The Fire Within

by District_7_Profanity

Summary

"Johanna had a special eye for fire, being born of it in District Seven." Johanna and Peeta return from the Capitol altered by their torture. Johanna is still protecting Katniss, but the enemy is not who anyone expects. A Joniss Mockingjay story from Johanna's perspective, slightly AU. Rating M for future chapters.

Update: 8/6/15 - I have adjusted the chapters for typos and consistency, as well as drastically changing the tone of the last chapter. I think it flows much better with the Joniss dynamic now. Thanks for reading!
In sessions with her head doctor, Johanna was asked how she coped while she was being tortured. She explained, impatiently, that the shocks are not what almost broke her. It was the waiting in between the shocks. The times when she was laid up in her cell listening to Peeta's screams and trying to get her body to stop shaking. The indeterminable lengths of time that she was certain they varied on purpose. Sometimes they'd only wait a few hours before strapping her down again. Sometimes it would be days. But always there was the constant stream of water and the constant stream of Peeta's screams.

How, he would ask. How did you cope?

She daydreamed. The one place that was safe from President Snow was deep within the recesses of her memory. She allowed her mind to traverse the forest of her memories, climbing trees of thought and reliving the moments that meant something to her. Her mind scaled the trees of 7 as a child, her mind learned guitar at her uncle's feet, her mind remembered her first kiss, stolen on the playground by a boy whose name she couldn't remember, who she had laid out flat with a punch to the jaw. She focused on the flickering flames of the village bonfires, how they'd dance with oranges and reds kissing the sweet pine air.

Johanna tried not to dwell on the moments that destroyed her, like the times she allowed herself to be whored out by the Capitol or the dying eyes of the tributes she had killed. Those memories were the real gift from the Capitol. Her doctor had her examine those memories, too. Neutralizing your anger, he had called it. Digging out the reasons why she was so angry and robbing the power from them. Render those memories impotent and they can't hurt you.

War and sex is all the same and those were Johanna's talents. Even before the Reaping that changed her life, it was always war and sex. Fighting in the schoolyard and fucking in the forest. Had she any friends to be interviewed when she was in the arena they would have exposed her "helpless" charade in a moment. Her reputation as a spitfire was as blatantly obvious as her black hair.

War is about conquering others for your gain. Sex is too. Sure, it can be an intimate give-and-take of emotion or whatever else kind of fairy tale imagery you want to conjure up, but at the end of the day it all comes down to one thing: Who's on top?

Johanna was. Always.

The first time in the Capitol was not so bad. It was just sex, a service like any other. No emotion, no feeling, no real purpose other than getting off. The man came and went without so much as a word to her. He was probably more nervous than she was. It marked the first time she realized the power within her body. The power of her body. Her nakedness was not lack of armor. It was her armor. People, especially people in the Capitol, hid behind their outfits and wigs and accessories. Johanna didn't hide. The Capitol had made her District-scarred skin beautiful, the Games had made her body fit and athletic and her prostitution had made her shameless. She was naked anywhere she wanted.
Other "clients" had special requests like forcing Johanna to wear certain outfits or having her abuse them. After showing herself to be a ruthless killer, people seemed to want to act out a fantasy of being at her whim. They wanted to be degraded and abused and Johanna was more than willing to oblige. She hated them almost more than they hated themselves.

A small part of her enjoyed it. She hated that part of herself.

All things considered, it wasn't exactly the worst experience ever. It was far from enjoyable but less dangerous and physically debilitating as the other jobs in her district. Lumberjacks, carpenters, log pullers, all losing limbs and fingers and hope. With sex she only lost time. And a little, tiny bit of who she had been before the 71st Hunger Games.

She, like Finnick, amassed an arsenal of secrets. The money was fine, yes, and the jewelry and clothes were wonderful. But the secrets? They were what kept Johanna going on the exhausting nights. They were what kept her from going insane when she was allowed home for short periods of time and tried to maintain a normal facade for her parents and sister. The secrets were what helped nurse the lonely nights on the train back home after watching two of her tributes get murdered. She and Blight drinking themselves into a stupor until they were back in the safety of their respective homes in the Victor's Village.

It was these secrets that kept her a prisoner after the Quell but they kept her alive. The things she knew about prominent Capitol citizens (possibly defectors) and the Rebels were what Snow wanted from her. That, of course, and her pride. But he'd never get either.

The incidents in the Capitol she detested most took place in a room much like the fetish bedrooms they were usually in. The wall opposite the bed was cut out to fit a large mirror. Again, not strange; for whatever reason people liked to watch themselves have sex. Other walls would have an arsenal of sex toys Johanna couldn't even identify a purpose for. It was when someone else Johanna recognized entered the room, she realized what was happening. Two victors and someone paying to watch them beyond the mirror. Maybe several people, Johanna never knew.

That's how she got to know the others. Cashmere, Enobaria, Finnick. One of whom she would end up killing. One of whom she hated. And one of whom she'd come to know as her best friend. Her only friend. There were others but those three seemed to be the most popular.

It wasn't the forced sex with friends or strangers that turned Johanna from this prostitution. It was the person who would become final client to request her services. A deceptively beautiful woman who at first glance, Johanna wouldn't have turned down even if she wasn't being coerced. Long, auburn hair. Penetrating blue eyes, clear like the waters in 4. Flawless skin that despite her age - Johanna figured maybe forty or so - was tight and smooth. She didn't speak in an affected tone or wear garish make-up or costumes. She seemed perfectly normal, if not peculiarly attractive. If she hadn't reeked of money and privilege Johanna would have guessed she was from 4 or another fair-skinned district.

The only rule in Snow's business of pleasure was that you weren't allowed to hurt the victors. They could hurt you, only if you asked. The woman ordered her to strip, so she did. She ordered her to lay on the bed, so she did. She asked her to strip, so she did. She ordered her to not make a sound, so she didn't. She explained calmly, as Johanna lay naked on the white sheets in silence, that she was a special friend of President Snow. A member of an elite, exclusive organization of people that helped keep him in power. He owed her favors.

She was calling in one of them.

It hurt. All of it hurt. The woman didn't really want sex. She wanted power. War and sex are one in the same and this woman wanted war, but she didn't want Johanna to fight back. If Johanna
struggled, the woman hurt her more. Physically, sexually, verbally. Johanna withstood the abuse for hours until the woman finally fell asleep out of pure exhaustion.

Johanna couldn't count how many scars she had on her body. Gashes, burns, bruises. Mentally, she fared no better. The woman had somehow found out things about her family, about her life and whispered threats and degradations in her ear. *Worthless whore, wouldn't your daddy love to see his little girl like this? His special little Jo.* Johanna had begged her to stop. It was the last time she ever begged in her life.

The white sheets were tie-dyed red by the time Johanna had regained enough strength to leave the room.

When she confronted Snow, he dismissed her. She owed the Capitol now. Her family lived in a spacious home, free from worry and strife. Her life was one whirlwind of special occasions and banquets. She'd never starve like the miners in 12, or get killed for insolence like the farmers in 11. She'd never go through the punishing physical endurance trials of the kids in 1 and 2. She'd never drown in a freak maelstrom like the sailors in 4. She was lucky. Johanna supposed perhaps she was lucky, but that night never left her. Even after asking Finnick and the others, who all confirmed a visit from the same woman, she couldn't shake how worthless she felt. How used. *Powerless.*

The next time she was called to the Capitol she marched right into Snow's antiseptic office and denied her services. He issued her a warning but she was a cyclone of venom, hatred and anger. She was immune to his threats, his cajoling and stormed out of her meeting with Snow feeling vindicated. She would no longer be the Capitol's whore. Head held high she embarked on the train back to 7.

Upon her return, her family was nothing but a pile of ashes in a razed backyard.

"An accident" was the official verdict, but no accident ever looked so contained. It had the practiced, perfect execution of which she knew only Snow and his people were capable. Only her backyard was on fire, her trees burned to the ground, her family nothing but bits of ash huddled around the graveyard of a bonfire. The only people in the world she loved were were dust. They were smoke and ashes and nothing. There was nothing to bury, nothing to show for their lives. All her pictures, all their belongings had vanished in the short trip from the Capitol to 7. Johanna had nothing.

Nothing but her anger and her *power.*

So how did she "cope" in the Capitol? She thought of why she was there: The Mockingjay. It only took around five minutes for her to be convinced into joining the rebellion. She had seen pockets of rebels form in 7, meeting in cabins deep in the woods beyond the electric fences. A lot of people in 7 were still loyal to the Capitol and for many reasons. Seven didn't suffer like some of the others did. They were middle class and not starving, and they bordered 1 so they often got some of the fruits of the luxury district. People felt fortunate to be born into one of the most stable districts.

Everyone else saw the farce. You are only as safe as you are compliant. Johanna didn't live her life that way. Certainly not anymore.

Seeing the star-crossed lovers of District 12 win their Games together sent conflicting emotions through Johanna: jealousy and hope. Jealousy because she was no longer the most talked about tribute any longer. Her fame dwindled as Katniss Everdeen's story ran aflame across Panem and her sister, Primrose, became the country's darling. Whereas her sister had become fertilizer for the
fir trees in her backyard.

But of course, hope. Hope that this girl, with her braid and her arrows, could spark a true revolution in the fucked up country they called home.

When she did, Johanna swore to protect her. Haymitch said bring her Nuts and Volts and she did. He said cut out her tracker if they got caught. She did.

Protect Katniss. That is what consumed her thoughts when she was waiting for the next round of electric shocks. Was that job finished now? Was Katniss dead? If not, then Johanna still had a job to do. She had to protect her until this was over.

In her sessions with her doctor he tried to convince her it wasn't necessary anymore. Katniss was safe in 13, being watched around the clock. But Johanna was not fooled. There was still an enemy in their midst and no one knew it but her.

The first time she saw Katniss Everdeen was not in the elevator at the Training Center. It wasn't even when Katniss volunteered for her sister at the 74th Hunger Games. It was when Katniss was 11 years old and Johanna was 15, and the country watched as she and a few other depressed looking kids received medals of honor when their fathers exploded in one of the mines.

The ceremony was required viewing for everyone in the country, and Johanna had been sitting in the black market bar in 7 with a whiskey to her lips watching them. She saw the girl who would later catch fire, but then she was just a lost little girl with the same braid down her back. Her wrinkled black dress not covering her scabby knees and thin calves. However, there was something living deep within her murky gray eyes that seemed to be copied and pasted on the other people of the district. There was a fire. A fire that wasn't quelled by the soft words of the mayor promising money and hope for the families of tragedy.

Johanna had a special eye for fire, being born of it in District 7.

She couldn't forget that day not only because it was the first time she saw the girl who would change her life, but also because it was the same day she had her first real kiss. Not the boy on the playground, but the woman in the white suit. Nova, the 19-year-old Peacekeeper who somehow managed to keep Johanna out of trouble before she was reaped. She was from 2 with long blonde hair and caramel colored eyes, a round chin and a nose that was crooked from a playground brawl gone awry in her youth.

Her first kiss tasted like beef stew and whiskey and smelled of balsam and lavender. Nova's lips were gentle and insistent, practiced in kissing but urgent in their need. Her back was pressed against the curved log exterior of her neighbor's house, her hips pulled against the slick white material of Nova's Peacekeeper's uniform. Soft fingers were in her unruly black hair, tangling her messy locks as her lips pressed for more.

The air was bitterly cold against Johanna's plaid shirt, the sleeves rolled up just to her elbows. She hated wearing jackets because it was a hinderance in grabbing her axe but the February cold didn't bother her. There was enough heat between them to burn the house they were against down to the ground. Nova pulled away from her, all swollen lips and apologies. She had overstepped her boundaries.

No, Johanna had insisted. She was a willing participant. And she'd be a willing participant again if Nova wanted to meet her beyond the electric fence. Johanna never forgot the wide smile that
seemed to appear magically on Nova's face when she said that. Nobody had ever smiled at her that way before, with such affection.

She was young. She was in love. She was stupid.

They did meet beyond the fence a week later and spent a night in an abandoned cabin beside a fire. Johanna learned how her body worked and just how much she enjoyed the soft feel of another woman. There was something inexplicably thrilling about the soft, non-threatening skin of a woman and the high gasps they made. She especially enjoyed Nova's.

That was the first and last time they'd ever share a moment like that. Only a few short weeks later Nova had been shipped back to 2 to help guard the Capitol's mountain data base and Johanna was left heartbroken. There was no soft skin to feel anymore, no hot breath to feel against her cheek. Most upsetting of all, no one to look after her. Nova had kept the other Peacekeepers away from the troublesome teen, but now there was no barrier. It was Johanna against the world.

But they had the power. Johanna had nothing but a bad attitude and a way with an axe. Not much she could do against a Peacekeeper with a whip and a gun. Not until she won her Games. Then she strolled through the streets of 7 with an axe tucked into her belt; carrying a weapon was against the law in 7 but the law didn't apply to victors. Nothing applied to her anymore.

She didn't think of the poor, starving girl with the braid again until she saw her emerge from the crowd of denim-clad kids in 12 and volunteer herself into the Games.

Johanna saw the flames inside her again. She was rooting for the girl on fire.

Johanna had faced certain death five times in her life:

1. When she almost got herself sawn in half as she was a toddler and got too comfortable around her father's buzz-saw.

2. When she nearly got swiped by a spear during the 71st Hunger Games at 17 and it instead lodged in the tree next to her.

3. When the blood rain poured into her mouth and eyes during the Quarter Quell at 21 and nearly both drowned and blinded her.

4. When she cut out Katniss's tracker and was nearly torn apart by Enobaria.

5. When she mouthed off to the guard administering her shocks during her Capitol torture and he nearly killed her with the last round.

Her body writhed on the cold tile floor of her cell, forever damp from the water that never seemed to fully drain from the room and the constant dripping above her head. By her estimation she had been inside the Capitol for three weeks. Three fucking weeks. She didn't see much of the Capitol's main building outside of her white-on-white cell. Everything was so painfully white and sterile, just as Snow wanted it. At night her mind would wander to colorful things - the bursting colors of fall back in 7, the searing blue of the summer sky, the chestnut brown of Katniss's braid, the crimson red of her blood down her arm as she stared disorientedly up into Johanna's eyes at the end of the Games.

Between Peeta's screams for Katniss and her own consuming thoughts, the Mockingjay was always present. Johanna had mangled dreams of Katniss getting scooped up by the Capitol.
Burned alive. A fitting end for the "girl on fire" Snow would mock as Katniss silently went up in flames. She'd wake up in a sweat, but the sweat would just be the same moisture she'd carry with her all the time now. She missed being dry. When she wasn't plagued with nightmares about seeing Katniss burned alive like her family had been, she dreamt of the dry warmth of a fire. The crackling of wood and the sulfury smell of pine as it was incinerated. The dryness of dead leaves. The dryness of a warm towel. Dry. Warm. Things she could barely remember, what with all her senses being soaked.

Her cell was almost like a giant bathroom. White tiles ran from the drain in the center of the room to the jets of water on top. There was no bed. There was no chair. There were only two large metal chains that hung from either wall. The Peacekeepers would come in, chain her wrists to the walls and position her over the drain. She wore a skintight white jumpsuit that cut just below her knee, not unlike the black one they gave for training before the Quell.

Except this one was only a formality. It provided no protection, served no purpose other than to cover her nakedness. Often at night she'd take it off, if she possessed the strength, just to be a thorn in the morning and force one of them to dress her.

They would drench her in water, soaking her freshly shaven head. It was a brand new sensation, that first time. She had always possessed a pile of black, messy hair that protected her scalp. But now she was nearly bald, only a thin later of hair stubbornly clinging to her head. The water would bounce off her scalp, much colder than it felt when it hit the rest of her.

They'd ask questions. She'd spit sass. They'd shock her. She'd curse at them. They'd shock her. It was this routine that made Johanna think that maybe there wasn't still a rebellion. She knew nothing of the country outside of her cell, so who knows? Maybe Katniss was killed in the Quell. Maybe Snow had put down the rebels, flattening the districts that caused problems. She didn't even know what she was fighting for.

But she was Johanna Mason. Fighter. Victor. Victim. From the ashes of her family she had vowed never to stop fighting Snow. In small or large ways, he would pay for what he did. This was her rebellion, even if it was just a small one. She'd fight it until she had no more breath in her lungs.

The pain of the shocks was excruciating. Unlike any other pain she had ever felt. It crept up her nerves and set her skin on fire. It left (almost ironically) tree-like scars up and down her skin. Bright red and pink welts that spread out like roots across her body. There were no mirrors, hell there weren't even any windows. There was just whiteness, water, and the screams of the baker next door. She was sure she looked like absolute hell.

When she finally saw Peeta he looked deceptively healthy. The room was all white, Snow in the center on top of a white throne. Her reaction to seeing him was one even she was not prepared for. She lunged for his throat like a wild bear, only to be knocked down by a nearby Peacekeeper after taking down two of them without a weapon to her name. When she came to, her bruise from his hit was gone and there were suddenly twenty Peacekeepers in the room. Peeta looked robust, shining. She imagined she looked similarly healthy, in spite of the wealth of bruises and scars all across her skin. The itchy blonde wig they procured for her hid her near baldness.

It was a propo. She was instructed to stand still. She was forbidden to speak to Peeta. She was handcuffed behind her back until just before filming, when the handcuffs disappeared but the white bracelet on her left wrist remained. She could feel the familiar buzzing from the cuff. It was electrified. She didn't know who was controlling it but it was no matter. If she so much as looked at Snow wrong, she knew the consequences. What would it serve her to kill Snow anyway? The Mockingjay was probably dead.

...But she wasn't. The television monitor showing them their own broadcast cut and she saw his
Peeta and Johanna finally exchanged a look. Relief. Katniss was alive. The rebellion was still happening. Johanna did nothing to stop the high, long laugh that bubbled from inside her chest and expelled out of her mouth. She could see Peeta's warning look but she ignored him. How good it felt to laugh! She hadn't laughed, even a little, since agreeing to split the loaves of bread during the Quell. She laughed to know that Snow was losing. Katniss was alive. Armed with that knowledge Johanna went down like a bag of bricks as the cuff on her wrist shocked her. She paid the pain no mind and continued to laugh.

The next propo was not the same. Peeta looked worn down, beaten. Johanna figured she probably looked tired, too. But neither of them looked as awful as Annie Cresta. Her normally lush red hair was flat against her head, pin straight as it fell down over her shoulders. Bright green eyes were dull. Her thin lips quivering in fear as she stood next to Johanna, unable to speak.

Enobaria was there too but she looked fine. It took all of Johanna's willpower not to strangle that dumb bitch where she stood. At the very least, she and Peeta were slightly to blame for the rebellion. He was one half of the star-crossed lovers that had been part of the igniting, and she had willingly talked disparagingly about the Capitol, and saved the lives of Wiress (for a time) and Beetee so they could survive and help in District 13. Most damaging of all, she protected Katniss.

But Annie Cresta was innocent. And yet here she was, looking deprived and out of her mind, while Enobaria stood looking strong.

Fuck the Capitol.

The night before the rebels stormed the Capitol, Johanna's torture was particularly harsh. They seemed more desperate this time. They called her names, told her all the terrible things they were going to do to Finnick, to Annie, to Katniss, once the rebellion was put down. When they were finished she could barely keep her eyes open. She must have looked asleep or dead, because they stood in her doorway and had a chat instead of leaving and slamming the door, as they usually did.

"He's afraid they'll come for the boy. Put a trigger word in him."

"Trigger word?"

"Yeah. If they come in here and take him, they bring him back to the girl. Everything's fine until -" The man snapped his fingers. "Boom. Killer. He'll tear her throat out and they'll never see it coming."

"What about the hijacking? Won't they know?"

"Nah, it's locked in there. But just one word - a word they'll definitely say around him - and he'll snap her pretty neck."

"What word?"

Johanna passed out.
Fire

The day Johanna was born there was a raging forest fire in the backwoods of 7. All the firemen and Peacekeepers had been dispatched to help combat the flames which threatened to consume their livelihoods. Johanna's mother was alone in their cabin with a midwife, biting down on a rag and screaming to the high heavens and pushing out all the expletives she could think of as she pushed out her firstborn.

After being cleaned and swaddled, Johanna's mother brought the screaming infant to the window. Tiny brown eyes blinked hard as they adjusted to the moonlight coming in their dusty windowpanes. Johanna looked out the window and saw the flames licking at the sky, as if the orange fires were trying to climb to the heavens and become stars themselves. Too small to understand the destruction, she simply watched in wonder. She was quiet.

The fire was uncontrollable because autumn had settled in 7, just a week into November, and all the rich green leaves turned to brilliant reds and oranges but also became dry as a bone. Johanna grew to love autumn; not because her birthday was smack in the midst of its splendor, but because of those colors. She liked red and orange - the color of autumn, the color of fire. It soothed her soul.

It inevitably brings indiscriminate destruction but Johanna never really saw it that way. Pragmatically because most destructive fires were preventable and a result of human error. But spiritually, because fires brought rebirth. They took everything and whittled it down to nothingness, back into the earth. From those embers arose something greater. When her father was alive he'd talk about "walking through the fire" - his way of saying "we're gonna get through this." He'd go on and on about the story of the phoenix rising from the ashes of itself and becoming something larger, something better.

After she was spreading the ashes of her family in the sloshing rivers deep in the woods, Johanna had made herself a campfire in the same cabin in which she had met Nova years earlier. She sat on the floor, knees to her chest and watched the fire in the hearth as it bounced against the brick of the furnace. She thought about what would be born from her family's ashes. What good would possibly come from such a tragedy?

The only thing that existed of her family was her. She was the last Mason. Her family survived the Dark Days and the hundreds of years of destruction leading up to them. They survived being reaped until her, and she survived the reaping. They were survivors. But now, they were nothing. Nothing but a name etched in stone on a marker in a wooded field.

So what could arise? A different Johanna Mason. A Johanna Mason who looked out for no one but herself. She had to survive, to see the end of President Snow's tyranny to honor her family. She would be borne from their ashes. Never again would she be taken advantage of. She would be the fire that consumed her family and burn anyone who tried to get near her.

Become the fire.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the opening and closing of the door of the cabin. She leapt to her feet, her axe poised above her head on instinct. Blight had told her that after your Games you're never the same; you never can be surprised again. Every face in a doorway, every shadow in a
corner, every fading figure in the peripheral of your eye becomes an enemy. You have to teach yourself not to attack. Johanna hadn't gotten there yet. She was still on the attack.

Luckily for the intruder, she too had exceptional reflexes. She ducked the axe coming at her face and watched it whip out the door and lodge itself firmly in a tree ten yards away. Johanna blinked in confusion as the visage of the woman came into view. Blonde hair that was much shorter than she remembered, but the same caramel eyes and crooked nose.

"Nova." Johanna said it like a prayer, the same ethereal way she called out for her parents and her sister in her dreams. With mascara running down her cheeks and her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail she didn't look like how she wanted to look if she ever saw her again. Then again, she wasn't the same naive fifteen-year-old drunk on whiskey. She was a killer now. Nova looked different out of her Peacekeepers uniform. She was in a tight-fitting leather jacket and worn jeans that were tucked into tall brown hunting boots. Her hair had a few red streaks nestled in the blonde locks that were cut into a feminine short style. Still beautiful.

The same smile appeared on Nova's lips like magic. "No kidding, brainless." Her smile curled into a smirk as Johanna gave her an exasperated stare. Johanna hated that nickname. "Johanna." Her smile fell as she stepped into the cabin and closed the door. "I heard about your family. I came as soon as I could. I am so sorry."

"Everyone's sorry," Johanna shot back, watery brown eyes looking up at the older woman. "I can't do anything with people's fucking sorries." Pity and apologies felt caustic to Johanna's skin and she hated it. She only had two hands and neither of them wanted to hold someone else's pity.

Nova's jaw clenched as she got closer to the other girl. "I also heard about what President Snow did to you. What he made you do." Her fists balled at her sides. If Johanna was fire, then Nova was much like her namesake, the hot fiery gas of a star that shone brightly. Constant burning. Constant combustion. "He will pay for what he's done."

Johanna scoffed and moved away from Nova toward the fireplace. "And how will you do that, hm?" She crossed the room quickly and pinned Nova against the door with her torso. Her face was mere millimeters from Nova's as she spoke. She could almost kiss her. "You will go nowhere near him. You shouldn't even be near me."

"What?" Nova asked, looking down at the girl. Johanna might be a victor and three years older than when she saw her last, but she was still the same scared, defensive young girl she had fallen for. The same wild, don't-look-passed-my-hardened-exterior gaze that had first drawn her in.

"I know why you left," Johanna said in a hoarse whisper, her intense gaze never leaving the eyes of the other girl. She backed away from her, giving both of them space so Johanna could file her thoughts. "I didn't get it then. I thought I was worthless." Again she brought her eyes up. "I thought you didn't love me."

"That's not true, I-"

"Shove it," Johanna replied tersely. "I get it. You wanted to protect me. And now I'm protecting you." She swallowed down the lump in her throat and continued speaking. "Snow has taken away everything I love. He does not know about you. You are only safe if he thinks there's no one left I love."

"I can't fucking just live my life while he has his hands around your throat!" Nova's voice was similar to the tone she took when Johanna was caught beating a boy in the lumber yard for making a pass at her. Authoritative and strong, but still high and feminine. She ran her fingers through her cropped blonde hair and stood tall. "I love you." Johanna couldn't bear to look at her and dropped
her gaze to the fire. "I don't want this life for you. I want to fight for you."

"I don't want you to fight for me." Johanna clenched her fists and looked at Nova. Despite their physical differences they were remarkably similar. Postures defensive, intents noble, attitudes poor. Made of the same element.

*Fire.*

She sighed. "I don't need anyone to fight for me, I'm not gonna start now." Her cold, calculated tone was intent on subduing the other woman into leaving. The only vestige of the person she was before her reaping was inside Nova somewhere and she didn't want to lose that part of herself. The part of her that was good and well-intending and innocent. The part of her that still believed in love and happy endings. As long as Nova lived, that part of Johanna lived as well.

Nova let out a chuckle. "You think that I don't know what you're trying to do? Trust me kid, I'm the master at pushing people away. I literally ran away from you. But never did I stop loving you." She pulled Johanna into a tight hug in which after a few beats, the younger girl melted into and buried her nose in the blonde girl's sternum. "I've loved you since the day I saw you. I can't just turn it off because you're scared for me."

Johanna reflected on the day she met Nova. It was Nova's first day as Peacekeeper, fresh out of training and eager to please. Like most recruits she had been assigned the high school as her first mission. A simple job that just meant preventing truancy and keeping kids from fighting. Not exactly the glamorous gig she had assumed it would be. Johanna was skipping school like she often did, sitting in a small clearing in the woods nearby, trying to kickstart a fire that was too stubborn to take.

The spring weather hid the approach of footsteps, as crunchy leaves were replaced by soft grass underfoot. Johanna didn't even know someone was there until the taller girl stood directly in front of her in full uniform, helmet pulled down over her face. "Mason," she barked, causing Johanna to startle but not move. She continued trying to start the fire in the grass without looking up. She was on her knees bent over the pile of sticks, intent on making a fire without a lighter or accelerant.

"Wow, first day and you know my name already? I'm impressed."

Nova scoffed. "I know all the names of the troublemakers. Besides, your name is also on a list of kids who are known truants." Johanna didn't respond and Nova's white gloved hand gripped around her whip. "Now let's go, Mason. You're in deep trouble. The woods are off-limits to non-workers during school hours, you know that."

Johanna laughed out loud, sitting back on to her butt and placing her elbows on her knees. She looked up quizzically at the woman, tilting her head to the side. "Let's say I agree to this." Underneath her mask Nova rolled her eyes. "I want to see your face. Seems fair that I know who is putting me in cuffs."

Nova pursed her lips but obliged, pulling off her helmet and shaking free her blonde hair. Johanna's initial reaction of stupor at how beautiful she was she tried to hide quickly with an aversion of her gaze to the ground. "Happy now, Mason?"

Johanna smirked. "Call me Johanna." The raven-haired girl produced a hip flask from behind her and unscrewed the cap, taking a long swig from the metal container. She tucked it back into her belt as Nova looked on disapprovingly. "The way I see it we have two options. One, I can go
with you and get in trouble. Probably get suspended from school and no doubt get the whip." Her eyes looked down at Nova's whip which she still had in her grip. Her fingers fell from the weapon under Johanna's gaze guiltily. "Or, you can have a seat and we can drink the rest of this wonderful liquor around a fire that hopefully I'll be able to start sometime this year."

The blonde bit her lip to suppress a smile at the younger girl's audacity. Normally people's knees buckled when they encountered a Peacekeeper but Johanna held no fear in her eyes. Only challenge and confidence belying her young age. "I'm not going to risk my job to hang out in the woods with a child."

"Please, I'm far from a child and I'm not going to rat you out." Johanna moved back on to her knees and began working at the fire again. The stones she was using to create a spark just wouldn't work and the efforts were making her increasingly frustrated. Now with the extra pressure of being nearly caught and probably put to the whip, she was making even less progress. "Fuck this fucking fire."

Nova laughed and got on one knee in her uniform, peeling off her gloves. "All right brainless, hand me the stones." Johanna's nostrils flared at the degrading nickname but she handed the stones over. "Your problem is you're striking it weirdly at the wrong angle." Nova positioned herself over the small kindling Johanna had collected and began striking the two stones together. A few sparks fell from the stones and within just a minute there was a small stream of smoke. "Now it's not just going to be all of a sudden a fire. You have to work to make fires grow." Nova got closer to the ground and moved the embers around with her bare hand, igniting more of the dry grass. Gently she blew on them and within a few minutes they had a small fire going between them.

They spent the rest of that afternoon drinking and laughing around the small campfire until it got closer to when school would be dismissed. Nova would be missing at her post and the punishment for missing your post was a hefty one. She bid Johanna goodbye and ran back toward civilization, leaving the young girl alone in the woods. But they struck up a friendship that day that over time evolved into something much more. Nova cared for her, watched over her, protected her while Johanna got in and out of trouble. It was the most meaningful relationship Johanna had ever had.

Now here they were again, in the cabin they had first shared their love, held in a tight embrace as they had been three years prior. Except now they were both changed women. Changed except for one thing.

*Fire.*

The need for human contact and affection became too overwhelming for Johanna to bear. She pulled the taller girl down into a punishing kiss, unable to hold back the emotions that had been crawling up inside her like vines. Her overwhelming grief, her impassioned anger, her consuming love for the woman in her arms. It was all poured forth as they tore at each other's clothes and skin, sweat and tears on their faces and necks.

Johanna hadn't been with anyone since the woman back at the Capitol. Sex had for so long been a weapon she had forgotten what it felt like for it to be kind and gentle and loving. Nothing was painful, forced, or fake. It was real and amazing and made her forget temporarily about the horrors of her life. She was wrapped up in the other girl's heart and shielded from the demons that plagued her dreams at night.

She felt protected. She felt safe. It was only for one night, as Johanna was right and any connection to her spelled trouble or death for Nova. But it was the first night since the day she was reaped that she had felt safe with another person. A feeling she wouldn't have again until the next time her body touched fire.
Johanna wasn't sure of the last time she had woken up so groggy. Usually she awoke with a start, ripped directly from a nightmare and sweating and swearing; the names of her family members dying on her lips. The morphling drip in her arm was the probable cause of her haze as it pumped the deadening cocktail into her bloodstream. She had no recollection of her trip from the Capitol or who had gotten her out. She was just glad to be dry. Dry and warm.

And chained. She panicked for a few heartstopping seconds until she came back to terms with where she was, in 13 with the rebels. Rumors of 13 being in existence had circulated her whole life and only when she became a Capitol darling did she finally get confirmation from a defecting Capitol sponsor of its realness. She didn't know what it looked like, just that it was deep underground and on the brink of depopulation. She could neither confirm or deny the declining population as she was in a one-person room, strapped down to her bed.

Plutarch Heavensbee waltzed into the hospital room and, after a brief chat with a nurse outside the door, made his way toward Johanna. His white hair was combed to the side of his head, his hands placed on his rounded belly and a gentle smile on his lips. He looked no different than the first time she had met him at her victory banquet. The same placid demeanor and persuasive, if not enigmatic, way with words.

"Welcome back Miss Mason," he greeted in his gravelly tone. He knew her well enough to mask the pity in his eyes. "How are you feeling?"

Johanna's thin, chapped lips moved upward in an attempt to smirk. "Wonderful."

He let out a soft chuckle and placed his hand on the railings next to her bed. He looked over her toward the door. "I'm glad to hear that. We're very excited to have you back with us."

Johanna expelled a tiny snort. "We are, are we? Don't lie to me, Heavensbee. Even Snow didn't lie to me. The only reason I'm here is because the boy was with me. Otherwise I'd still be in the Capitol."

There was a trace of self-pity in her tone but Johanna kept her small voice even. Plutarch looked down for a moment then met Johanna's gaze. "That's untrue. Both Finnick and Katniss made compelling cases for you." Johanna arched her eyebrow. Finnick she believed only a little, because she knew him well enough. However his thoughts were no doubt consumed by Annie and not of his friend and forced bedmate. Nobody was pining for her in her cell and certainly not Katniss. They didn't even like each other. Well, Katniss didn't like her and Johanna kept her at a scathing distance. "But yes, of course Peeta Mellark was our priority."

"Can't disappoint the Mockingjay now can we?" Johanna asked sardonically, laying back against her pillow.

"No we certainly can't." Plutarch seemed to have more to say and Johanna narrowed her chocolate eyes at him. He caught her suspicion and let out a sigh. "We need to know everything you found out while you were in the Capitol's custody."

Johanna laughed hoarsely. "In their custody? It's not like I was an adopted kid. I was their hostage. They didn't exactly trade secrets with me."

"We know this. But anything you can remember is helpful. If there's anything we can do to help trigger memories for you let us know."

Trigger. Johanna's wide set brown eyes flew open with new clarity. Suddenly the morphling
didn’t even matter. Pale hands gripped at the sides of her bed painfully hard and she jerked against her constraints. "Peeta. He's a time bomb. You have to get him away from Katniss."

Instead of being as alarmed as Johanna thought he would be, Plutarch winced. "Yes, about that. He said that you'd be like this when you woke up." Johanna's furrowed eyebrows and enlarged pupils conveyed her massive confusion. Plutarch placed his hand on hers in a conciliatory manner, but Johanna jerked her hand away as best she could with the cuffs around her wrists.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Who said what about me? Is that why I'm locked up?"

"The boy," Plutarch explained evenly. Everything about how calm he was acting irritated Johanna's nerves. Speaking condescendingly to her like she was a simpleton. "He said that part of your torture was you being hijacked. You believe he poses a threat to Katniss. When in fact you are the threat."

"What?" Johanna nearly shrieked. The nurse looked in through the small window in her door and Johanna shot daggers at her with her eyes. If only she had her axe. "Are you fucking kidding me? That's not what happened. I have to protect her." Johanna wrestled uselessly with her constraints.

"Then what happened Johanna? Peeta has very detailed descriptions of what occurred. Maybe you can shed more light for us."

Johanna faltered. All she had was a fuzzy discussion she had overheard after being shocked. "The guards. They said he had a trigger word." She paused and clenched her teeth. "They said he'd rip her throat out if you said it around him." Plutarch's sympathetic gaze leveled on her and she became more insistent. "I didn't get hijacked or whatever. They did some shock therapy with a fuckton of cold water but that was it."

The older man breathed out a sigh. "All right then. What's his trigger word?"

Johanna frowned sourly. "Hell if I know. I overheard them and then passed out."

His light gaze dropped to the ground. "Perhaps you were mistaken and they were talking about you. Is that possible?"

Johanna was seething. She had withstood weeks of torture to come to salvation in 13 and be labeled a crazy like Annie? "No." Her voice softened. "There's no way I would hurt Katniss. I fucking risked my life for her."

Plutarch nodded. "And so did Peeta." His hands gripped the side of Johanna's bed. "Either way you'll both be undergoing psychological evaluations. You'll be assigned a very helpful psychologist who can help unravel what happened to you."

Johanna growled. "I don't need a fucking shrink. I need to not be chained to this hospital bed like an animal." She raised an eyebrow. "Is the baker chained?"

"No," Plutarch replied, lifting his hands from the bed and placing them behind his back. "He is under evaluation now."

"Has he seen Katniss?"

"Yes. We filmed their reunion live. It was very inspiring."

Johanna made no effort to shield her eye rolling. How was this possible? She was as certain as she was alive that the guards were talking about Peeta. "So what you're saying is I'm not allowed near the Mockingjay because you're choosing to believe his story over mine."
"We heard his first. And to be frank Johanna, you're responding exactly as he said you would. Denial, anger." Johanna's hands jerked at the restraints and she saw the doctors in the distance glance her way warily. "But I will go over Peeta's evaluation with his doctor and see if we can't uncover the truth."

Johanna scoffed and turned her attention forward. "And while you're doing that, who protects Katniss from him?"

"Miss Everdeen has survived two Hunger Games. I believe she is strong enough to take care of herself. And she is safe here. No one here wants to see her harmed."

"Except her lover boy who will undoubtedly be spending the most time with her. This is fucking rich." Johanna glared with all the heat she could muster in her weakened state. "Snow might just win the war yet. Because at least he can pick out a liar." Plutarch gave Johanna an empathetic smile that she did not return. Her eyes were beginning to get hot with the welling of unshed tears. She was not crazy.

"Tomorrow you'll be taken to Doctor Thorne for your eval. Until then Miss Mason, try to get some rest." Plutarch quietly left the room, stopping to place his hand on the shoulder of a doctor and whisper something in his ear. Probably about how crazy Johanna was, she thought to herself. Asshole.

Johanna felt humiliated. First she had to plead to be allowed to wear the normal jumpsuits everyone else wore. Unfortunately she was forced into electronic handcuffs not unlike the one she had worn in the Capitol when she was escorted to her doctor appointment. She passed through the halls of 13, getting shocked and scared glances from the people bustling around. Everyone here always seemed so busy and focused. But when she walked by their gazes turned to her in horror. That's right, she thought. This is what the Capitol does.

Johanna Mason did not believe in shrinks. People were simple creatures in her estimation and this analysis was absurdly unnecessary. She was not crazy. She was not damaged by her torture, other than her aversion to water. Dr. Thorne was a kind man in his late fifties, balding at the top with a shag of white hair rimming his head. He had a large knobby nose that looked to Johanna like a piece of raw knotted pine. He was kind but he was also superfluous. Johanna had no use for superfluous things.

They spoke at length about her early life in 7 and about her games. They touched briefly on her involvement with the rebellion and finally came around to her theory on Peeta. "Look doc, I'm not crazy, okay? I know what I heard. Katniss is in danger. You have to tell them to let me protect her."

His brown eyes peered at her over his small, round glasses with their silver frame. "Is that how you see yourself, Johanna? As Katniss's protector?"

"I made a promise to defeat Snow. Keeping Katniss alive is the best way to do that. So yeah, I kinda feel like I'm her protector." Did that make her sound crazy? Johanna wasn't sure. The boundaries of what was sane and insane seemed to be blurring on a day-to-day basis.

"Johanna I'm wondering if you'd be open to a little hypnosis." Her raised eyebrow communicated her reluctance. "I know it seems scary to relinquish control like that but I think it would be helpful. If you are telling the truth about Mr. Mellark this night be a helpful way to clarify that."
"Fine," Johanna agreed in a huff. "Don't try anything while I'm asleep." Johanna winked at the older man and settled into the long couch.

"Okay Johanna close your eyes. I need you to take long, deep breaths. Concentrate on your breathing." Johanna listened to his instructions and did as she was told. After a few minutes of steady breathing she found herself more relaxed than she had been in months. "All right, now I want you to picture somewhere safe. Some place where you know no one will try to hurt you. Maybe your home in Seven or maybe right here in Thirteen. A warm, pleasant place where you feel completely relaxed."

He allowed time to pass as Johanna put herself in the last place she felt safe. She was in the abandoned cabin in 7 with Nova, snuggled into the strong embrace of the older girl. Nobody had ever held her like she did, like she was too precious to let go of. Like she was something worth protecting.

"Are you there? Where are you?"

"I'm in Seven, beyond the fences. An old abandoned cabin."

"Wonderful. Now in your cabin I want you to place something. Can you put a lamp in there?"

"Yes." Johanna imagined the lamp in the middle of the floor near their blankets. Nova's hair looking like spun golden threads in the reflection of the light. She smiled.

"What comes to your mind when you think of the lamp? Some adjectives."


"Good, that's great Johanna. Now I'd like you to go to the door and let Katniss into the cabin."

Johanna tensed. In her trance suddenly Nova disappeared from the sheets and Johanna was alone. The heat of the fire and light of the lamp illuminating the otherwise darkened one-room cabin. There was a knock at the door. Begrudgingly Johanna got to her feet and opened it, revealing Katniss in the darkness. Wordlessly the Mockingjay stepped around Johanna and into the cabin. She was in her burning mockingjay dress from the interview before the Quell, her quiver around her back and her bow over her shoulder. Her hair wasn't up in the tight bun. It was neatly plaited into a braid like she usually wore it.

"Is she there?"

"Yes."

"Good. When you look at her, tell me the adjectives you think of. How does she make you feel?"

"Angry," Johanna responded immediately, but honestly. "Jealous. Nervous. She... she makes me feel like I'm on fire."

"Is that a good feeling or a bad feeling?"

"Amazing, Johanna wanted to say. But she didn't. Instead she just whispered, "I don't know."
weeks in. Instead of glaringly white, everything was neutrally gray. There was not one damn thing in the room other than her that was colorful. It was one of the many things that made her miss home. Everything in 7 was green, brown, orange, red, blue. The trees, the sky, the mountains.

There was no window anywhere to indicate what time it was, no clock on the wall even. Johanna swam in a sea of timelessness. In between her morphling nightmares and hazy therapy sessions the passing of time seemed arbitrary. What does it matter if it's day or night? Every second that passed was just another second Peeta got closer to murdering Katniss.

Of course they'd think she was the threat. She openly despised Katniss and had been the one to knock her out and remove her tracker-jacker. Admittedly, she had done the latter with less finesse than she could have. But Katniss was so unbearable in that arena, stuck to Peeta like a bump on a log and defending every last weak person there. She had a little aggression toward her, yes. But not enough to want to kill her.

The small patter of footsteps broke Johanna from her thought train. She rolled her head to the side to look at her visitor. Finnick had been to see her, as had Haymitch. Even Beetee had stopped by to say hello and try to figure out her "hijacking." But this was not Finnick or Haymitch or Beetee.

It was Katniss.

"And the Mockingjay appears," Johanna said sarcastically, raising an eyebrow toward the hesitant brunette. "Didn't they tell you? I'm dangerous. How did you even get in here?"

At that Katniss chuckled, making the first noise since she came in the room. She crossed the room toward Johanna, looking both suspicious and sympathetic toward the restraints. "Oh I can be very persuasive," she joked in a low tone, causing the older girl to smirk. "I snuck in. And you don't exactly look like a killer right now."

Johanna looked down at herself. Katniss was right. In her hospital gown and with large metal cuffs around her wrists, she was nothing. She hadn't put on any weight so her ribs still stuck out, her fingers bony and her face gaunt. A fee sprouts of hair had amassed on her head but it was still close to her scalp. "Sometimes things are more than they appear. You didn't exactly look like a victor in your little blue dress when you got reaped."

Katniss's insulted look softened as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Johanna Mason, victor from District Seven knows what dress I wore to my reaping?"

"Well I did tell you how much I liked your outfits," Johanna reminded. She watched Katniss recall the event in the elevator and smiled at the very light blush she was able to bring on her cheeks. "That one was not one of them." Katniss rolled her gray eyes and looked around at the bare room. Johanna imagined this was a far cry from the compartments that all the normal people lived in. "So what brings you to my cell? On a suicide mission?"

Katniss's face turned somber, something Johanna thought she did far too often. She could count on one hand the amount of times she had ever seen Katniss smile. Not that they had much to smile about any time they saw each other, but Katniss hadn't been a victor long enough to ever come to terms with it and seek happiness again.

"They told me about what you said. About Peeta." Her voice wasn't as accusatory as Johanna thought it would be. She figured Katniss would be insulted that she dared insinuate that Peeta didn't have the most noble of intentions. He was just as revoltingly pure as Katniss.

Johanna rolled her eyes defensively and set her gaze on the ceiling. "Well don't worry about it, Twelve. Apparently the only person who's a danger to you is me." She compressed her lips and
looked humorously over to the fellow victor. "But that's no surprise to you, is it?"

"I don't think you're dangerous," Katniss argued softly. Off Johanna's unbelieving stare she backpedaled. "Okay objectively yes, you have killed people, you are dangerous. But no more than myself or Finnick or Gale. Or even Peeta"

"Oh sweetheart I am much more dangerous than your lover," Johanna replied. She saw the shake of anger roll through Katniss and she smirked. She still had the ability to get underneath the Mockingjay's skin. Good. "On a good day, of course. Not when he's one word away from ripping your throat out."

"Funny, it was you who said you'd be ripping my throat out, remember?"

Of course Johanna remembered. Back when they were pretending Katniss was pregnant and she was pretending to be in love with Peeta. Except Katniss wasn't pretending and Johanna never would have ripped her throat out. Maybe slapped her a little because her selflessness was revolting, but not killed her. "Yeah well when I almost get fucking killed by blood rain pouring from the sky and some little teenaged shit defends the person I saved at my own peril against me? Yeah I was pissed. That and it was all I could do not to barf on you and Peeta and your non-stop kissing and googly eyes."

Katniss laughed, a real laugh that made Johanna smile a little. Her laughter faded as she took in the situation again. There was a clear battle in her eyes. Johanna could tell this wasn't some sympathy visit, aside from the fact that if anyone knew Katniss was there, she'd be in trouble. "He's different."

Johanna let out a loud scoff. "Of course he's different. We're all different. He and I especially."

"No, not because of that. There's just something off. That's why I came here." Katniss steeled herself and placed her hands on the edge of Johanna's bed railing. "I believe you."

"You do?" She couldn't suppress the hope and disbelief in her eyes. Of all the people living on the planet, she thought Katniss would be the last person to believe her account of what happened. Finnick supported her, as he always did, but she figured that was born of friendship and trust rather than actual agreement. Haymitch didn't know who to believe, and Beetee wanted to see if there was any physical proof. Nobody took her on her word. Until now.

"Yeah." Johanna felt a relaxing breath go in and out of her lungs. She had no idea that she would feel physically better after hearing someone believed her. However, it wasn't enough. She was still under constant supervision and almost always wearing handcuffs. She couldn't protect Katniss. "So what do we do?"

Johanna chuckled. "What do you expect me to do? I'm always locked up. Gotta keep the monster in her cage."

Katniss frowned and gave Johanna a thoroughly sour expression. "You're not a monster. You know, you saved my life in that arena. I know it doesn't mean much now, but I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me for that awful scar on your arm?" Johanna replied, nodding her head toward Katniss's right arm. There was a jagged mark about five inches down Katniss's forearm and she rubbed it self-consciously. Johanna would never say it aloud, but she kind of liked the fact that she had marked Katniss in a permanent way. There'd always be a little bit of herself on Katniss and for reasons she dared not analyze, she enjoyed that. "You're welcome. I'd say you'd do the same for me, but we both know you wouldn't." Katniss didn't respond and Johanna merely looked at her. "I
don't blame you. I never gave you a reason to trust me."

"Even if you had, I might not have trusted you anyway," Katniss admitted with a shrug. In many ways, Johanna felt like she was the person Katniss would have been if she had won her Games alone. If she didn't have Prim or her mother to weigh down her conscience. They didn't trust easily, they were quick to temper, they were stubborn to a fault. And most glaring of all, they kept people they loved at a distance out of fear of bringing them pain. "But I trust you now."

"Do you, Mockingjay? You're not afraid I'll kill you in your sleep?" Johanna taunted in what she hoped was a light tone.

Katniss smirked. "Like I couldn't take you."

Johanna's expressive eyes and raised brows made Katniss blush at her own comeback. Johanna's lips went wide in a shit-eating grin. She had finally gotten past Katniss's pure, untouched personality and hit the woman beneath. She didn't press it, knowing how easily Katniss slid back into her shell. "So what now? What's the plan?"

"I convince them to let you out and start training. If you're right and Peeta is wired to kill me, I'm going to need someone who will be willing to..." She couldn't finish the sentence and Johanna frowned. She nodded in understanding so Katniss didn't have to say the words. She wasn't always merciful, but the thought of harming Peeta looked like it really hurt Katniss so she cut her some slack. "I'll need you with me. Not locked in here like a prisoner."

I need you with me. Johanna ignored the tingle in her chest at those words. "And how do you plan on convincing them I'm not a threat?"

Katniss leaned forward, coming into Johanna's personal bubble for the first time maybe ever. They got close saving each other's lives on the beaches of the arena but nothing like this. Not when Johanna could feel the heat of Katniss's body and smell the mint on her breath from her toothpaste. "I told you I can be very persuasive." Johanna's tongue darted out to wet her lips as Katniss backed off and started toward the door. "The 'Mockingjay' has some pull around here, you know."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Katniss turned around and took the challenge with a nod, then turned back and quietly opened the door. She peeked down the corridor to make sure the coast was clear and Johanna watched her slip into the darkened hallway. She wasn't sure Katniss could make good on her promise, but she did hold a tiny bit of hope in her heart that she was right. Hope is a dangerous thing. Snow was right about that; it is more powerful than fear or hate. Fear and hatred fade with time, but hope remained. Even after all Johanna had been through, she still held on to hope like a lifeline. If someone as jaded as herself could still believe in her heart that good things happen, she could only imagine what it did to people who possessed more goodness and had more to lose.

Just like everyone else in Panem, she was resting her hopes with the fiery Mockingjay. Of course if there's one thing Johanna always counted on, it was fire.
Survivors

In her life Johanna had been called many names. Her father called her Firelight; her mother called her a spitfire; her sister called her 'Hanna; Nova called her Jo (or brainless, but that was a lifetime ago); the Capitol called her a victor; 7 called her a hero. However, as she learned quickly, there were no winners or victors in Panem. Heroes existed in fairy tales and children's imaginations. The games produced one thing and one thing only: 

Survivors.

That what she called herself. That's the name she carried with her inside her heart: survivor. Not a fighter, not a winner, not a victor, not a lover, not a woman. She had no identity outside of being a survivor. Everything that she was or had been seemed to be lost somewhere. The bits and pieces of what she used to be that cropped up every now and then were now weapons. Her sexuality, her wit, her strength, her mind, her body. Every last piece of her was used to destroy others and protect herself.

To survive.

Morphling was an intense drug. The doctor explained it comes from an old medicine called morphine that they used back in our ancestors' time to dull pain. Over the last few centuries it morphed into more a hallucinogen. As life gets harder, the drugs get stronger. Ever since Johanna got to 13 they'd had her on a steady diet of the nasty stuff to prevent her from "breaking out." They also had her in a padded room with inch thick metal cuffs around her wrists. Evidently her reputation as a victor and a "loose cannon" meant extra precautions were being taken for Katniss's safety.

During Johanna's victory tour, her trip to 6 had been the most shocking. She had no idea how pervasive morphling was until they stopped at the transportation capitol. District 6 was the largest district in Panem, specializing in machinery and yellowish looking emaciated people. Johanna couldn't remember if she had killed any of their tributes; she doubted it, as most of them usually got murdered in the first couple hours. Except for Titus, the guy who ate everyone and got swallowed by the avalanche during her games.

The power of the drug - the look of mindlessness, the dazed smiles on their faces despite their bleak situation - was intense and alluring. They always seemed much happier than everyone else. However, that perception was as stupid as the one that the Capitol provides safety: you are only as safe as you are compliant. You are only as happy as you are ignorant. Compliant and ignorant were two words that did not suit Johanna.

It suited 6 because that's how they survived. They, too, were survivors, Johanna realized. They didn't win Hunger Games or have any money, but they had drugs and each other. Painting their faces and going out of their minds. When your fantasy life is better than your reality, you either have to change your reality or give wholly to the fantasy. Before Katniss, they chose the latter. After? They bravely chose the former.

Survivors.

Until Katniss emerged from the arena a year ago with Peeta's hand in hers, there were only survivors who got lifted from that arena. Fifty-something people who had nothing in common except for the fact that they were all victims of the same curse. The curse of living when you were marked for death. Katniss didn't know, but her survival against Snow's wishes meant that maybe there was more to winning than surviving. Maybe, just maybe, you could live again. Primrose was
a living example of how you could be more than just a survivor. Snow couldn't punish Katniss by killing her little sister because this had become bigger than just living and dying. Prim gave the others hope that innocence could be salvaged.

Within around five days of Katniss's late night visit to Johanna she finally got her released into the regular section of the hospital. It was a long shot from the compartments she had wanted, but it was the best compromise Katniss could maneuver with President Coin. Johanna had yet to meet the infamous President Coin, the wannabe successor to Snow, but she already didn't like her. She held a small reserve of respect for the woman for keeping all these people alive without the help of the other districts, and for being a woman in power. That was as far as her respect went.

Typically people who want power most are the people who should have it the least.

Living in the hospital was still better than the cell. There were no chains to keep her in her bed. She was free to roam the hospital and eat in the cafeteria, as long as she was flanked by two guards. The round-the-clock protection was unnecessary, but Johanna didn't mind it so long as they didn't tie her up again. The morphling they gave her was still a high dosage, keeping her mellow for around a week until she began cutting her own supply. If she was going to help Katniss and figure out what was going on with Peeta, she needed to be lucid.

Typically she sat alone in the cafeteria, or sometimes Finnick and Annie would sit opposite her but their constant affection for one another wore Johanna's already wafer-thin patience. She was happy for Finnick but it was tiresome.

She and Katniss hadn't spoken since that night, especially since it seemed everyone was conspiring to keep them as far apart as possible. Johanna wasn't sure she was imagining the distrustful glances of Peeta, Gale and others or if they were legitimate. The morphling, and then the subsequent morphling withdrawal, was making her loopy. Her already magnified suspicion was doubled. Fire and attacking bakers echoed in her dreams at night.

Lunch was one of her favorite times of day - not because the food was any good, because it was awful - but because she got to see little glimpses of Katniss. There was no reason to analyze the anxious feeling that sat in her heart as she watched the younger girl with her friends. She was her protector. As much as her head doctor had insisted she "put it behind her" she couldn't ever outrun the games. Not while Snow was still playing. Seeing Katniss safe and even somewhat happy made Johanna feel a few emotions she was loathe to identify. So she didn't.

Her brown eyes stared down into the small piece of bread she still had left from her lunch. Her slightly grimy fingernails needleled at the dough, absorbed in the meaningless task. The shifting of her two guards, the sounds of their hands gripping their guns drew her attention up. Her eyes met sympathetic gray ones and Johanna felt a sharp stab of something in her heart. Was that nervousness? She couldn't tell.

"Want a lunch partner?" Katniss asked lightly, a small smile on her lips. "You look, uh, a little worse for the wear."

"Morphling. I've been," Johanna gave a look to her guards then shrugged, "I've been holding back my own supply from myself. Trying to sober up. Can't exactly be a high-functioning member of this greased machine if I'm halfway to the moon all the time." Johanna paused and darted her eyes to the table. "And sleep has been hard to come by. But that's not new."

The look Katniss gave Johanna meant she understood. Her disorientation would not prove useful to their plan. She even looked a little proud? "I'd say sleep is at a minimum everywhere. Can I sit down?"
Johanna looked up at her guards and raised an eyebrow. She returned her gaze to Katniss and smirked. "Settle down boys. It's only the Mockingjay. No need to protect me. I don't think she could take me, do you?" Katniss shook her head and sat down across from her, placing her tray on the table and let out a small laugh. "Oh that's right, they're here for you, not me." She pointed her bread at the guards lining the hallway. "Everyone's here for you."

The guilt spread in Katniss's eyes quickly and pushed the smile from her mouth. "Is that why you hate me?" she asked gently, taking a bite of the small sandwich she had been served for lunch.

"Partly. Jealousy is certainly involved." Johanna tore at the piece of bread in her hand, her wide eyes darting up Katniss's face. "I also think you're a little hard to swallow. What with your tacky romantic drama and your defender of the helpless act." Johanna sighed exasperatedly. "Only it isn't an act and it makes you even more unbearable." Katniss rolled her eyes and Johanna tilted her head. "Please feel free to take this personally."

But Katniss wouldn't. Not only because she knew Johanna was entitled to her anger, also because she wasn't wrong. Katniss frowned and looked affronted. "You think I put on that act with Peeta. Like I was cheating."

Johanna shrugged. "I think you got away with a lot. All you had to do was act in love with a guy who's crazy for you. Poor you, forced to wear beautiful dresses and hold his hand. It's just a little below the belt, you know?"

Katniss's gray eyes went perceptibly darker. If she had misconceptions about Johanna's feelings toward her, they were quickly circumvented. "I know a lot of you - a lot of us - have had our lives made unbearable by Snow. But I did what I did to protect my family. They had to survive. Prim did."

"Your volunteering saw to that," Johanna informed dismissively. "If she was precious enough for you to risk your life, Snow had no chance of killing her without inciting a rebellion." Her voice dropped an octave menacingly. "Don't for a second think you're 'one of us,' Mockingjay. What we went through you couldn't begin to imagine. All those victors I killed, you killed? Those were the real survivors."

Katniss's fingers gripped around the sides of her tray, clearly torn between leaving the table - and the assault on her character - or staying. Johanna watched the battle rage inside the girl and ultimately, her hold relaxed. "You should've been the Mockingjay. They never would've had to feed you lines."

Johanna smirked. "True, but no one likes me."

"I like you."

Katniss looked back down at her sandwich and took a large bite as the awkward silence fell between them. Johanna licked her lips slowly and crossed her legs. "Mm, I bet you do. And where does that come from exactly? The guilt because I was tortured because of you? Or is it you thinking I'm some helpless twit who needs your defending? Some pathetic charity case like your boyfriend."

Johanna's fists began to ball at her sides and she felt the guards behind her get a little closer to her body. Most upsetting of all, Katniss looked nervous. As if this tiny display of anger was proof Johanna was lying and it was she who was the killer-in-the-wings. After a few deep breaths she managed to bring her gaze back up to Katniss. Miraculously, Katniss hadn't given up and left her there alone to stew in her anger. "We're going to Two in two weeks. Well, Gale is going and I have to go as the face of the rebellion." Johanna narrowed her eyes in confusion. "Peeta is
Even in her withdrawal-laden state Johanna understood. Gale would be out fighting and none of these Capitol-trained people would be able to protect Katniss from Peeta. The boy was strong and determined but most of all, unassuming. "I'm not going to be allowed on that hovercraft with you. And look at me. I'm about as useful in a scuffle as Effie Trinket."

Katniss's mouth twitched. "They want you in the propos. It's important to Plutarch that we show the Capitol that you weren't undone by your torture." The careful way she chose her words did not fly over Johanna's head. Everyone was always so concerned with not offending her when she literally couldn't care less. "They're afraid of what you might do to me, so no one asked you."

"But you're not afraid of me, are you, girl on fire?" Johanna asked, leaning over the table slightly. She tore at her piece of bread and smiled. "Not that day we met in the elevator, although I think I did have you back on the ropes."

A blush flared across both of Katniss's cheeks. "You and Finnick. He didn't strip down naked but he might as well have in that net get-up. Asking me if I wanted a sugar cube," Katniss recalled with a shake of her head. The Finnick she knew now was not the same smug man who had asked for her secrets. She much preferred this Finnick. "But you were just trying to rile me up because I'm so 'pure.'"

"Is that why I did that?" Her lower lip protruded as she thought on that for a moment. She got up from her seat, slowly (the guards did not take kindly to quick movements) then leaned her palms on the table, coming close to Katniss's face. Her tongue darted out to swipe her lips and she cocked an eyebrow. "Maybe it was an invitation." She must have gotten too close because the guards pulled her back from Katniss and she let out a short laugh as she looked on Katniss's flustered face. "Calm down boys, I'm just having fun with our Mockingjay."

In spite of her light tone her eyes glared at them angrily. Their rough treatment of her was expected, but when they did it in public it undermined her reputation. She didn't want everyone in the rabbit warren of 13 to think she was some sort of lunatic. Well, she didn't care about everyone...

Katniss looked for a moment like she was going to take up Johanna's case but clamped her mouth shut. Johanna moved out of the guard's arms and snarled at them, escorting herself out of the cafeteria.

Her dreams always screamed at night: fires, mutts, axes, blood. The morphling had been dulling the sharp emotions in her dreams but without it they were free to drive into her skull and wake her in a sweat. That's what they don't tell you about winning the Hunger Games. They don't tell you how you relive your victory every day of your life. But you don't relive the pomp and circumstance of the win, you don't relive your interview with Caesar or your heartwrenching Victory Tour. You relive the moment you split someone's head open with a hatchet.

You relive the moment you watched a little girl get beheaded from your safe position high up in a tree. You relive the moment you scaled a tree so fast the blonde-haired boy from District 1 couldn't catch you. The moment you saw an insane boy eating the barely living remains of a tribute he had killed. You hear that person's blood-curdling scream. The heart-pounding, soul-killing moments of life and death. This is what made Johanna sit upright in her hospital bed, soaking her white sheets with sweat. Her fingers trembled in the darkness as she grappled around on the floor for the morphling drip she had unhooked before going to sleep. She neatly tucked the
drip back in and let out a sigh, laying back down on the bed. She hoped something more pleasant would visit her dreams.

It did. It was her sister playing in the forests behind their home in 7. She hadn't gotten to live in the Victor's Village long so Johanna never saw her there. She often saw her where they were most happy - out in the woods, far from the bustle of the town's square. She approached her baby sister, sitting down cross-legged across from her on the ground. Her sister's hair was long, nearly touching the ground as she sat. Today it was plaited down her back in the same style Katniss wore it.

"I like your hair," Johanna said, smiling at her sister when she looked up. She had big, beautiful hazel eyes that stared back at Johanna with a sageness beyond her few years. It was memories like this that made Johanna wish she could have volunteered for her sister. Maybe then she would've been spared. But she wasn't old enough to put into the reaping anyway. And there's no going back.

"I knew you would," she replied, taking the end of the braid in her hand. "That's why you put it like that. To remind you of her." Johanna didn't know how to respond, so she didn't. She joined her sister in drawing designs in the earth with a nearby stick. She was afraid to break the dream. It had been so long since she had seen her sister. The last time she spoke to her she was promising to be back as soon as possible. One of many promises Johanna had broken. One of the few she regretted.

It wasn't always violence that screamed in her dreams. Sometimes it was the pregnant silence of broken promises.

"You have to save Katniss," she said abruptly. Johanna looked over at her with knit eyebrows. "You have to be the hero. You're the only one who knows the secret."

Johanna sighed. "I want to protect her. But I'm no hero, kid."

"Because you couldn't protect me?" Her sister looked at her without malice and smiled. "It's okay 'Hanna, I forgive you." Johanna wanted to reach out and touch her but the violet haze her dream was soaked in made her nervous. She didn't want to ruin this peaceful moment. "You just need to unlock the secret. It's like a game. You used to love to play games with me."

"Yeah, well, I've been playing some not-so-fun games recently," Johanna explained.

"You won those games," her sister countered. "You just need to know the word."

"The trigger word? I don't know it. I don't - I don't remember." The air around them began to turn deep purple and Johanna frowned. Her time with her sister was ending.

"He does." Her sister placed her tiny hand on Johanna's cheek. As Johanna went to place her hand over hers it evaporated. Within a few moments Johanna was awake, staring at the gray cement ceiling over her head. She unhooked the morphling drip and threw it on the floor. No more morphling. As much as she missed her sister, those dreams were not real, they were not connections to an afterlife. They were the consequence of being a survivor. A punishment. Her sister could never forgive her for letting her die.

She would never forgive herself anyway.

The following morning Johanna received a stamp on her arm for the first time since her rescue,
indicating her schedule for the day. She was to eat breakfast, then report to President Coin's office at 9am. She figured that was a hard 9am so she ate her breakfast quickly. Her guards, who she had named Idiot and Grumpy, followed her into the office.

President Coin sat behind a fairly simple desk made of steel, a few instruments of unknown ability were across the top but otherwise it was sparse just like everything else in 13. Waste not, want not. Johanna walked into the office determined to not let this woman intimidate her. "At ease, boys," Johanna said to her guards, who stood at the door with their guns in hand. Coin looked mildly amused as Johanna sat down in the work chair on the opposite side of the desk and crossed her legs.

"I'm glad you're in better spirits, Miss Mason," Coin said, her expression passive. "I'm sorry it's taken so long for us to meet properly. Obviously your circumstances have not been ideal for a conversation."

Johanna raised an eyebrow, rimming the edge of her armrest with the tip of her finger. "Oh no, I thoroughly enjoyed being held like a captive for no reason." President Coin looked very quickly taken aback but she caught the emotion before it spread and replaced it with indifference.

Her posture stiffened. "Miss Mason you must understand that my top priority is the safety of the people under my protection. The people of both Districts Twelve and Thirteen."

Johanna produced a shrill, short laugh. Her eyes moved around the room, taking in the security features that seemed overkill for a woman hiding several hundred feet underground. "I'm sure. And I was a big threat being freshly tortured and totally weak. I'm sure all the infants were shaking in their cribs."

President Coin remained unruffled. She clasped her hands in front of her on the desktop. Her pale eyes offered nothing in the way of her emotions other than a subtle hint of frustration. "Did Plutarch explain what happened when you were rescued? Which, you'd be wise to remember, we did at the risk and expense of our very thin supplies."

The younger woman shook her head. She remembered hearing gunfire and smelling gas but nothing specific of her rescue until she got to 13 and woke up tied to the bed. "No, he must've missed that part after he was done telling me I was a stinking time bomb."

"We brought you and Peeta back and he came to first. After being seen by our physician he explained how they forced him to watch your torture. From what you've described to Dr. Thorne, he was spot on accurate. He then said that they used deep hypnosis to place a kill switch inside you. When prompted with the trigger word, you would be programmed to murder Katniss Everdeen without remorse. Considering your tenuous relationship with her, you seem a plausible threat."

Johanna allowed the information to sink in. Peeta knew how she'd been tortured. How was that possible? Did they implant memories in him? And what was all this about her "relationship" with Katniss? They had no public interactions other than the arena, where she figured her bad attitude would have been excused by the impending threat of death. "So let me ask you: Had I woken up first and said the same thing about him, would he have spent weeks in handcuffs being followed around by two hulking piles of meat devoid of personality?"

Her translucent eyes flickered toward the guards, then back to Johanna, who was sat watching her smugly. "Yes, I imagine we would have. We had Peeta under very strict supervision. He has passed all of his tests with flying colors. There doesn't even seem to be any marks on him from any invasive torture."
"And I failed these tests?" Johanna asked, losing patience. "I have gone to that stupid head doctor every day since I woke up." Her eyes narrowed and she clapped her hands against the chair armrests in frustration. "This is bullshit. You guys don't trust me?" She threw her arms in the air. "Fine. I don't need you to trust me. I need her to trust me, and she does. So when they go to Two in two weeks and you let a walking grenade stand next to her? I will be there. For her."

President Coin's mouth moved upward for a split second before it returned to its straight line. "You are being cleared for training beginning after lunch. If you are approved by Soldier York I will allow you to go with the team to Two. Not because I think it's correct, but because Katniss has refused to go without you. I told her the only way I would agree is if you manage to get through training."

Johanna smiled triumphantly. Katniss really was on her side. Something swelled inside her chest that felt unfamiliar for a few beats until she recognized it. Pride. She attempted to rope in her composure. "Is that all?"

President Coin nodded. Johanna took that as a dismissal and got up from her chair. Her fingertips slid across the top of Coin's desk, collecting the small bit of dust that was on the surface. She rubbed it between her fingers and began walking to the door. "Miss Mason?" Johanna turned, crossing her arms across her chest. "Make sure that you attend each training session. Do not waste our time and our resources. Miss Everdeen may be willing to go out on a limb for you, but I am not."

"Thanks for the pep talk, chief." Johanna rolled her dark eyes and strutted out of Coin's office, snapping her fingers at her two guards. She felt empowered by their conversation. No matter how little Coin thought of her, Katniss was on the same team. She got her into training and Johanna was going to be the best damn person in that training class. Guards or no guards, she was going to 2.

The days of training reminded Johanna of the small amount of learning she had done before going into her arena. The day she arrived in the Training Center she had been intimidated by all the various equipment and the large kids able to use them. She and Blight had strategized on the train ride to the Capitol on what her story would be. She had a handful of survival skills: she could light a fire (because of Nova), make a small camp, wield an axe with deadly precision, and climb trees faster than most squirrels.

The arena could have been a desert wasteland or a snowy tundra, so she wasn't even sure any of those skills were relevant. Blight was usually pretty drunk during their sessions together but they did come up with one brilliant masterstroke: Johanna would get a low training score and act like she wasn’t a threat. If the Careers thought she’d be tough, they’d go for her first. She could win like Annie Cresta had, by hiding and learning to survive better than anyone else. She had gotten a six in her training session, which was low for that year.

Her training in 13 began with the fifteen-year-olds which Johanna initially found offensive, until she realized she could barely keep up with them. Even a week in the stretching hurt her body and the running made her heave on the track outside. With her sweaty palms on her knees she bent over, trying to catch her breath. A few kids sprinted by her and Johanna moved to the side to get out of the way. She wiped her mouth of the bile on her lips and stood up, arching her back and sticking out her stomach.

The second part of her day she was putting together rifles and taking target practice outside with the kids. She wasn't great at assembling the rifles or being a sharpshooter. Her hands still shook
from the morphling withdrawal and her aim was not great without an axe in her hands. Frustrated by missing her marks, she braced the gun over her shoulder and paused for a break, muttering expletives beneath her breath. Out of the corner of her eye she saw two figures emerge from the large steel doors of 13. Her eyes squinted in the harsh midday sunlight as she made out the people - Gale and Katniss. They joked cordially, Katniss stretching her bow as they began toward the forest.

"MASON!" Soldier York barked at Johanna from across the field, jerking her attention away from the two 12 natives. She saw Katniss look over in her direction and she inhaled sharply. She wasn't going to look like some weakling in front of Katniss Everdeen. Not Johanna Mason. Gritting her teeth she put the rifle in position. "Mason you need to hit five bullseyes or you're going another five laps."

Johanna grumbled under her breath and steadied her rifle. Zeroing in her focus she began to tick off the targets as they moved across the field. A headshot, a heartshot, another heartshot, and two more headshots later she smiled triumphantly, turning to see if Katniss was still watching. She was, although Gale had moved several feet away toward the forest.

"Great job, Mason," Soldier York said, coming up behind Johanna and blocking her view of Katniss. "But since you can't keep your focus, why don't you go ahead and take those five laps anyway?" Johanna opened her mouth to complain but York's stern glare made her mouth close. The woman leaned in, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Everdeen will still be here when you're done."

Wide-eyed and embarrassed Johanna tossed her gun on the ground, never breaking eye contact with York as it clattered at their feet. Her fists clenched so tightly small semi-circles were cut into her palms Johanna took off around the track. With every bounce of her heel against the ground pain shot through her body but she ignored it. In spite of Soldier York's treatment and teasing, she knew she was doing well. As long as she didn't suffer any setbacks in a few days she would be on the hovercraft to Two with Katniss.

Would the creak of a faucet always send a chill down her spine? Johanna slowly turned the metal knob and rushing hot water spewed forth. Her eyes squeezed shut as she dabbed a towel under the water. Just the sound of the water crawling through the pipes made all her hairs stand on end. In the Capitol the water could be heard in the walls as it climbed up from the floor and rained down from above, pipes groaning from disuse.

It would soak her so thoroughly she felt like she'd never know the sensation of dry skin again. Now that she was back in 13, just the sound of rushing water induced such crippling flashbacks that she'd have to shut out the world to try and regain herself. The thought of being rained on or wet made it feel like a ringing alarm was inside her brain. The crackle of electricity did the same but that was much less common.

She ran the towel over the back of her neck, wiping off the sweat and grime that had accumulated there. Wincing, she dragged the towel across her breastplate and down her arms. Every single pass of the damp towel against her skin felt like being burned alive. She made quicker work of cleaning herself, wanting the unbearable task to be over as soon as possible.

Tossing the towel on the floor she stepped out of the communal hospital bathroom. Most of the other patients were asleep, and even if they weren't, her nakedness was not something she would've hid. The branch-like scarring across her body from the electricity was the only thing marring her skin. She had gained a little weight and muscle back from the training and eating
properly, but she was still thinner than she had been in the arena.

Upon arriving back at her bed she stopped short behind the curtain, smirking brown eyes meeting enlarged gray ones. "O-o-oh, I didn't...you're..."

"You know there used to be a charge for this, Twelve," Johanna mocked, crossing her arms under her breasts and canting her head to the side to watch Katniss flounder as she sat on the edge of her bed. Rendering Katniss unable to speak was in Johanna's top five of her favorite things to do. Even though she tried to stop it, she watched Katniss's eyes flick down her body, then over to the door embarrassedly. "Do you need something? Or are you just here for the show?"

Katniss blinked rapidly as she looked back to Johanna, seemingly determined to keep eye contact at all costs. "I um. I. Uh, I'm -"

"Gonna finish that sentence tonight?" Johanna placed her hands on her slender hips. "No wonder they have to feed you lines." Frustration hiding her entertainment at Katniss's discomfort, Johanna let out a melodramatic sigh. "You're sitting on my sleep uniform, Everdeen. I'll put it on if it will help you spit the words out. I don't typically sleep in anything but I'll make the exception for you." She paused. "Making an exception for Katniss. Maybe this place is rubbing off on me."

Katniss got up briefly and tossed the outfit to Johanna who begrudgingly put it on, her darkened brown eyes never leaving Katniss's as she dressed herself. A short hiss made Katniss jolt from the bed and whirl around, and the orange cat emerged from underneath Johanna's bed, tail flicking back and forth. "Buttercup?" She bent down to grab the animal and Johanna watched as it scurried away from her and back under Johanna's bed. Katniss turned to Johanna. "Did you take Buttercup?"

Johanna rolled her eyes. "Yes. Between the vigorous training, the head doctor sessions and the insomnia I found the time to kidnap some random stinking cat and keep it under my bed, brainless." Johanna moved across the room and sat down on her bed, tucking her leg underneath the other. "He wandered in here a few nights ago."

"Prim has been looking for him forever," Katniss remarked, still confused. "What is he doing in here? He hates people. He only likes Prim."

"Hates people or hates you?" The offending feline emerged from beneath Johanna's bed and leapt up onto her lap, curling himself into the small area between her legs. Absently she stroked his fur, looking up at Katniss smugly. In truth she had been excited to see the animal a few nights back. She didn't know who he belonged to but she liked him. He hissed at her doctors and kept her company at night.

"Of course he'd like you. You're so similar." Katniss hid a grin by biting her lower lip as Johanna's eyes met hers.

"How's that now?"


Johanna grunted in displeasure as her fingers stroked the tangled fur of the cat. "You're a killer too," Johanna reminded. "But he doesn't like you." Johanna picked up the feline and placed him on the ground. She moved to the door and opened it. "Okay you little bastard, go back to Prim. The Mockingjay has spoken." Buttercup stood still for a moment, twitching his tail before
scampering out of the room. Johanna closed the door and turned to Katniss. "So I'm a cat in your analogy?"

The brunette blushed and ducked her gaze. "I'm just saying I see the similarities."

"Did you come down here to tell me how much I remind you of that critter?" Johanna questioned as she returned to her bed, stifling a yawn. "Unlike you, some of us actually have to work to be allowed special privileges."

The jab made a flash of hurt flicker in Katniss's eyes. Johanna felt a pang in her chest but ignored it. "I just came to see how you were doing. I saw you in training. Looked like you're doing really well."

"Gee, thanks for the compliment," Johanna mocked, laying down on the bed and sliding her hands under her pillow. "They could tape this for a propo, you know. 'The Mockingjay Paying Charity Visit To Poor Tortured Victors.' I think that'd go over well." Johanna laughed at the flare of anger in Katniss's eyes. "Better than your charity visit to Eight, anyway."

On that, Johanna saw that she had stepped over the line. Katniss's gray eyes were aflame with anger and her arms crossed over her chest. Everything about her seemed to radiate heat and rage. Johanna didn't want to think of how that look made a stirring happen deep in her stomach. "What is your problem? You claim you wanna help me but then you - you do this. What the hell?"

Johanna sat up. "Slow down there. I never said I wanted to help you."

Katniss shook her head quickly in evident surprise. "Let me spell it out for you, kitten. You are the Mockingjay. As long as you live, the rebellion lives. You live, eventually, Snow dies." Johanna laid back down on the bed. "That is why I'm helping you. That dumb baker is not going to ruin what I risked my life for. What a lot of people, people I loved, died for." Katniss's lips set in a line and Johanna saw the hurt evident in her gaze. "Wow, you are truly self-centered if you thought this was all about you."

"No," Katniss replied, walking toward the door. "I thought it was about us. I thought maybe," Katniss smiled sardonically and let out a short laugh, "Maybe we could be friends. I thought maybe you were trying to help me because you liked me and you didn't want me to die." Her grip tightened on the handle of the door. Without another word she swung it open and stormed out, slamming it behind her.

Johanna grunted and turned onto her side, pulling her blankets up over her shoulders. "Maybe we could be friends. Yeah, sure, maybe in another life, Johanna thought miserably. There was nothing seemingly stopping her from trying to be friends with Katniss, other than the fact that Katniss's quest to be the most noble person in Panem was nauseating. Inside, though, she felt a pull that she couldn't ignore. A gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach that told her friends was not in the picture for her and the Mockingjay.

There was no time to dwell on that feeling, though. The only thing she had to worry about was keeping Katniss alive. Thoughts of silly things like friendships and feelings could wait until this was all over. If they were still alive, then maybe Johanna would take the time to figure out just what that feeling in her stomach was.

Until then? Survive.
In her school room in 7, Johanna would sit near the back of the classroom carving little pictures into the wooden desk with a metal stylus she had stolen from her father's tool box. The teacher would drone on about the Capitol while Johanna created a landscape photo of the woods behind her home. Time seemed to move at a glacial pace. Her eyes would dart to the clock - 9:06. After an eternity later she'd look again - 9:13.

In the woods when she was free from the yoke of her education, time seemed to pass like a rushing river. One moment she'd be staring at the clouds from the canopy of a tree, the next the sky would have burned black into night with the pock marks of stars. She'd hear her mother's voice calling for her in exasperation. Time was like air - it was everywhere and there was so much of it to use.

The speeding train that took Johanna and her mentor Blight to the Capitol after her reaping was faster than anything Johanna had ever seen. Since traveling in between the districts was forbidden, Johanna had never been in anything faster than one of the logging trucks. In just a day or so they arrived in the Training Center and suddenly, time was falling through Johanna's hands faster than she could catch it. The only piece of advice she and Blight had agreed upon was her strategy: look weak. District 7 hadn't had a female victor in nearly thirty years, the last one having died a few years before Johanna was reaped. But 7 was still formidable because they were strong lumberjacks who learned their trade young. Even the women could wield axes. Johanna's slight stature made her look like less of a threat than some of the other girls before her. So she did what she was told. She looked like a coward. It was embarrassing, but fuck if it didn't work like a charm.

Interviews, training, costumes, 3, 2, 1, launch.

Time moved weirdly in the arena. The first few hours flew by. The moment they shot up they were on a flat plain of grass with the cornucopia inside a small cave in the center. It was a death trap. Blight wasn't much but he was a victor. He instructed her to gather small things from the edge of the arena and get as far away from everyone as possible. Find water, stay warm, wait it out.

Time.

Use it to your advantage. Survive as long as possible. Plenty of District 6 tributes had won just by camouflaging themselves and waiting until everyone else was dead. Johanna wasn't afraid of killing anyone, but she knew the Careers would destroy her if given the chance.

The plain field of the launching area gave way to a very rocky mountain that went up in almost every direction. Johanna had grabbed a few provisions and gotten to the sparse forest, looking up at the trees for one that would be a suitable home. The boots she had been given were made especially for climbing, Johanna had realized quickly. She vaulted over rocks and loose pebbles that made up the floor of the forest. A particularly dense pile of rocks caught her attention. She picked up a large stone and tossed it in, watching the ground consume the stone as if it were alive. Her mind searched for the name of that material. There was an old fable her father had told her about a stupid monkey chasing a coconut into quicksand. It was a lesson about being too greedy, but today it helped her live another day. Avoid quicksand. Johanna continued to scale the rocky terrain until she came upon some trees and a very small brook that would be helpful. If the other sources of water were this small, she would no doubt have company eventually.
She settled into the tree that night, watching as the sky lit up with the names of the fallen tributes. The first day was always a bloodbath and the 71st Games was no exception. Out of the 24 of them, ten were gone in the first few hours. Johanna and other unlucky thirteen lived to see another day.

But the time moved so slowly. Night crawled like snails over concrete. Another cannon went off in her sleep. The following day was a nightmare. Johanna had moved her camp, weakly trying to find a way to get some food. Her fish catching skills were non existent, and there were no axes to hunt with. Trying to get one from the cornucopia would be a suicide mission.

Her hunger was staved however because that was the day Titus went insane. The District 6 boy savagely beat and began eating six of the thirteen people left. Johanna came across one of their bodies, the chest still moving slightly but his legs were bloody and torn, obvious bite marks on his inner thighs. His stomach was open, entrails falling out. He begged for death, although Johanna was sure he couldn't see her since his eyeballs lay next to him. She dry-heaved.

Time was moving slowly for that boy, too.

A hovercraft appeared over her head, but no claw came down. Instead it was a shot of electricity. Johanna ran in the opposite direction after hearing a loud, manly gurgle scream across the land. Later she would find out that the Gamemakers had electrocuted Titus to clean up the bodies because he was eating them. Even the ones he didn't kill himself. She heard a blood-chilling scream a few hours later. The pleading of someone being eaten alive. Johanna squeezed her eyes shut and hoped the cannon would go off soon.

Boom. Time's up.

A day later one of the hills nearby erupted and an avalanche of mud, trees and rock slid down toward the cornucopia. A cannon went off. That night, Titus's unassuming face appeared in the sky. Johanna knew wherever the other people were, they were probably just as relieved as she was. They were going to die, but no one deserved to have their body desecrated. And the Capitol, well, Johanna was sure no one wanted to see little kids get eaten by an insane boy. Then again, maybe they did. They lived a different life.

That day Johanna made her way back to the cornucopia. With Titus gone it was just herself and around three other tributes. By now her family had been interviewed, her district highlighted. Her odds were rising. The chances of her gaining a sponsor increased but Blight wasn't exactly Mr. Charming. She didn't rely on anyone else, anyway.

Today she had two things: her wit and time.

She retrieved a small hatchet from the cornucopia as well as a backpack with some rolls, a sleeping bag, two knives, and some healing salve. It would be enough to survive a day or so. Unfortunately, Johanna was not going to wait anymore. She was going to emerge from the cowardly screen she had hid behind.

Today, she was going to kill.

Her first kill was trapping a boy in the quicksand she had found. He threw a spear so close to Johanna's skin she felt the metal slide against her and the cool wind of it missing her by a hair. He chased her over the rocks and when they came upon the quicksand Johanna leapt for the tree and he stumbled into the material. She watched from above as he slowly was sucked into the earth. He cried for her help.

Not today.
The other tribute she met in passing. She found her fire, stupidly having been lit in the middle of
the day. Johanna leapt from tree to tree, scaling them like a vine with the quickness learned of
growing up with trees. The girl laughed in her face when she landed on the ground in front of her.
What district was she from? Johanna couldn't remember. She looked strong, though. Maybe 2. In
any case, she laughed at Johanna's approach. She came at Johanna with a sword, expecting her to
cower.

She ducked. She came up behind the girl and smashed her skull with the hatchet. The crunch of
bone was muted by the boom of the cannon.

Two more remaining. Still no parachutes. Fine. Johanna didn't need them anyway. In her training
she had spent some time in the flora and fauna section, learning about hazardous plants they didn't
have in 7. She had recognized one of them in the arena: devil's eyes. They had another name back
in another time, but Johanna remembered their name now and their poison. She plucked a few
from one of the bushes and placed it in a makeshift bowl she had carved from the wood. She set
up a campfire and waited.

Time would not kill her. She could soak it up.

Soon enough she heard the sound of gravel crunching under someone's heavy boot. Johanna
quickly put out the fire, kicking up stones and running toward a nearby tree. She scaled it quickly
and watched the boy approach her camp. A bowl of fresh water sat next to her campfire as well as
her hatchet and the bowl of devil's eyes. He mocked her from the ground. "Nice job Seven!
Thanks for your weapon and your camp!"

He ate the berries.

He died.

Johanna retrieved her weapon and smirked down at the overturned bowl of berries and the white-

cased corpse. "You're welcome."

The last tribute was a fight between herself and a boy from one of the poorer districts, maybe 11.
It was desperate. It was bloody. It was over. The trumpets blared and Johanna was lifted from the
arena and her wounds tended to. Mostly she was starving, though the boy from 11 had gotten a
few shots on her. She couldn't wait to get back home. Now she had the guarantee to live her life in
peace. Her parents didn't have to work dangerous jobs in the district. Her sister would never have
to take out any tesserae. They would be safe.

They had all the time in the world, or so Johanna thought. Little did she know every second from
that last cannon boom was counting down to the day when all she loved would be robbed from

Time's up.

This deception in her games was probably one of the reasons no one believed her now in 13. If
she could pretend to be a weakling and then viciously murder, she could pretend to be Katniss's
friend and then kill her too. In that sense, Johanna understood their trepidation. But if she was
going to kill Katniss, she had plenty of chances to do it in the jungle. Plenty of chances here now.

In 13 time was seen as a commodity as precious as gold and food. No second was to be wasted.
Every moment of every day was dedicated to preparation and work. A small sliver of time carved
out for reflection. Sleep, eat, work, reflect, sleep. Johanna felt like this was actually more wasteful
than the morphlings in 6 who spent their time painting themselves. At least they were enjoying
life. What use was time if you were flushing it down the toilet by working all day long?

Johanna got up in the morning and had her arm stamped with her schedule. Breakfast. Session
with Dr. Thorne. Meeting with Coin. Then nothing. Johanna couldn't prevent the warm
excitement in her body. This was the day of York's decision. If she had passed the training then
she was going to 2. She'd finally get to do something for the rebellion that wasn't being tortured.

Speaking of, she hadn't seen Katniss since essentially kicking her out of her room days earlier.
Protecting Katniss at her own risk was one thing, for Katniss to question her motives were entirely
another. Her motives were clear: keep the Mockingjay alive, keep the rebellion alive, kill Snow.
Deep down, in a place she hid even from Dr. Thorne, she knew that the guards in 13 were more
than capable of protecting Katniss. Hell, Katniss could probably protect herself from Peeta at this
point. But she couldn't let go of the sensation that she alone was the only one who could truly
shield her. The sensation that she had to. That she wanted to. Dr. Thorne tried to get her to give it
up. He soon realized like she did that this mission was the only thing anchoring Johanna down.

She wolfed down her breakfast and got to her session early. Johanna spent the entire half hour
detailing her time in the arena. She knew the gory details made Dr. Thorne uncomfortable and she
wanted the session to be over as soon as possible. She left out no detail about the boy's entrails
leaking into the ground through his jacket. To her glee, the session ended five minutes early.

Coin looked just as composed as she always was when Johanna finally entered the room. Johanna
didn't know the state of the rebellion but if they were getting as close to the Capitol as District 2,
then it must be going well. That's where they made Peacekeepers and the served as Capitol's
military base. Coin's placidity was either a clever ruse for nervousness or she really wasn't
surprised how well things were going.

"So?" Johanna asked, standing near the doorway with her guards behind her. President Coin was
surely used to more pomp and circumstance but Johanna knew they didn't like each other. She
wasn't the Mockingjay, she wasn't anything but a borderline crazy person. She didn't want to
waste time with inane pleasantries and feigned respect.

"Cutting right to the chase, Soldier Mason?"

Johanna rolled her eyes and tapped her foot impatiently. "You're the people who hoard every
minute like it's precious with these schedules, so yes, I'm cutting to the chase. Did York clear me?
Can I go with Katniss to Two?"

Johanna could've sworn she saw the ghost of a smile cross Coin's face. "Yes."

Johanna pumped her fist and turned around, holding up her hand for one of her guards to give her
a high five. He stood there, holding his gun in his hands and looked unmoved. "Right. Fuck you.
Anyway." She turned around back to Coin. "They're not coming, right? There's probably a
weight limit on that hovercraft."

Coin shook her head. "There will be enough protection. They will stay here and wait for your
return."

Johanna turned on her heel back toward them and pouted. "Well don't miss me too much, boys."

"Soldier?" President Coin called from behind her, making her pause in her exit. One of the guards
roughly turned her around to face the gray-haired woman as she spoke. "Let us be clear. You are
there to prevent Peeta from attacking Katniss. As he will be there to prevent you from attacking
The hovercraft ride to 2 was on Johanna's list of the most awkward times she'd ever had. On one side was Peeta, Katniss, Gale, and someone they kept calling "Boggs." On her side was Cressida, Messalla, and the two cameraman, Pollux and Castor. A few other assorted people were on the hovercraft but none important enough for Johanna to have learned their names. The Mockingjay side cast dubious glances in her direction. She returned them with a scowl.

Cressida filled Johanna in on the main part of their involvement. To get a few glamour shots of the victors leading the rebels, and the serious conversation on what to do with what Katniss had nicknamed "The Nut." Johanna remembered seeing it briefly on her victory tour in 2; an imposing structure lifted up by stone slabs. Most of her tour she tried to blot with drink but that mountain she remembered.

When they arrived, Commander Lyme, a tall, broad-shouldered woman with short blonde hair and crystal blue eyes like Cressida's, welcomed them brusquely and gave a short presentation on the ins and outs of The Nut. Johanna watched disinterestedly from her chair next to Cressida, picking out pieces of soil from her boot. Lunch came and went without any real decision on what to do. Their roles become clear: Beetee was the technical aspect, Gale was the strategizer, Peeta was the humanist, Lyme was the mediator. Katniss was the Mockingjay. Johanna was not supposed to be there.

Katniss leaned over to Cressida. "Is it okay if I go outside? I'm not of any use here at the moment." Johanna peered over Cressida to take a look at Katniss's face. She was slightly paler than normal. Clearly all this talk of blowing up people and flushing them out was not working for her. Cressida seemed to agree and nodded her head.

"I'll come with," Johanna volunteered, standing to her feet. The conversation between the men ceased as Peeta also rose. Johanna rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Heel, boy."

Peeta's face turned grim. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to go off alone," he said calmly, with an even tone that surprised Johanna. She couldn't keep the malice out of hers when speaking about Peeta. Then again, Peeta was always a gentler, more even-handed person than her.
Until Snow turned him into a killer. "It's fine," Katniss assured him with a pat on his arm. "I'll have my bow anyway. We'll only be gone an hour or two." Peeta sat down, a sense of unease about him that looked reflected in Gale across the room. For a brief moment, Johanna entertained that Coin was right. She was somehow the fourth corner of this sickening love square. Not necessarily in the way Coin had implied with her tone, but she was there all the same.

Three people all protecting one girl who was already under the protection of the whole country.

Johanna smiled through the tension and followed Katniss out, passing Peeta. She patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, lovebird. I'm just keepin' her warm for you." Johanna winked at Beetee on her way out, who adjusted his glasses to suppress the smirk on his worn features. The pair of them made it out of the command center and toward the abandoned woods behind 2. The trees were different here than in 7 or 13, much thinner and providing much less shade than the thick redwoods of home or the pines in 13.

They walked around aimlessly for almost an hour, neither of them speaking. Finally they came upon an entanglement of trees that looked like a natural gymnastic set. "Not like home, is it?" Johanna asked, moving silently behind Katniss. They weren't out there to hunt, in spite of having brought their bow and axe, respectively, but the quietness seemed most natural.

"No. The woods in Twelve smell different. More like a sweet earthen smell. This is - all I can smell is the sulfur from the mines." It had been what, six or seven years since Katniss's father died? Johanna couldn't remember. That little girl in the black dress, standing scared and defiant in front of the crowd, was a stranger compared to the girl Johanna saw now. This Mockingjay had evolved over time just like her namesake. Evolved into something they could use as a weapon against the Capitol.

But still, the smell of sulfur from the mines must've made her remember that day her father died. Time has a way of sneaking about unnoticed until wham, you're flattened by a memory long buried. "For a year or so after my family died, the smell of a snuffed out fire used to completely mess me up."

Katniss turned around, visibly surprised by the admission from Johanna. She had only spoken at length about her family with Dr. Thorne and Finnick, but she felt compelled to commiserate. "Is that how they died?"

Johanna nodded in confirmation. She hoisted herself up on a long, swinging, braided branch that connected two tiny trees. The branches groaned beneath her weight but held firm. Her boots barely grazed the ground beneath them. "That's typically what happens when one rebels against the Capitol." Johanna struck her gaze at Katniss. "When one does it alone."

"Haymitch mentioned that." Katniss sat next to her, rocking back and forth with her on the makeshift swing. It was almost serene, if you could block out the sounds of machinery and shouting from the center of town. "That he was an example to the 'Finnicks, Johannas and Cashmeres.' They killed his mother, his brother and his girlfriend."

Johanna's lips pressed together. She didn't know much about Haymitch's backstory. Her only interaction with him had been asking how to get Katniss as an ally. She knew the pain, though. He drowned in it drink, she drowned hers in anger. "Snow killed my parents and my little sister." What if we set your backyard on fire? Johanna recalled her angry words and her glance darted over to Katniss. If she had any tears in her eyes she had forced them away. They knew each other well enough now to know that Johanna didn't want anyone else's tears being cried over her. "It feels like a lifetime ago. But sometimes, I smell that smell and it's like I'm seventeen again."

"I just can't be in there when they talk about that. Blowing up the Nut?" Johanna nodded for her
to continue. "I don't know how Gale does it. It's just like how our fathers died."

"Because they don't have a choice. They're not attacking us."

"Did your father have a choice to slave in those mines? Did my father have a choice in pulling logs? Did my baby sister have a choice in burning alive?" Johanna's voice rose as she spoke, only wavering slightly at the end. "No. This is what has to happen. After this, we take the Capitol. After that, maybe some fucking peace around here for once."

"At what cost? You know, Peeta was on to something when he was with you in the Capitol. We almost went extinct once."

"Yeah and the Capitol has been exploiting that fear every damn day since then. How many Hunger Games have we had? Seventy-five? Twenty-three kids ritualistically murdered every year for seventy-five years. Forty-seven the year your boy Haymitch won. Do the math. Like 1,700 kids in that time. And we're going to shed some tears over a couple hundred people sucking the Capitol's teat? Think about it, brainless."

"Katriss!" Gale's low voice called from the edge of the woods, whipping both their attention to him. Katniss stood from her position seated on the branch swing and casted a glance toward Johanna and Katniss. Johanna lifted herself off the swing and turned around. "Untrue. Prim loves him. He just doesn't love you."

"That's the problem, right? You need everyone to love you. Even that dumb cat."

Johanna smirked. "I'm sure he finds the room too suffocating, if he's as like me as you think he is."

"Or maybe, he's too busy being disagreeable to let anyone love him."

A note of discord fell between the two of them as Johanna tilted her head to the side. "Prim loves him. He just doesn't love you."

"That's the problem, right? You need everyone to love you. Even that dumb cat."

Johanna watched Katniss carefully for a reaction. Instead of anger or challenge, she just saw sadness. "Why are you protecting me if you hate me so much?"

"We're going to start avalanches in the mountain, disabling the Nut," informed Boggs, looking toward Johanna and Katniss. Johanna shrugged and nodded her approval. Katniss stood there, horrified. "It will in all probability kill just about everyone inside. Whoever manages to escape will come through the train tunnel, where we will be waiting."

"I know," Peeta said, standing up from his seat. He looked toward Katniss and saw what Johanna saw, the battle of someone who wants to save lives, but understands the cost of rebellion. Lose lives to save lives. "I tried to convince them out of it but Katniss, this looks like the only plan that might work. Everything else is too risky."
"For once, and probably the only time, I agree with the baker," Johanna interjected. "I know if I were in there, I'd welcome the death if it meant the stinking Capitol couldn't have their precious military base anymore."

"That's what I said," Gale admitted from behind her, giving her a nod of what she assumed was approval. In another time, she might remark on how similar they were in spirit. But while Gale wore his fire on the inside, Johanna let hers shoot from her body and burn all of those around her. That might just be the difference between a victor and a soldier. Victors are weapons, soldiers wield weapons.

Time slowed to a crawl. Everyone in that room was now holding the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of people they didn't know. Death seems to be the only thing that stops the fast pace of time.

After a brief chat with Coin, the plan was set into place. Gale's idea worked beautifully. The Nut collapsed, trapping the people inside. Johanna stood at the window with Katniss, watching the firefight down below. The roof had become too hot for them to stay on so they waited in the lobby of the Justice Building, staring at the destruction.

No trains with survivors emerged. Johanna imagined in that mine, time stopped entirely. People choked to death, thinking of their loved ones outside. Maybe they thought about all the things they wished they did. Their children, their wives, their husbands, their dogs. Whatever it is people think about when they know they're dying. When Johanna was in the arena, all she thought about was going home. Maybe these people wanted to go home too. They wouldn't.

Over Katniss's earpiece Johanna heard Haymitch tell her to give a speech. She tensed, her hands on the windowsill, pressing her eyelids together. As much as Katniss denied wanting to be the Mockingjay, she did it well. Under pressure, beautiful, smart things came out of her mouth. But she never believed in herself until the last moment.

"I'll go with you," Johanna offered quietly. Gale and Peeta were on the front lines with a group of soldiers taking on the waning numbers of Capitol soldiers arriving near the building. There was no one to object to her offer. She knew Katniss wouldn't. She gave Johanna a lopsided smile.

They walked on to the steps of the Justice Building, where they had both before stared into the crowd of people whose tributes had been killed. Johanna had killed the girl from 2. Katniss's enemies, Cato and Clove, they had some gruesome deaths. It probably brought back some unpleasant memories. Johanna patted her on the back and nodded.

"People of District Two, this is Katniss Everdeen, speaking to you from the -" The loud, blaring screech of two trains coming into the station next to them cut her off. The lights above their head shut off, enshrouding them in protective darkness. Johanna heard Haymitch tell Katniss to get back inside. But Katniss was a bleeding heart, Johanna knew, and impulsive and brash. As the people coughed and stumbled off the train they waved weapons in the air, badly wounded and belligerent. The stink of burning flesh, fuel and hair came out with them, pouring onto the streets. The rebels rushed toward the train until Katniss screamed. "Stop!" With Johanna behind her she ran toward a man who was holding a bloody, soot-covered cloth to his cheek. Instead of gratefulness, the man leveled a gun at Katniss's head. His ashen hands shook, but his aim was true. A slip of his finger and Katniss would be all over the town square and Johanna would kill him as savagely as her reputation indicated. The arena would look like child's play.

Katniss raised her bow above her head while Johanna palmed her axe, spinning it around in her hand. She raised it in the air but Katniss caught her by the wrist. "Don't," she whispered. Slowly
Johanna lowered her axe, but kept it firmly in her palm at her side.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't kill you," the man coughed out.

Johanna tensed. *Because I can make your death quick, or I can make it slow.* "I can't," Katniss responded, placing her bow on the ground in front of them. "But I'm done killing the Capitol's slaves for them."

Johanna's eyes looked up toward the screens that usually projected the fallen tributes during the tour. Right now it was the stand-off between herself, Katniss, and this bedraggled man. "I am not their slave." Johanna moved until she was out of the frame, but close enough to protect Katniss if the man tried something.

"I am," Katniss replied. "That's why I killed Cato, and he killed Thresh, and he killed Clove, and she tried to kill me. It's a never-ending cycle of violence and who wins? Not the districts. The Capitol. They always win. Not today."

"We are not the enemy," Johanna reminded. "The Capitol is the enemy." Katniss sank to her knees in front of the man. "Kill her and you kill all hope. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know," the man replied, his shaking hand still holding the gun at Katniss. Johanna knew that look. The look of someone who has no idea why they're doing something. It was the vacant look Titus had in his eyes, the look she knew was probably in hers when she tossed her axe into Cashmere's chest. There's no time for sorries or excuses when you think all hope is lost.

*Time begets hope. Hope begets time.*

Katniss rose to her feet and pointed to the machine guns. "And you, up there? I come from a mining town. And since when do miners condemn each other to death? Or stand there and kill anyone who manages to crawl out of the rubble?" She turned to address the smoking people coming off the train. "And you. Fighting against Lyme, who was your victor? Stood up to the greatest horror this country has to offer and for what? So all her people could turn on her for the Capitol? They don't want you. They need you. Show them that you don't need them. Stand with us. Join us!"

Johanna's eyes scanned the crowd. Two things caught her eye. One, the flash of blonde hair of a woman a few rows back, coughing into her hand. She knew that shade of blonde. She had tangled that hair in her hands and pulled on it in ecstasy. What was she doing here? Was she a rebel? Was she a Peacekeeper still? Time suddenly got hazy and Johanna was torn between her present in the fog of smoke and rubble, and her past, in the cabin in the woods.

Then the glint of a gun, shining with oil. Pointed at them. Pointed at Katniss. Johanna stepped in front of her and on the screen in front of them, watched herself get shot.

*Time's up.*
The most burning memory Johanna had of the last part of her games was the ascent into the hovercraft. She placed both feet on the ladder, trying to climb upward but a bright light engulfed her and electricity kept her completely still. The ladder lifted on its own accord, dumping her into the plane. Everything about it was loud, pulsing, burning bright.

Light.

The hovercraft that took Johanna back to the Capitol after winning her games was like a very sophisticated triage unit from back in the olden days of warfare. She was sedated almost immediately and hooked up to a machine that pumped some blueish cocktail into her veins. Blight explained it later as kind of a "life juice" of sorts to help nourish her quickly.

Her wounds were tended to and by the time they arrived in the hospice section of the training center, she was practically completely sown up. Externally. Internally, she was a wreck. She awoke a few hours later, thrashing and screaming in a bed she didn't recognize. The nightmares had begun. The nightmares that would repeat almost every night for the rest of her life. This one was Titus chasing her through the woods, blood oozing from his mouth like a wolf with a fresh kill. He morphed and ran on all fours. There were no trees to climb. Only the inevitable exhaustion from running too hard. The only reprieve she got from her nightmares was the opening of her eyes. The sun or the fluorescents would burn her retinas upon waking.

The room was white, and sharp, yellow lights flooded her from above. Johanna wrenched at her restraints until finally Blight and a doctor came through the door. The doctor's eyes looked at her vitals on the screen while Blight stared down at her. "Where the fuck am I?" Johanna demanded, panting and sweating from both frustration and the residual effect of her nightmare.

"We're in the Training Center," Blight explained calmly. "You won. We lifted you from the arena and brought you to safety." Warily he eyed the doctor and Johanna knew she wasn't getting the whole story. "Do you mind?" he asked the doctor, nodding toward the door. "I'd like a minute alone with my victor."

There is no safe. Everything is deadly, everyone is out to kill you, everything is a weapon. You are a weapon. You are death.

Victor, though. Johanna liked the sound of that somewhere deep inside her brain behind the thorny bushes of hysteria and confusion. "What the fuck?"

Blight sat on the edge of her bed. "You did win. Your plan worked perfectly. I know this sounds really harsh but I'm proud of you." Johanna scoffed and Blight held up his hand. "I killed kids, too. But when we're dropped in that arena, there's nothing we can do except fight to go home. And you earned it. In a few days we'll be going home. It's been a while since Seven had a victor."

Blight smiled conversationally. "My party was an all-nighter. Even after the Capitol cameras left, we all just partied into the night." Johanna frowned sourly at him. "You have to at least try to enjoy your win. The alternative is not a happy life."

"Great reward for slaughtering some kids," Johanna replied with a roll of her eyes. "When do I get out of this bed?"

Blight shrugged, standing up from his seated position and brushing some imaginary lint off his Capitol attire. "In a day or so. They'll bring you meals in here. They need you to rest up for your interview with Caesar. I'll help coach you through the interviews. They'll have a plan for how to
present yourself."

Johanna managed to raise an eyebrow at her mentor. "Suddenly taken an interest in me?" Johanna vaguely remembered the boy from her district. Ben? Dan? Whoever he was, Blight had been instructing them both but Johanna felt he favored the boy. Not that she could blame him, male victors were more common. It had only served to push Johanna more.

There had been to talk of an alliance. Talk, whispers, direct requests, but Johanna's strategy required solitude. Her attitude required solitude. She wondered how long he had made it. She couldn't remember. It would be a long time before she was able to piece together all the events of those days in the arena.

Blight smirked. "You didn't need as much help as he did. Besides, it worked, didn't it?" With that he left the room, the noiseless door opening and closing behind him, leaving Johanna alone with her thoughts. In typical Johanna Mason style, she attempted to get out of her bed to test her legs and a cool liquid seeped into her arm.

Darkness.

Waking up after being shot in 2 was a very dissimilar experience. Johanna woke slowly, her eyes blinking hard as the piercing white light above her head dilated her pupils. She became aware of two very interesting things. One, she was naked underneath her bedclothes, and two, her hand was clammy and warm from being held.

With her head on her arm and the other hand clasped with Johanna's own, Katniss was asleep, hunched over on the left side of her bed. Johanna could feel the dreamy morphling in her veins, and the grogginess allowed her time to appreciate this closeness. She didn't know how long she had been out, but Katniss was changed out of her Mockingjay outfit and back into her standard issue jumpsuit.

Finnick appeared in the room on her right, for once not flanked by his usual red-haired companion. Now it was almost weird to see him without her. When she used to visit him on rare occasion in 4, Annie was always there. It was kind of this district-wide secret that they were lovers, kept away from the cameras of the Capitol until the Quell forced them back into the spotlight. When Johanna and Finnick encountered each other in the arena, he was the sole beacon of hope she had that maybe they'd make it out alive. Because certainly, of everyone involved, he wanted to get back home the most.

The cruel clock of death had already taken Mags and Blight, Johanna had desperately wished to keep Finnick.

"Good morning," Finnick whispered, eyeing the slumbering girl on the edge of Johanna's bed. "How are you feeling?"

Johanna shrugged. "As well as can be expected." Her brown eyes darted to Katniss, and back to Finnick. For a man whose entire post-games career was bent on keeping secrets, he looked practically brimming with information. "What is she doing here?"

Finnick smirked, the old dimpled-grin that had made many women swoon. "She hasn't left your side since you came back. You took that bullet for her and she carried you back into the Justice Building. They took you both immediately back to Thirteen." His seafoam green eyes leveled on Katniss. "They asked her to stay because your little act of defiance really riled them up and the
rebels took Two. But she refused. And you know how the Mockingjay gets what she wants. And
that's the second time she's chosen you. You might wanna thank her when she wakes up," he
added with a grin.

"Thank her?" Johanna questioned, her voice rising slightly and causing the girl to stir. "For what,
getting me shot?"

Finnick shook his head. "No. It was Katniss who arranged for you and Peeta to get brought back
to Thirteen. She said she'd only help if you both got full immunity. Well, you both and Annie and
Enobaria, but she had to fight for you two specifically, what with those tacky propos you did."

Johanna's lips moved into a grin. "You know I almost strangled Snow the first time."

"Too bad you didn't." Katniss groaned out a tiny noise and Finnick looked down at them, his eyes
catching their clasped hands. "The sleeping dragon awakens. I'll see you later, tiger." He patted
Johanna on the arm and strutted out of the hospital, leaving Johanna alone with the waking
Katniss.

Sleepy gray eyes blinked hard as they came into focus, settling on very awake but slightly dazed
brown ones. "I'm alive," Johanna murmured, smirking at Katniss.

The girl returned the smile in full, something Johanna rarely saw her do. "No kidding, brainless."
Johanna's face of surprise was quickly masked. Had she been calling Katniss that? She made a
mental note not to tell Dr. Thorne. Nobody had called her that since... Johanna didn't want to think
about it. It only reminded her of that flash of blonde hair she had seen in 2. Had that really been
Nova? Was she alive? "You saved my life."

Johanna blinked once as Katniss's soft voice broke her reverie. "Don't be so dramatic, Twelve,"
Johanna remarked, tearing her eyes from Katniss's intensity and up toward the ceiling. "Your suit
protected you. Cinna saw to that."

Johanna closed her eyes and recalled those final moments with startling clarity. The fire. The
smoke. The train. The smell. The shot. The bright white flash in her eyes as she hit the ground.

It had felt peaceful for a moment. The warm light taking her in. Until there was pain. And
wetness. And shouting.

Johanna felt a pressure on her hand that was being held that compelled her to look back at Katniss.
"That may be true, but my suit didn't have my back when I confronted a train full of angry people.
My suit didn't stand in front of me and take a bullet to the side. You did."

Johanna used her free hand to unhook the morphling drop from her left arm and let the tube hang
loose. She immediately regretted the loss of the good feeling but it was necessary. "I can't kill you
myself if I allow some nobody from Two do it, can I?" Typically a remark like that would've riled
Katniss, but Johanna was surprised to see her completely still. As if she was wearing a protective
armor against Johanna's barbs. Her voice softened. "We're allies, remember? That doesn't stop
when the games are over. Snow is still alive."

In place of irritation she saw a small smile appear on Katniss's lips. She stood up, unclasping their
hands and Johanna ignored the missing that she felt when the warmth of her hand was gone. The
brunette stretched her limbs up and rolled her neck, wincing. Johanna had to assume she had been
there a while. She placed her hand behind Johanna's head on the top of the hospital bed, the other
on the edge of the mattress.

"You're not fooling me, Johanna. Not anymore."
"Excuse me?"

Katniss shook her head, using her fingers to push hair out of Johanna's vision for her. Johanna suppressed the shudder in her body and instead flexed her hands that were, to her surprise, not chained. "You didn't have to protect me, you said it yourself. Cinna's suit would've deflected most of that bullet. But you wanted to protect me and Peeta was nowhere to be seen." Her lips curled into a triumphant smirk. "Johanna Mason, I think you want to be more than allies." Johanna's entire body stiffened. "I think you want to be friends." She made the last word sound scandalous and Johanna bit the inside of her cheek to hide a smile.

Katniss moved away from Johanna's bed, crossing her arms over her chest and smugly making her way toward the door. "You wish," Johanna called to her back, irritably pouting in her bed. Katniss didn't answer her, she just continued out into the hallway, leaving Johanna with her thoughts.

She didn't make friends. Friends were for people with the luxury of time and safety to spare with someone else. Maybe before the games or after this rebellion, but friends didn't exist for Johanna now. For there to be friends, there had to be trust. She didn't trust herself with Katniss. There was something off about her feelings toward the Mockingjay that stopped her from fully giving over to the warm friendship that could blossom between them.

Johanna realized very quickly that Katniss was not lying about wanting to be friends. She showed up the very next day, bright and early, smiling at the bedridden girl. Johanna eyed her warily as she approached with a duffel bag emblazoned with "WEAPONS" on the side, narrowing her eyes. "Come to finish me off?"

The double innuendo was not lost on Katniss and a pale blush appeared on her darkened cheeks. She rolled her eyes at Johanna's forwardness and unzipped the bag, pulling out the hissing but compliant Buttercup. Johanna's face brightened as the cat was plunked down on her bed. He immediately curled in between her arm and her hip, meowing softly and looking - if a cat could do it - smugly toward Katniss.

"You brought Cat," Johanna said, stroking the tomcat's fur with her fingers.

Katniss nodded. "He didn't want to come and they don't allow pets in the hospital ward so I had to sneak him in. Well, they don't allow pets at all but Prim's got everyone here wrapped around her finger. Not that she'd notice."

Johanna raised her eyebrow toward the girl, who pulled over a nearby wheeled chair and rolled it next to Johanna's bed. "She's an Everdeen all right." Katniss offered Johanna a small smile. "How'd you get him to come?"

"I told him we were going to see Johanna. He finally stopped hissing at me." Johanna continued to comb his fur with her fingers, twirling his blue bow around his neck. She wasn't allowed to have pets growing up because she "couldn't be trusted not to chop it up" due to her penchant for swinging her father's axe around the house. It was nice to feel the tiny warmth of an animal, even if it was cantankerous Buttercup. Also, it tickled her that he didn't like Katniss. "Feeling better? I heard the doctor saying you'd be cleared soon."

Her smile widened into a grin. "I told him we were going to see Johanna. He finally stopped hissing at me." Johanna continued to comb his fur with her fingers, twirling his blue bow around his neck. She wasn't allowed to have pets growing up because she "couldn't be trusted not to chop it up" due to her penchant for swinging her father's axe around the house. It was nice to feel the tiny warmth of an animal, even if it was cantankerous Buttercup. Also, it tickled her that he didn't like Katniss. "Feeling better? I heard the doctor saying you'd be cleared soon."

Johanna rolled her eyes and pulled herself up into a seated position, causing a disgruntled meow to erupt from Buttercup. He stood up and made himself comfortable elsewhere on Johanna's body. "I'm fucking fine and they won't let me leave." Her voice rose to just below a yell and one of the
nurses walking by shot her a glare. She returned to attention to Katniss. "I feel fine. I can walk, I
can talk, I can feed myself, bathe myself. I don't know why I'm still in here. The bullet's gone, the
scar is gonna heal soon. Not that it matters, it just kinda blends in with the rest of them."

Katniss frowned, gray eyes pained. "I'm sure they'll release you before Finnick's wedding,"
Katniss replied casually, picking at the loose threads on Johanna's blanket.

A palm slapping down hard next to her hand caused Katniss to abruptly look up. "Are you
serious? Finnick and Annie are getting married?" Katniss looked rightly horrified to have been the
one to divulge that information. She clearly thought Johanna knew. She didn't. "Okay, this has to
stop." Johanna whipped off her blankets, placing her feet on the floor and (somewhat painfully)
stood off the bed.

Buttercup whined his displeasure and scurried out of the room. "Johanna, sit down," Katniss said
gently. "You're just going to get yourself in trouble."

"No," Johanna replied flatly. "No. I am not going to be put up in this - this dungeon like some
kind of patient." She gave a glare to one of the doctors making her rounds and she began untying
the knot that held her wispy hospital gown together. "I am going to march to Coin's office and get
a stinking compartment."

"Do you really think she's going to see you right now? She's probably in a meeting and Johanna,"
Katniss caught the briskly walking girl by the wrist, "you're in your hospital gown."

Johanna looked down at herself, then back up to Katniss with a wicked smirk. "Good point,
Mockingjay." She shrugged the gown off and balled it up, shoving it toward the other girl. "Hold
that for me, will you?" Stark naked except for a pair of gray socks, Johanna marched out the door
of the hospital and toward the office of Coin, nestled deep within the confines of 13.

Before she could reach the doors her guards, who until then had been absent, intercepted her and
took her by each of her biceps. The loud commotion she made near the door prompted both
Haymitch and President Coin to emerge from within the meeting room. Neither of them were
impressed by Johanna's nakedness, though Haymitch did give her an appreciative nod and smile.

"Soldier Mason do we have a problem?" Coin asked, steel eyes focused on Johanna's wild brown
ones. "Other than your nudity which I was told you were informed was not acceptable here."

"You're damn right we have a problem!" Johanna wrenched her arms from her guards but they
were holding firmly to her upper arm muscles, most definitely leaving bruises on her skin.
Wouldn't be the first time. "I want a compartment. I don't want to keep living like an invalid in
your hospital."

Coin was unmoved, as usual. Her robotic appearance seemed to waver from slight annoyance to
complete indifference. The fact that Johanna had seen a small smirk on her once she considered a
miracle. Haymitch looked at her sympathetically. "We - well, they - don't think it's wise for you to
live on your own."

"She won't." Johanna heard the voice pipe up from behind herself and her guards. She looked
over her shoulder to see Katniss holding out a set of standard issue clothes toward the naked girl.
"I'll be rooming with her." Johanna swore she'd imagined it but she thought she saw, briefly,
Katniss's eyes wander down her body.

Nobody, not even the guards, hid the surprise on their faces. Coin couldn't resist raising her
eyebrows at Katniss's outburst. The only person who appeared to have seen this coming was
Haymitch, who could barely disguise the smirk on his worn face. Johanna took the clothes from
Katniss, but the gesture was larger. She wasn't just taking the offered clothes, but also the proffered friendship behind it. She didn't hear the commotion of Haymitch and Coin softly arguing back and forth. She heard nothing but the hum of her own voice in her ears.

She and Katniss. Sharing a compartment. Sharing a room.

Katniss was her friend.

By nightfall they were changed into their sleeping uniforms in their new compartment across from Prim and Katniss's mother. Johanna began inspecting the room, not having seen one of them up close, opening up drawers until she came upon Katniss's things. She quickly shut the drawer and looked over at Katniss. "Sorry."

Katniss smiled and nodded. "It's okay. You can look at my stuff if you want."

Johanna fumbled in the drawer, opening the locket she remembered Katniss having in the arena. When she had smacked her in the head with the coil the necklace had erupted from inside her shirt, glinting off the eerie light that filtered through the trees. Gale, Prim and Mrs. Everdeen. Johanna ran her thumb over the images before closing the locket and placing it back inside.

With a snort she picked up the parachute, removing the spile from inside. She placed it on her pinky, wiggling it at Katniss. "Makes me thirsty just looking at it." Finally, beneath one of Katniss's uniforms was a pearl. It glinted off the soft light of the compartment and Johanna rolled it between her fingers. "What is this?"

"A pearl," Katniss supplied from the bed, drawing a look of pure ire from Johanna. No shit. "Oh. Peeta gave it to me. A few hours before I blew out the force field." Johanna looked over at the girl sitting cross-legged on her bed. A world away from the girl who stood on that stage and volunteered for her sister. A world away from the girl that stood defiantly on that platform before the Quell. A world away from the bloodied half-conscious mess Johanna left before she was captured.

This Katniss was hardened. Somehow, though, managed to possess a softness that kept her going. Johanna didn't know what to attribute that softness to. Peeta? Prim? Her mother? Maybe just the thought of not becoming one of the robots in 13. Whatever it was, Johanna was hoping it was contagious because being so hard all the time was exhausting.

Johanna tossed the pearl back into the drawer and closed it, shuffling over to her bed and slipping beneath the covers. "How are things with you guys? You were pretty cozy on that beach the last time I saw you."

This is what girls do, right? Talk about boys? Johanna couldn't remember. She didn't have many friends anyway and they certainly would not have been talking about boys. "Things are different." Katniss buzzed around the word and landed on it like a fly, tentatively.

"Well no shit, brainless," Johanna replied caustically. "The arena messed us all up pretty good, don't you think? Or do you still feel like the same girl who volunteered for her sister?"

"No."

Johanna sighed, turning on her side to face Katniss in the darkness. The lights above had gone out already, plunging the room in a near pitch-black state. "I think that's one of the things my head doctor might be right about. There's no going back. Might as well get on with things."
Katniss turned over, and Johanna could just make out the whites of her eyes in the darkness. "Johanna, can I ask you something?"

"I'm not really in a position to stop you, am I?"

There was a long pause before Katniss spoke again and she almost thought the brunette had fallen asleep. "What happens if you're right about Peeta? What happens to him?"

Johanna's doctor had asked her the same thing. He asked her what she would do if she was right. If some word triggers Peeta and he attacks Katniss, then we swoop in and save her. Then what? What happens to this boy? He had no control over his actions. Could he be rehabilitated? Surely between 13 and the Capitol they had to have some sort of therapy for that. "He'll come back to you," Johanna replied finally, with just the barest hint of resignation in her voice. She turned over to face the wall. "He always does."

Panem was technically a unified country but weddings were vastly different from district to district. Johanna knew of some of District 4's practices from Finnick's tales and she had witnessed a few weddings back in 7. Always something to do with where you came from: the sea, the forest, the hills, the mines. What did 13 have? A bunch of nukes and one color swatch that ranged from steel gray to cloudy gray? Luckily the folks from 12, along with Plutarch's game-making abilities, turned the drab main room into an autumn nautical wonderland.

Johanna was certain she had never seen two people so happy. Gone was the constantly worried expression on Annie's face and the barely-masked pain on Finnick's. Instead it was two radiant faces shining at one another. The Capitol had taken just about everything they had, everything they were, but they never touched on Finnick and Annie's love. It was the one small sliver of sunshine not overshadowed by the loom of the rebellion or the Capitol.

Nobody could touch their light.

Somehow a fiddler from 12 made it out with his instrument and he began plucking a jaunty tune from the side of the room. Within moments a woman Johanna had heard them call "Greasy Sae" - though she looked no greasier than everyone else from 12 - picked up Gale's hands and forced him on to the dance floor. Within moments many of the displaced 12 residents were struck up in a dance.

Johanna spent most of the night with Haymitch, siphoning some of his smuggled liquor instead of relying on her morphling. It felt nice to imbibe something that she could control. The morphling was dulling but uncontrollable. Alcohol was easy, Johanna had been drinking it since before the first time she'd bled. It gave her a nice warmth that she spent a lot of time chasing. She wanted warmth, craved it even, but it was hard to come by in 13.

Peeta was on the dance floor with a slightly round girl whose name Johanna couldn't and didn't care to remember. Diligent brown eyes scanned the crowd until she finally came upon Katniss, clapping happily from the side of the room. Johanna used the large crowd to disguise her voyeurism, but as she heard Haymitch clear his throat next to her, she realized she had been more obvious than she thought.

"Ask her to dance," he whispered in her ear, the stinging alcohol smell wafting into her nose.

Johanna grimaced and looked at him. "I don't want to dance."
Haymitch rolled his eyes. "What better message is there to send Snow than to see not just one," he pointed to Peeta, "or two and three," pointing to Finnick and Annie, wrapped as one on the dance floor, "but five attractive victors dancing happily?" Johanna frowned deeper and Haymitch sighed. "Peeta's been trying to get her to dance all night and she won't. She only danced once with Prim earlier and Plutarch doesn't think they caught it. Get her on that dance floor. I think she'll listen to you."

Johanna raised her eyebrow and placed her drink on the table next to them. "She doesn't listen to anyone."

Haymitch was less than impressed. "And who knows a stubborn woman better than a stubborn woman herself?" he asked, tilting his head to the side. Johanna rolled her eyes back at him and moved away, slinking behind the crowd.

One of the moments that stuck out to her in the arena was when she got Katniss water. Even though the jabberjays were long gone, when she had moved to go retrieve Katniss's arrows and find more water, Katniss had touched her wrist and told her to stop. It was the first voluntary physical contact they'd ever had. For a split second the horrors of the arena were swamped beneath this one, very small, gesture of care toward her. When she returned she made sure to walk on hunter's feet, quietly approaching the girl until she got close enough to toss her arrows into her quiver. Katniss had startled and turned around, only to see Johanna herself handing her a cup of water with a faint smirk.

It was her offering of thanks. Thanks for caring enough to not want her to suffer through those jabberjays.

Now Johanna used that skill to come up behind the Mockingjay again. She pinched her above the elbow and Katniss startled again, whirling around to face Johanna. "Are you going to miss the chance to let Snow see you dancing?"

Katniss's eyes went from the dancing revelers back to Johanna. The initial shock on her face was wiped off completely and replaced with confidence. "Are you?"

Johanna's first thought was, "who let the Mockingjay into the liquor cabinet?" But there was no trace of alcohol on her breath. Just the sweet scent of chocolate and the crisp bite of apple from the cider. Johanna took Katniss's hand in hers and grinned. "Only if you promise to keep up, Twelve."

The light in Katniss's eyes sparkled as they whipped out on to the dance floor. Katniss was a natural at the steps, obviously having learned them as a child. Johanna followed close behind until eventually the pair of them were laughing and cutting across the dance floor with practiced ease. Johanna's injury pained her slightly but the feel of Katniss's hands on her hips, fingers digging into her skin dulled any other pain she might have felt. Gray eyes were smiling at her, for her, and it filled Johanna's heart with a lightness she hadn't felt in - she couldn't even remember the last time.

"You do much dancing in Seven?" Katniss asked breathlessly as they did another whirl around the room.

Johanna nodded. "Mostly just at weddings. Nobody in my family played much music but my neighbors did. My sister really loved to dance." A wistful smile came on her features as Katniss's attention was drawn to her own sister, laughing and giggling loudly as a refugee from 12 she probably knew whisked her around the dance floor.

The cameras buzzed around them, Cressida and her crew watching Peeta, Delly, Gale, Finnick, Annie, and Katniss and Johanna as they moved across the dance floor. Between the alcohol and
Katniss's touch, Johanna felt a happiness in her veins that, for the first time in months, wasn't related to morphling or fantasizing about killing President Snow.

Real happiness. Real light.

They danced well into the night, well after Peeta's beautifully decorated cake had come and gone, until the fiddler couldn't fiddle and Johanna felt her heartbeat in her wound on her side. With her arm propped over Katniss's shoulders for support, they made their way back to their compartment. Johanna removed her arm from around Katniss and flopped down on her bed, boneless and in pain, face down on the mattress.

Katniss must've caught her wince because instead of retreating to her own bed, she leaned down next to Johanna's. "I told you we should've stopped dancing before the cake."

Johanna didn't turn over, instead just moved her head and peeked her left eye and nose out from the pillow. She took in Katniss's knowing smirk with a narrowed eye. "You're so wise. That's why they made you the leader of the rebellion," Johanna grumbled into the soft plush pillow. Katniss pursed her lips at Johanna and the older girl sighed. "Take a break, Everdeen. Go to sleep. I don't need to be doted on 24/7 like your boyfriend."

"Fine," Katniss replied shortly, brushing off the front of her pants as she stood. "I'm going to take a shower. If you need something let me know."

Johanna rolled completely over, placing her hands on her stomach and looking up toward Katniss. "And you'll what? Come racing out of the shower? Finally get over this hang up you have over being nude?" Katniss grunted and moved away, gathering her towel from her dresser noisily. "I think I'll be able to handle myself for the five minutes you'll be gone. It'll be touch and go for a while, but I'll manage."

Katniss placed her hand on her forehead and went toward the bathroom door. Before she opened it she turned around to face Johanna, whose eyes were still staring up at the ceiling. "You don't have to act like this, you know."

"Excuse me?" Johanna's eyes went from the ceiling to Katniss, her head unmoved. She peered at her through the corners of her eyes.

"I had a really nice time tonight. For the first time since-" Katniss searched the room with her gaze and shook her head. "Since I don't know when. And you -" She cut herself off and drew in a deep breath. Her fists clenched the towel in her hands. For the first time since meeting her, Johanna genuinely thought Katniss looked like a mockingjay. Standing, listening, contemplating. Either about to tweet a song or flit into the trees. "You can trust me. I know that's stupid from one killer to another, but you can." A song.

She didn't wait for Johanna to answer, which was good, because Johanna had no answer. She pressed her eyelids shut and tried to will sleep to come to her. Without the morphling sleep was hard to come by and always edged in the danger of nightmares. Luckily the dancing had taken a toll on Johanna's already weakened state and she was quickly whisked into a nightmare.

Like most of her nightmares she was in the arena. The jungle. Hot, pulsing, alive. Everything around her breathed with dangerous life. The trees were dripping wet with blood just like they had during the games, but this time they all shone. The leaves looked like freshly cut rubies glistening in the hot overhead sun. Blight's voice was behind her telling her to move.

She couldn't. From behind Blight came the screams. She was puzzled for a while until she placed the screams, even though the chronology was off. It was Katniss. Katniss screaming her name.
everywhere, stinging in her ears. *Johanna, Johanna, please, Johanna!* Johanna gripped her axe in her hand and took off toward the jungle. The wet red leaves scraping against her skin, painting her in crimson from head to toe.

She emerged into the dripping open field and saw the jabberjays circling above her head. They suddenly settled on the tree branches, staring down at her with their pitch black eyes. They stopped screaming. Panting and confused she looked down toward the ground where Katniss stood, flanked by Peeta and Enobaria. Before she could speak Katniss's bow was raised and pointed at her.

"You can trust me." A deadly smirk. Johanna blinked once in surprise, her eyes almost getting stuck together with blood. The arrow sunk into her chest and she awoke with a start, a scream dying on her lips. She felt arms wrapped around her and breath against her ear. The words were nonsense but the gesture was briefly comforting until Johanna realized from where, or who, it was coming.

She slapped Katniss's arms away and moved to the side of her bed against the wall, feeling the cold cement against her back. "What are you doing?" Johanna seethed through her teeth, shivering and gripping the sheets of her bed. She could see Katniss in the dim light and she was just as confused as Johanna, gray eyes wider than the moon.

"You were screaming in your sleep. I was -I thought it would help. I'm sorry." Katniss untangled herself from Johanna's blanket and retreated to her own bed across the room. Johanna heard the squeak of the mattress and the rustling of sheets but did not look over.

A million emotions zoomed through Johanna. She wanted to be angry, to spit out at Katniss. How dare she assume Johanna was some weakling who needed her comfort? Nightmares were expected, they both surely had them. Johanna was sure Peeta would have comforted Katniss if she was suffering from the nightmares. Katniss was trying to pay that kindness forward. She wasn't the monster Johanna had dreamt in the arena, just like her sister was not really her sister when they met in the woods.

She had been abiding by her doctor's advice to "not censor her thoughts" but generally left out the second part he had said, "but think about your words." All the vicious, distancing things she wanted to tell Katniss died on her tongue. She settled on the next safest thing. "If you wanted to bed me, you only had to ask."

A silence. Then, laughter. Katniss chuckled into her pillow and Johanna smiled from across the room, unseen.

Maybe she could be *friends*. 
Seven was not unkind to Johanna. With its proximity to the Capitol and 1 and the money from the lumber, they were in much better shape than the poorer districts like 12 or 11. They had books in their schools, food available (though hunting was illegal it was almost never enforced) for everyone, and warm wooden houses built from the sturdy redwoods that grew thickly throughout the land. Winters were harsh, summers were mild, autumn was incredible.

Her victory party was lavish and well-attended; many people Johanna never knew and wouldn't see again drunkenly congratulated her on her performance. "Knew you could do it!" "Good job kid!" "You made Seven proud!" There were large fires and a dessert table that Johanna estimated was a mile long. People in 7 had a work-hard play-hard mentality that was certainly prevalent that night. Johanna could barely remember the specifics of the party due to the mind-numbing effects of the hooch alcohol that was flowing.

She remembered two things crystal clearly: first was the hot, desperate sex with Nova after a long night of partying. Her blonde hair cascading over Johanna's body and her loving, wet kisses everywhere at once. Two was the immediate sense of family that Johanna had never felt in her home district. She had ostracized herself with her behavior and never truly felt like she was welcomed. But after she came home from nearly dying, it was a whole different world. Citizens invited her to their cabins for dinner, officials gave her tours the illustrious dam that held back the raging river that fed into the ocean. She was treated like a full-blown celebrity, but not in the sense that she felt superior to everyone. For the first time in her life, she felt like she was one of them.

In the Capitol it was the same. On her subsequent trips there, people opened their homes and their wallets to her. People came to her for advice. She was seventeen, certainly not in any position to give people advice, but yet they flagged her down everywhere she went. Little girls waddled up to her with posters of her face and asked for autographs. Little boys begged for dates. The people of the Capitol adored Johanna. They, by extension, became her family.

The previous victors slowly enveloped her into their fold as well. Finnick sought her out a few weeks before Snow had informed her of the prostitution at the party for the following year's Games. The lights in the ballroom were twinkling with an unearthly glow, the entire palace swathed in green and purple. The victor was some boy from District 8, but Johanna paid him no mind.

"Johanna Mason?" The blond-haired boy appeared behind Johanna, wearing a crisp sky-blue suit with what Johanna assumed were real sapphires sparkling throughout the fabric. Everyone in Panem knew Finnick Odair - the heartthrob from District 4 who had become the youngest victor in Panem's history, and subsequently a hot commodity in the Capitol. Johanna herself was wearing a pristine white dress with shining green emeralds inlaid in the silk. It wrapped around her, dipping between her cleavage and leaving her back exposed.

"Who wants to know?" Johanna raised her eyebrow, feigning indifference. She leaned on the dessert table and pushed an orange candy into her mouth, smiling as the foreign juice spilled on her tongue. She decided she liked oranges.

His cheek dimpled as he stuck out his hand, unfazed by her pretend ignorance. "Finnick Odair. District Four." There was a pause, as if he was waiting for a look of recognition. Johanna merely shrugged. "I watched your performance last year. I gotta say, I wasn't totally impressed."

Johanna flared her nostrils but attempted to keep her attitude in check. Sort of. "Good thing I wasn't trying to impress some merman from Four," Johanna remarked as Finnick glided around
her, unperturbed. "Should I have just waited for the place to erupt and flood? Swim my way out like your victor?"

Finnick's expression darkened. Johanna's immediately assumed Annie Cresta must be on the long list of Finnick's lovers. It wasn't uncommon for a mentor and a victor to fuck, but Annie Cresta was unstable. Victors had their pick of people to marry, especially someone as sought after as Finnick. Not someone Johanna would have thought Finnick would care for.

He firmed his lips and puffed air out through his nose. "I apologize. I didn't mean to offend you. Obviously your strategy worked very well." He waved his arm around the room to the various people staring and whispering about them. "You've gotten a lot of attention." He returned his enigmatic gaze to her and cocked his head to the side. "Have you had any discussions with President Snow recently?"

It was a peculiar question. In truth she hadn't seen President Snow much since her tour was over and the next round of games began. Why Finnick Odair would want to know was a mystery. "Why?"

Finnick shrugged, taking a fluffly pink pastry from the table behind Johanna and holding it up to the light. It seemed to glimmer in the reflection of the light, as if there were tiny fireflies illuminating it from the inside. "Just curious. Our dear leader likes to involve himself in the lives of us victors. He likes new things." Finnick popped the pastry in his mouth and chewed it slowly. His proximity was such that Johanna could smell the fruit from his breath.

"Can't say I've had the honor." Their eyes locked and Johanna knew they were speaking in code. She just didn't know what the code was. Her escort told her that all the victors must showcase a skill after their games but Johanna hadn't gotten that far. She was still high off her victory, and even with this new victor, still very much in the spotlight.

"Well, let me give you one piece of information, from one victor to another." He leaned in conspiratorially, a smile on his face. "He does not make idle promises or threats." His grin quickly enlarged as he strode away from Johanna, leaving her piqued and confused. Though his smile was friendly, Finnick's voice showed no trace of happiness in it. It wasn't just information, it was a warning.

The rest of the night blurred on. Johanna met the other victors throughout the night, but none offered her any advice. There was something about them, though, that Johanna felt certain about: a shared sense of detachedness. They had seen the horrors of the arena and even the hardened Career victors from 1 and 2 seemed to be a little empty. Johanna felt like she belonged there with them. The only other people to share the abyss that was slowly opening inside her heart.

Family.

In a rare meeting in 13 that Johanna was privy to, she was finally informed of the dam break in 7. The flooding had severely impacted their ability to be self-sufficient, but they were surviving. Hardened living and dense woods helped protect them from the Capitol but there were struggles in the area surrounding the dam. Johanna thought back on the people who had shown her kindness, especially after her family was murdered. Though she kept everyone at an arm's reach - both for her sake and theirs - people still admired and feared her, like a disgruntled family pet.

The meeting itself was a bore, as most of them were. Only Gale ever pitched in with helpful information or suggestions. Peeta usually offered a counter-perspective or some notion of humanity that always lacked in the room. Katniss was silent.
A full assault on the Capitol was weeks away, giving District 2 time to regroup and help with the final push. President Coin dismissed everyone, she herself even leaving the room. Johanna stayed behind, capturing Beetee by the handles of his wheelchair and spinning him around.

"Can I help you, Johanna?" he asked, looking up at her through his thick-framed glasses.

Johanna nodded. "Can you pull up the map of Seven?"

Beetee smiled with just the barest hint of pity in his eyes. A pity he knew Johanna would not want to receive but he couldn't help. He wheeled himself over to the controls, motioning for her to follow him around to where President Coin had been sitting. With a few pushes against the interactive glass table, a large, 3D map of 7 was projected on the wall. Johanna's eyes looked up and she was immediately filled with the feeling of homesickness and anger. Spots she recognized - the woods near the dam, a small village on the river - were all but wiped out by the destruction.

"How are they holding up?" she asked, leaning her palms on the table. Beetee pulled up another set of information that made its way to the screen; it was a breakdown of the supplies and casualties. They weren't suffering much, Johanna thought with relief.

"Considering the state of Eight, Twelve and Eleven? Seven is practically untouched."

She moved around more pieces of information, showing Johanna more in depth information on her home. He looked up toward her, a faint smile on his lips. "You should be as proud of them as they are of you."

Johanna offered an appreciative smile. Finding them in the arena had been hers and Blight's obligation to the Mockingjay, which she had fulfilled for them both. Beetee didn't like Johanna's impatience with Wiress, but respected her ability to kill. He also understood her anger and sadness over Blight's untimely death. In spite of each other, they did form a small connection based on mutual respect. They were two sides of the same coin of rebellion: one strategic, the other deadly.

Losing Wiress had been a blow to them both, though Johanna hadn't held any stock that Wiress would survive the arena. There was too much else going on - the spinning island, killing Cashmere, saving Katniss - that she had fulfilled her obligations to them both. Beetee didn't like Johanna's inactivity with Wiress, but respected her ability to kill. He also understood her anger and sadness over Blight's untimely death. In spite of each other, they did form a small connection based on mutual respect. They were two sides of the same coin of rebellion: one strategic, the other deadly.

Not that she and Cashmere were friends by any stretch. They were acquaintances, forced lovers, and part of an exclusive club of fucked up individuals with blood on their hands and screams in their dreams. But Cashmere had a relaxed vibe about her that Johanna liked; she and Gloss didn't strut their power or feign interactions. They were actually pretty decent, as far as cold-blooded killers went. Sending that axe into her chest had cut off another piece of the patchwork family Johanna had sown after losing her own.

She hated Katniss a little for it. Why waste an arrow on Gloss when Wiress was as good as dead anyway?

Johanna shook the thoughts from her head and thanked Beetee, leaving through the automatic door and out into the hallway. She ran smack into Katniss, who was leaning against the wall outside the door. "Whoa, Twelve. You been put on guard duty with the buffoons?"

Johanna nodded her head toward the two beefy men waiting to escort her back to their shared compartment. Katniss gave them a look, then placed her sympathetic gaze on Johanna. "Is this even necessary anymore? We sleep in the same room. What good are they doing posted outside?"
"If you wanted to kill me, you could try before they'd even hear the sound of your feet on the floor."

"Try?" Johanna raised her eyebrow in amusement. "Not afraid I'll kill you in your sleep?"

Katniss ran her tongue along her teeth and placed it firmly her in cheek before responding. "Like I couldn't take you."

Johanna had a million responses all queued up in her brain. All of them dirty. All of them a little mean. *Think about your words.* As much as Johanna wanted to spar with her, she couldn't. Not without revealing just a bit too much of herself in the process. Katniss might be oblivious to some things, but she managed to peg Johanna pretty well. "You do have a point."

Katniss startled at Johanna's agreement. "I do?" she asked, almost playfully.

Johanna smirked and nodded. "You do. If I wanted to kill you, I'd surely have done so by now."

She crossed her arms over her chest impatiently. "Do you think you could convince Coin that I'm stable enough?" Johanna bit her lip in an uncharacteristic show of insecurity. "She's not exactly my biggest fan here."

The other girl chuckled, giving Johanna a bemused smile. "I think she's a little afraid of you."

Two smaller girls from 13 passed Johanna and gave her fearful, but interested looks. Johanna rolled her eyes and impatiently returned her gaze to Katniss. "I think they all are."

"It doesn't matter who they're afraid of, they live in a damn rabbit warren," Johanna dismissed. "In the Capitol, you're the one they're afraid of now. You could use that," Johanna said, intensifying her gaze on the younger girl. "Plutarch believes in you. Coin doesn't have a choice."

Johanna was suddenly aware of another thought: Katniss could refuse. She might secretly like the idea of these men protecting her. Johanna was sure somewhere Katniss still held a suspicion that Johanna was the cooking grenade. She and Peeta spent a lot of time together. Peeta gave Johanna distrustful glances, but they were always clouded in an air of sympathy. The way Johanna would look at the caged wolves in 7: you poor thing, you're a killer and there's nothing you can do about it. Poor, sad monster.

"You don't have to," Johanna piped up again, her brown eyes moving from Katniss to the floor. "It's not like you owe me any favors." Normally that statement would have been rife with sarcasm because obviously, Katniss did owe her some favors. Pretty fucking huge ones for saving lives and nearly giving her own. In place of sarcasm, it was dismissal and the faintest wisp of self-doubt.

If Katniss picked up on it, she didn't let it show. "I'll try." The corner of Johanna's mouth moved back into a small look of approval. It was a close to a thank you as Johanna was going to get. Katniss smiled and moved around Johanna and her guards toward whatever place her schedule dictated. Johanna turned and watched her go, catching the amused gaze of one of her guards.

"What are you looking at?" she sneered, stomping away from them and down toward her compartment. She had nothing left on her schedule so she figured she'd make use of their small library and grab a book and retire to her bed. The pickings were slim in the tiny library attached to the classroom; mostly books about the Capitol. She found what she was looking for, and after a furtive glance toward her guards, hurriedly brought the book back to her room.

The click of the door to the compartment closing roused Johanna from her dream. Her book was open on her chest, her arms wrapped around it like a security blanket. Blinking brown eyes adjusted to the dim light in the room and she saw Katniss sitting on the edge of her bed. Johanna,
as unobtrusively as possible, shoved the book underneath her blanket.

"I thought I'd come get you for dinner," Katniss offered. "Finnick says you get 'rabid' when you're left out of things."

Johanna raised her eyebrow. "Talk about me with Odair, huh?"

Katniss pretended not to look amused as she stood up from her bed and crossed the room to slide open the door. When they walked out into the hallway, Johanna noticed the distinct absence of her guards posted outside her door. Katniss continued walking past Johanna toward the cafeteria until Johanna jogged and caught up with her.

"How did you manage that in the time it took me to nap?" Johanna was close to annoyed. She had to practically beg to get anything done in 13, meanwhile Katniss could flick her wrist and everyone was at her whim. It worked to her advantage, for the time being, but it made Johanna angry.

Katniss stopped just short of the entrance to the cafeteria, pivoting on her toes to come face to face with the shorter girl. "Oh, not just in the time it took you to nap," she replied with a suspiciously casual tone. Johanna waited for the other shoe to drop. "Also the hour or so it took you to read half your archery book." She leaned in close to Johanna. "If you wanted to learn, all you had to do was ask," she husked. Smug and self-satisfied, Katniss moved away toward the lunch line.

Johanna followed her after a few stunned beats, separated from the brunette by a few of the residents. The slop smelled better than it had the last few days; maybe Gale and Katniss had done some hunting. Finnick waved her over to the table and Johanna took a moment to appraise it. Finnick was sitting next to Annie, whispering something in her ear that made her bubble out a short laugh. Peeta was talking conversationally with Delly, Katniss was playing a game with Posy, Gale's younger sister, as big brother looked on. Prim sat close by at the table next to them with Katniss's mother as well as a few girls Prim's age and another mother.

The Capitol burned away bits and pieces of all the people there. Finnick's family, Annie's mind, Peeta's family, Katniss and Gale's fathers. All of them had suffered tragic, life-altering losses and yet here they were, rebuilding again with each other. Johanna had done this once before after her family was murdered; string together a makeshift family of support. But in the end, she was alone. At night after the lights were out and the fires snuffed, Johanna would be alone in her bed. She would never have whatever existed between Finnick and Annie, Peeta (or Gale) and Katniss, or Prim and her mother.

Family.

Her torture had her so preoccupied with protecting Katniss she had forgotten all about her loneliness. It suddenly swamped all around her, feeling like the cold rush of water from the Capitol. With shaking hands she slammed the tray down on a nearby table, confusing and frightening the people sitting there. Johanna serpentined through the now thicker crowd of residents waiting in line for dinner and emerged back in the compartment.

How could she have been so fucking stupid, thinking that her role was to protect the Mockingjay? Thirteen existed almost entirely for that purpose. The guards, the residents, her friends, she was not part of their plan. Her rescue from the Capitol's torture was incidental, not intentional. There was truly nobody who cared about her existence anymore. Finnick was a friend, but he now had Annie and probably a child soon. Katniss had Peeta, who even if he turned on her, would be rehabilitated and they would be fine. Even people she had known a few years - Haymitch, Beetee - they'd go on with their lives.
She thought about packing, then realized with a sad laugh, that there was nothing to pack. Without much thought she grabbed one of Katniss's hunting backpacks and shoved the archery book inside. She tossed it over her shoulder and marched toward the training rooms where she assumed Boggs would be. He was, hunched over a spreadsheet, tearing at a piece of bread. His dinner time must be allowed to overlap with work. Everyone else had to do one or the other. "Hey Boggs," Johanna called, breaking his attention away from the blue-and-white print.

The brown-eyed man blinked in surprise, but his polite and commanding presence didn't relent. "Soldier Mason." Johanna mock saluted him and he cracked a small smile. "What can I do for you?"

Johanna cleared her throat, looking down at the blueprints. It all looked like gibberish but the overall idea was some kind of gun. Maybe a Capitol invention that they couldn't figure out. There was a formula at the bottom with a big red circle around it. As she stared at it, she spoke. "Are there any plans to send some back-up to Seven?"

Boggs's eyes went to the spreadsheet and back up to Johanna, his head askew. "The support for the rebels comes mostly from within the district. Two will sometimes dispatch help. If they request hovercrafts, sometimes we send a crew there. But we are thin on hovercrafts because the Capitol is shooting them down." Johanna's face fell and Boggs narrowed his eyes. "However, we are sending a small crew there tonight to help them rebuild the dam. Why?"

"I want to go home," she said plainly. "I want to help the rebels in Seven. I'm not of any use here." She gestured outward toward all the beeping machines and bright lights, all the complex machinery far beyond her comprehension and interest. "Besides, Coin doesn't like me. I'm sure she'll be thrilled to see me off to my potential demise."

Boggs chuckled but made no attempt to refute Johanna's claim. Though she was there to see how quickly she could leave, her mind was tugging toward the formula on the paper. The numbers bothered her. Numbers had always been something with which she'd been adept in school. Numbers were easy. Safe. Until the reaping, when the "odds being ever in her favor" made Johanna shudder. The odds were not in her favor. The chances of her being reaped were below 1%. The odds of her winning were less than 4%. She figured that out before even reaching the stage. "Is everything okay?"

"Can you put this on the glass?" The large glass board behind them, fully interactive with a special pen that sat on the cup below it, illuminated with the blueprint. Johanna studied the paper. It didn't look unlike the many blueprints her father had lying around as a carpenter. Carpentry was equal parts mathematics and fashion. Johanna was always interested in both. "Can you enlarge the formula?"

Boggs did as he was asked and Johanna picked up the pen. She began scribbling on the glass, teasing out a formula similar to the one below it. The electric door behind them opened and closed but Johanna didn't hear anyone enter. Her mind buzzed with the numbers and letters. Johanna's father had likened it to chess; you anticipate the actions of the numbers and plan accordingly.

However, Johanna possessed neither the interest nor the patience for chess.

"Whoever wrote this is an idiot," Johanna announced, rearranging the letters. "They don't understand force or physics." She looked at Boggs briefly. "Has Beetee seen this?"

"No."

Johanna sighed. "That's probably why this is wrong." As the numbers began filling her brain Johanna realized what it was. It was a new type of sniper rifle. One that could take out two targets simultaneously with a single shot. Use the spray mechanism of a shotgun with the accuracy of a
sniper rifle. Johanna spent a few moments fixing the math and then capped the pen, returning it to the ledge upon which it had sat. She clapped her hands as if trying to shake off chalk and admired her work. "Now it would work, I guess."

Boggs stood next to her, crossing his arms and widening his stance. "What do you mean?"

Johanna rolled her eyes. "The stinking formula was wrong. It's like basic math. They must've miscalculated and thought it was a bad blueprint. It's not. If you built this, it would work." Johanna shifted the light weight of her backpack and looked at him. "When does the hovercraft leave?"

Boggs glanced down at his communicuff and pursed his lips. "About an hour. Not enough time to clear your departure with President Coin."

Johanna smirked. "I'm not clearing it with Coin. That's why I'm here. I'm clearing it with you."

Johanna observed Boggs as he battled with himself. He wanted to help her. She had just done him a huge favor by fixing that formula and Coin would probably be okay with it. But making the decision to let a victor leave 13 without permission was risky. "I'll radio ahead and tell them to allow you into the hangar."

The grateful smile on her lips fell when she turned on her heel and saw the face of the Mockingjay staring at her in disbelief and the faintest hint of anger. Arms crossed over her chest, she glared at Johanna. "I woke you up for dinner like twenty minutes ago and suddenly you're leaving?" The tone she took with Johanna made Boggs cringe and he grabbed the remainder of his dinner and excused himself from the room, mumbling something about showing the new plans to Beetee. Katniss watched him leave, then returned her gaze to Johanna. "Well?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you." While true, the excuse was flimsy. Katniss saw right through her and shook her head. "Look, is it so crazy that I want to go home? Not all of us got our districts razed to the ground. Mine still exists. I'd like to see it before the girl on fire burns something else."

Johanna swallowed as she realized she said another one of those things she couldn't take back. Katniss looked hurt, but above that, she looked betrayed. "So all that talk about you protecting me, that's all gone now? Suddenly Peeta's not a threat?" Her hands moved from across her chest to her hips. "Or you just decided to stop caring?"

Johanna's irritability was bordering on exasperation. With her thumbs around the straps of the backpack she moved her eyes to the ground and bit the inside of her cheek. "Everyone here can protect you."

"Fuck you," Katniss replied, a burst of anger shooting forth and catching Johanna straight in the heart. Johanna didn't even attempt to hide her surprise. "I want the truth. If after all we've been through I don't even rate the truth from you, then you can go ahead and walk out of this room and you don't have to worry about me again."

Johanna was tempted to do just that. Walk out of the room and never think about Katniss Everdeen ever again. Never think about the confusing feelings she felt when she looked at her. Leave all this madness behind and live out the rest of the rebellion, and hopefully her life, in quiet solitude on her porch in 7. "You want the truth? Fine. You don't need me anymore." Katniss's hurt expression softened ever so slightly. "What I saw today in that cafeteria. Gale, Peeta, your mom, your sister, Finnick? Those people are all working around the clock to make sure you're okay. Hell, every guard on duty, even fucking Plutarch has his eye on you. If Peeta was to go off the walls, one of them would come rushing in to save you." Johanna breathed out a long sigh and
ran her fingers through her hair. "Nobody needs me. So I'm going to go where I can be of some use."

Johanna paused. "And look, if I'm actually the one programmed to kill you, I should be as far away as possible, right? Gotta protect the face of the rebellion."

Katniss flattened her palms against Johanna's shoulders and pushed her back roughly. Johanna stumbled a few steps but kept her balance. "You must think I'm really simple, Johanna." Johanna was about to confirm that hypothesis but Katniss cut her off with another short shove. "Do you think I don't know what running away looks like when I see it?"

Katniss pushed her one more time and Johanna felt the table behind her and she closed her eyes in frustration. "You push me one more time..." When she opened her eyes she saw the blatant challenge in the wide gray ones of Katniss. And you'll what? Johanna slid her backpack off her shoulders and tossed it on the floor. "You wanna go, Mockingjay? Is that what you want? A fight? Well then, let's go ahead. No bow and arrows, no axes."

Katniss rolled her eyes and took a half step backward. "I don't want to fight you."

"No?" Johanna cocked an eyebrow and stepped into the space Katniss left between them. In spite of her shorter stance she felt like she was holding herself over Katniss. They were so unbearably close that Johanna could even see the light smattering of freckles on Katniss's cheeks that swam just below her darkened skin. "Not after I stripped down in front of your boyfriend in the elevator? Not after I slapped you in the arena? Sliced open your arm and left that nasty scar? Knocked you out and gave you a concussion? 'Cause I gotta tell you, I've been looking forward to this."

Katniss didn't answer any of the questions. And despite how wicked Johanna made her tone, Katniss didn't back down. Instead her voice lowered to a timbre that felt like soft bristles down Johanna's back. "Why are you really leaving?"

Johanna suddenly didn't feel so large anymore. The three or so inches of height Katniss had on her was towering. Johanna saw the tendrils of brown hair that hung around the sides of Katniss's eyes. The faint wisps of eyebrows that were much less apparent when she wasn't wearing makeup. Eyelashes hidden under the small slant of her forehead. Lips of nearly the same size on top and bottom. Those eyes, like the soft fur of a rabbit, intuitive and watchful.

It was like someone took a pickaxe and tapped it against her, a small fissure forming in her hardened veneer. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. "I already told you," she whispered, only a trace of venom in her voice, "nobody needs me here."

"I do." There was trepidation in Katniss as she lifted her hand and placed it on the side of Johanna's neck, fingertips brushing against her pulse. It was bizarrely intimate for the District 12 native, who rarely showed any kind of affection. Johanna hoped Katniss wouldn't see or feel the goosebumps that were popping up all over her skin beneath her touch. Just as she pretended not to feel the tremble in Katniss's hand. "I need you here. I want you here."

Johanna's heartbeat thumped loudly in her ears as Katniss's face drew just the slightest bit closer to her. They were sharing the same air now, their eyes locked in a duel. Katniss broke first, her gray gaze dipping down to look at Johanna's mouth which on pure reflex she licked in anticipation. Anticipation of what? Was that her breath that hitched, or Katniss's? And what was that look in her eyes? Did it mirror the gnawing feeling in the pit of Johanna's stomach? She'd never know, because the door to the side opened and Boggs, face down in a report attached to a clipboard, entered the room. Katniss's hand flew away from Johanna's neck like she had been scalded, taking two steps backward from the older girl. Johanna barked out a hard laugh. She
leaned her head back and laughed again, shaking her head. How foolish she had been. In spite of Katniss's desperate eyes - no, please, let me explain - she picked up her backpack and shouldered it.

"It was nice of you to take time out of your busy schedule to say goodbye, Mockingjay," Johanna said scathingly, her eyes giving Katniss the answer to her unasked question - I don't want your explanation. "Say goodbye to Finnick for me."

Johanna brushed past Katniss, purposely nudging her shoulder on the way out the door. She hurried down the hallway to the elevator. The guards posted must have gotten the memo because they slid to the side so she could board the vestibule. It zoomed downward, then to the left, and made for the hangar.

What was she thinking? For a moment, for just a split second, she considered staying. That look in Katniss's eyes. She had almost ... no. That wasn't going to happen. Dr. Thorne asked one hundred times if her obsession with protecting Katniss perhaps had an underlined affection to it. She was adamant it didn't. But that didn't explain the tingle in her skin when they touched - intentionally or not. It didn't explain the protectiveness she felt when there was no real danger, or the protectiveness she felt when the danger wasn't Peeta. It didn't explain the damn archery book in her bag and her motivation for taking it.

There was one explanation for it and Johanna wouldn't even begin to entertain it.

But then again, that look.

It settled in her stomach like the bad slop they served in 13 as the hovercraft ascended into the clouds and took off West.

Home.

Author's Note: Thank you so much for all your reviews! Keep it up!
"Pick it up!" Johanna barked across the field, watching as the wannabe soldiers fell to their stomachs and got up a little faster. Johanna strode in front of them, swinging her axe around in her hand. The field they were training on used to be a track and sport field for their school, but school had been cancelled for months by now. Toward the end of the line one boy was particularly slow to his feet, sweat pouring off his forehead. He grunted in pain as he hit the ground, pushing himself up while the others had already done another set. "Stop!" Johanna called and the soldiers got to their feet, each of them in different states of exhaustion. "Did you not hear me?" Johanna crouched down next to the boy. He looked to be about sixteen, maybe fifteen. No facial hair to speak of and very little baby fat.

"I'm sorry, Soldier Mason," he apologized, attempting to lift himself from the ground. Johanna stood up and placed her boot flat on his back. He whined in pain and struggled, but she held him down firmly with just one leg. The mud on her boots made a large imprint on the back of his uniform. "I can't - I can't go anymore."

"Oh no?" Johanna asked mockingly, her face showing no trace of humor. The other soldiers looked on warily, not even daring to smile. "Do you know what happens when you just 'can't go anymore' in the arena?" Johanna pointed her axe at him. "You die. How old are you?"

"Fif-fifteen," he stuttered into the damp grass and mud beneath him.

"Fifteen? My my my, you're practically a lady!" Nobody laughed. Johanna pressed down harder on him. "At fifteen you should be in that reaping bowl three times, is that right?" The boy mumbled and Johanna kicked him in the side. "Speak up!"

"I-I took out tesserae. My name's in there five times."

"Five times? You know what the chances were that you'd be reaped?" The boy shook his head. "More than mine were, motherfucker. And yet," she let out a shrill laugh, "yet I went to the fucking Capitol. So you are gonna get your ass off the ground and you are gonna go run another five miles. One for every innocent person I had to kill in the games that we," she motioned around with her axe at the other soldiers, "are trying to prevent. While you've been fucking off!"

The boy took off running and Johanna looked back at the others. She tucked her axe back into her belt of the uniform she had gotten sent to her from Plutarch as a going-away present a day or so after she had left. The other soldiers stood at attention, awaiting her instructions. They were placed in five rows of seven, evenly spaced and looking not unlike how Soldier York had trained Johanna. "Um, Soldier Mason?"

A small girl, probably around the same age as the boy, called for her from the left side of the front row. Johanna plodded across the first row of people to her and stood in front of her, arms crossed. "You told him to run five miles for every person you had killed. But, um, in your games you only killed four."

"And in the Quarter Quell?" Johanna cocked her head to the side.

"Only the girl from District 1. But she's not -"

Johanna's laugh interrupted the girl's soft speech. "She's not what, innocent?"

"Hell no," a man called out from behind the girl. He was older, passed the age of being reaped.
Johanna's darkened gaze tracked from the little girl to him. "She volunteered for her games. She chose to kill people. She chose to work with the Capitol."

"And you know this how? You ever talk to her? You ever say one fucking word to her?" Johanna waited for him to answer, brown eyes wild.

"No, but I watched her volunteer. I watched her brother win the year before that. I watched her kill the two tributes from our district as well as many more. And I watched her try to kill you and Katniss Everdeen in the Quarter Quell. She deserved that axe in the chest."

As quickly as one could breathe Johanna had barged past the first row and stood directly in front of the man, her axe withdrawn from her belt and against his neck. If the man so much as breathed too hard, the blade would pierce his skin. "You have no fucking idea what you're talking about. What our lives were like after those games you couldn't even imagine. If you get sent to the Capitol, and you have to point your rifle down at a person half your age and kill them simply because that's what they tell you to do, you will. Because it's either him or you. And then you can come to me and you tell me how well you sleep at night. Tell me all about the choices you made."

"Sh-she made the choice -"

"No!" Johanna barked directly in his face, startling him and almost slicing his neck on the blade of her axe. "No. You choose only to live in that arena, at whatever cost. And after, that life? You don't choose that life. It is chosen for you. And it is a nightmare beyond your imagination."

Johanna strapped the axe back into her belt and walked to the front of the lines. "Anyone else got any questions?" She barely waited two seconds. "Good. You're all done for the day. Get out of my sight."

Johanna threw herself into work right away when she had arrived. Being the only living victor in 7 meant that there were around nine other houses, fully functioning, sitting completely unused in the Victor's Village. She gathered up the largest families in the nearest village whose homes had been destroyed by the broken dam and set them up in the new houses. She worked with the local plumbers and electricians to ensure they'd have running water and lights.

Distraction in the arena meant death. Distraction in 7 meant life.

For two weeks she kept herself solidly busy. She built homes, oversaw repairs, trained soldiers, planned blueprints, met with rebel leaders, did everything that they had denied her in 13. Seven was where she was wanted, where she was needed. The people welcomed her back with open arms and it almost felt like it did when she returned from the Capitol after her games. Kids waving to her in the street, people calling her by name, trying to visit her house late at night. Johanna adored and abhorred the attention. But both of those sensations were better than the uneasiness of living in 13.


"Mason!" Johanna swiveled her head in the direction of the burly voice. She found George, the head pullman of the lumberyards, waving her over. He was a large man with bulging muscles pushing at the fabric of his overalls, and a curly black beard that touched the middle of his chest. He constantly smelled of rubbing alcohol and sawdust. Johanna ventured toward him and he gave her a big, gap-toothed smile. "Listen, I just got a radio announcement that a hovercraft is asking permission to land."

"And?" Johanna raised her eyebrow. That was not news. Hovercrafts landed in 7 to refuel often enough.
He stared at the muddied ground beneath their feet. The single only thing she missed from 13 was how dry everything was. Everything in 7 seemed to be sopping wet from the flood still. "It's from Thirteen."

"Why? We didn't ask for any help." The rebellion had moved almost entirely to the Capitol, and with 2 under rebel control, it was only two weeks before the final offensive was to be enacted. Surely Katniss, Finnick, Gale and Peeta would be on that mission, even if it was just for propos. Johanna was glad to be out of that. She had no desire to return to the Capitol in any respect. She made her choice to stay in 7.

George shrugged his large shoulders. "Not sure. They said it was temporary, only an overnight visit and they'd be gone. I think they said it was a camera crew." Johanna shot him a glare. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger. I think that Plutarch Heavens-whatever is impressed at your training. Wanted to capture some of it on tape. Send it to Snow, that fuckin' rat bastard."

Johanna gave him an amused smirk and shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever. As long as they don't get in my way." Secretly though, she was pleased.

The few hovercrafts from District 2 often landed in District 7 because of their proximity. They would refuel or gather supplies, oftentimes leaving their wounded in the hospital. Johanna had taken it upon herself to meet with the crafts after they landed, verifying their purpose and mission. She didn't know when she had decided she was the unelected mayor of 7, but with their own mayor incompetent, Johanna made it her duty. She was the only victor, the most famous person there, and considered a hero amongst her brethren. In her own estimation, she was the only person with even half a brain that worked.

Johanna found herself at the train station, talking with the man who operated their station stop. A train pulled in and Johanna saw familiar blonde locks as the woman stepped off the train. Johanna walked away from the man mid-sentence and began following the woman down the street as she made her way toward a building. "Soldier." It was a cross between an order and a statement, but the woman turned around on instinct. She blinked a few times, eyes wide. Johanna's mouth moved into a small smile. "Hey there, soldier," she greeted again, friendlier.

"Johanna," the blonde woman breathed. "You're alive."

"I should be saying that to you. Last I saw you, you were a Capitol peacekeeper." It sounded almost like an accusation, as if they were on opposite sides. "Not many of them going around as of late."

"When they reaped you a second time, I defected." The anger in her voice was palpable. Johanna wondered if the fire she thought she was born with was perhaps given to her by mouth to mouth. "I met with some rebel leaders in Two and I was there until your friends decided to blow the place up." She placed her hands on her cheeks and blinked back tears. "I can't believe you're alive." She suddenly threw her arms around Johanna in a hug, crashing them both against a wall and she buried her face in Johanna's hair. "Fuck I missed you, brainless."

Johanna examined Nova as she pulled away, running her fingers through the blonde's hair. She still had some red streaks in it. "Why are you here?"

Nova appeared surprised at her words but shook her head. "Oh, I was a guard on the few trains we still have. I spent a lot of time here so I thought I'd take advantage of the free trip, considering the hovercrafts are pretty much off limits." Johanna eyed her suspiciously. "Okay, and I was curious to see if you were actually here."
Johanna poorly suppressed a grin on her face and walked with Nova down the road. Nova inhaled deeply and smiled, closing her eyes and tipping her head back. Johanna chuckled as they walked through the street. "Smell better here?"

"God yes," she groaned, rolling her shoulders to relax her muscles. "It smells like burnt shit in Two."

"Soldier Mason!" A girl around the same age as Johanna stood at attention, saluting Johanna as she passed.

Johanna smirked. "At ease, kid." Nova let out a raucous laugh once the girl was far enough away from them, nudging Johanna in the side. "What? My having authority is funny to you?"

"Of course it is!" Nova agreed, looping her arm through Johanna's. She felt warm. Familiar. "I can remember when you were just a little delinquent hanging out in the woods." Johanna pouted petulantly as she led Nova through the streets of 7. They were nearing the Victor's Village, which was now bustling with families attempting to put their lives back together. "From truant to tribute to victor to rebel. Now, she's a soldier?" They stood at Johanna's porch, the unused wood creaking beneath their feet. "I always knew you were something special, Soldier Mason."

Johanna rolled her eyes. "Please, we both know you just thought I was hot."

Nova took one step toward Johanna, feeling the heat between them rise. She placed her hand on Johanna's hip and aimed her caramel-colored gaze at her. "You were hot. You're still hot. But that's not why I loved you."

Love. Johanna remembered a time when she felt the same way about Nova. Her body was filled with love for her at many points in her life. But now, looking into her amber gaze, she felt more nostalgia than affection. Nostalgia was still distraction. And this - this would be an amazing one.

Johanna tasted her own arousal on Nova's tongue as they kissed languidly on Johanna's bed, tangled in bedsheets that were falling off the mattress. The sun was high in the sky when she pulled Nova into her home and tore her clothes off, but now the moon was shining down on them. Johanna hadn't realized how much unspent sexual energy was bubbling inside her. She didn't know how badly she needed the release.

It was manic. It was consuming. It was over.

She peered down at the exhausted woman, pulling a strand of blonde hair from the girl's mouth that had somehow gotten tangled in their kissing. Nova smiled up at her, raising a pale eyebrow. "That a was a little different."

Johanna looked at her, mirroring her expression. "How so?"

"Well," Nova slid out from beneath her, not bothering to cover up her body as she stood next to the bed. "You really like being on top now, don't you? All this new power gone to your head?"

Johanna scoffed, flattening herself on the mattress and gazing at her lover. Her wild blonde locks were messy around her head and falling passed her shoulders. She was still as beautiful as Johanna remembered her from their first time in the cabin in the woods. That cabin was long gone by now, another victim of the rebellion. "I didn't hear any complaints."

"On the contrary, I loved it." She grinned wickedly at Johanna. "You can top me anytime." She ventured into the bathroom and rummaged around. She emerged with a fluffy towel in hand, posing herself against the doorjamb. "Care to join me?"
Johanna's mind flashed with the image of Nova's back against the tile, water streaming down her body as she plunged her tongue inside the older woman. Then images of herself in the Capitol, body writhing against the cold tile, water pouring down on her head as the electrical currents ravaged her body slammed against her mind. Battle lost. "I'll pass."

"Really?" Nova shrugged. "All right, but I give a good back scrub." She disappeared into the bathroom and Johanna heard the loud creak of the pipes as the water groaned through them. She hadn't used the shower probably since the night before the reaping. It was angry in its disuse but the spray came out nonetheless. The curtain whipped back and she exhaled a breath she had been holding.

Sex with Nova was easy. It was familiar and comfortable. It was nearly like being alone, only much more pleasurable. They were so alike, and Johanna realized she had only grown to be even more like her. In her eyes, as she was breathlessly panting Johanna's name, she gathered that it wasn't the same anymore for Johanna. The passion was real and alive, but the adoration was gone.

Someone took it.

Snow. He'd taken her ability to love away by ruining everything she'd held dear. How could she expect to give her heart to anyone when it was in such shambles? That was the most logical solution, she convinced herself. It couldn't possibly be because her heart wasn't inside her chest anymore. It couldn't possibly be because someone had unintentionally taken it from her and held it between her fingers, squeezing it and controlling her.

Nope. Not that. Anything but that. The last two weeks had been a welcome respite from all the confusion that lived in 13. No, the only thing she missed from 13 was the dryness. Well, that and Buttercup. And of course Finnick, but she would visit him when this was over.

Distraction. Johanna got up and walked to the window, looking into her darkened backyard. There was a small, now-functioning fountain that she had installed for her family as a small memorial as well as a bunch of large trees. Johanna's eyes went to the tree with the big, square plank nailed to the trunk. Two arrows stuck out of the wood, dangling in the night air. She was getting better.

After Nova finished her shower Johanna ventured into the bathroom to wash herself down with the rags. The sensation of the warm water against her skin was still debilitating, but it had become a little easier since returning from the Capitol. It was getting harder and harder not to wash her hair in the shower as it continued to grow. She deliberated cutting it but that seemed like acquiescing to Snow.

Her door sounded with a few solid knocks and Johanna emerged from the bathroom in only her underwear, not a drop of water on her. Nova was redressed in some of Johanna's clothes, laying on her bed and watching the Capitol's coverage of the rebellion. "Want me to get that?"

Johanna shrugged. "No it's fine." She sauntered down the stairs to the front door of the spacious home, tossing open the front door. She was met with the surprised, but slightly amused face of Cressida, flanked by the open-mouthed cameramen Pollux and Castor. They both simultaneously cast their gazes to the ground. Johanna's face fell into a hard frown. "Why are you here?"

Cressida's bright blue eyes met her own, then for some reason, looked beyond her. Johanna followed her eyes and saw Nova rummaging around in her kitchen in her clothes. Cressida bit her lip to hide a smirk but failed pretty miserably. "Glad I didn't bring Katniss with me."

Johanna hardened her stare. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"
"Nothing." Cressida inhaled a deep breath. "We'd like to do a few shots of you training the soldiers for a propo. Nothing too involved. Just kind of shadowing you and what you're doing here." Johanna nodded, waiting for Cressida to continue. The look on her face revealed there was more. "We'd also like to have you talk about your life here in Seven, your family, and, if you're up to it, what happened to you in the Capitol."

Johanna rolled her eyes and sighed, leaning against the flat side of the door. "Which time?" Cressida looked to Pollux and Castor for an answer but they both shrugged. "When I was turned into the Capitol's whore or when I was turned into the Capitol's sponge?"

Cressida's eyes widened about twice their size. Like a true professional she contorted her face into an impassive expression. "Both, I suppose."

"And this will all be over by tomorrow?" The longer they stayed, the higher the chance they might fly the Mockingjay there to "help out." Johanna couldn't risk it.

Cressida nodded, producing a clipboard from behind her back. "Yes. Our hovercraft leaves tomorrow night at 9pm."

"Great. Well. Have a good night." Johanna swung the door on them but a small hand came out and prevented it from closing. Johanna opened it as Pollux and Castor walked down the steps, leaving Cressida alone on the porch. "Yeah?"

Cressida leveled her eyes into Johanna's intense brown gaze. "It's not my place, but you should know you are missed in Thirteen." Johanna raised her eyebrow and let out a short, hard chuckle. "Truly. What you do here is your business," she began, looking through the crack in the door toward Nova, "but you should know she hasn't been the same since you left."

Johanna looked mildly amused. "Who, our great leader President Coin? I knew she had a soft spot for me."

"Like I said, it isn't my business."

"You're damn right it's not."

"But when it affects my propos, it is." Johanna canted her head to the side, stepping into the porch and closing the door behind her. Cressida rolled her eyes at Johanna's shameless display of nudity. "She has been very difficult recently. Very sullen, very withdrawn. The only time she seems to come alive is when they allow her to use her bow. I need her to be the fiery Mockingjay she was presented as. The one I saw with you in District Two."

Johanna shrugged her shoulders and crossed her arms below her bare breasts. She hazarded a glance back to the door. "I don't see how that's my problem."

Cressida pursed her lips and nodded. "Right. I'll meet you here tomorrow at seven am. Good night, Johanna." Johanna stormed back inside, clicking the lock into place. She turned around to see Nova snacking on some fruit-filled bread one of her many surrogate mothers brought her. Johanna allowed it, because at least now anyone who cared for her wasn't in immediate danger anymore. Snow didn't have his eyes on her. His eyes were on Katniss, whose family was under the country's protection. Johanna could permit displays of gratitude from the people around 7, and she could technically allow Nova back into her life. Armed with the information that perhaps she was the cause of Katniss's sudden depression threw another wrench in that plan.

"Who was that?" Nova asked, a comical amount of food in her mouth.

Johanna blew air out of her nose and shook her head. "A camera crew from Thirteen. They're
going to film me tomorrow." Nova raised her eyebrows in acknowledgement and nodded. Johanna sank down into the couch next to her, trying to find solace in her embrace. Nova's fire didn't feel like home anymore. It felt too familiar. Too much like the life she had been forced to give up before the Quell.

Johanna had chosen to be in 7. She had chosen to stay away from 13 and from Katniss. One of the only things this rebellion was giving her was free will. She could choose to stay in 7 with this wonderful woman, living her out her life in an uncomplicated relationship. Maybe raise some kids, or maybe not. Return her district to its former glory as Panem turned into a democratic regime that didn't ritualistically kill its children every year. Maybe not.

Choices.

Cressida was prompt, running cameras from seven am until late into the day. Johanna marched out to the training field where her soldiers were waiting for her, running them through their training procedures, explaining to the cameras how she modified York's training regime to fit the rigors of their district. They trained with rifles but also with axes. They could scale trees (and building edifices) with ease. Johanna prepared them not just for the assault on the Capitol, but for life in 7 if the rebellion was victorious.

"If?" Cressida asked jokingly, smirking behind the camera.

"When."

After they broke for lunch Cressida and her crew followed her home, Johanna having stated her preference to be interviewed there. Nova propped herself up in the kitchen as Johanna and Cressida settled in the living room.

Cressida got comfortable in the armchair across from Johanna. "Tell me a little about your life here in Seven before the reaping."

Johanna smirked. "The first reaping or the second?"

"Okay. Well, my parents and my sister and I lived in a nice part of Seven. Not as nice as what the Capitol gave me for killing some kids, but nice. Celebrated the autumn festivals, birthdays. My father was a great singer. Life was - life was pretty good. Normal." Johanna flexed her fingers, staring down at her fingernails. "I was reaped for the 71st Hunger Games about five years ago."

"My parents worked really hard. Too hard to watch their daughter sent to the slaughter. I can guarantee you that they would be leading this rebellion themselves had they lived to see it."

"What happened to them?"

Johanna's gaze briefly went to Nova, who was sitting on a stool near the breakfast counter in the kitchen, watching intently. Pain flashed in her eyes. "President Snow is a man of the people. He wants to do everything he can to keep the people who keep him in power happy. After I won, after the victory tour and the money and the house and the happiness for my family, he called me back to the Capitol. "President Snow is a man of the people. He wants to do everything he can to keep the people who keep him in power happy. After I won, after the victory tour and the money and the house and the happiness for my family, he called me back to the Capitol." Johanna steeled herself, intent on delivering every word with conviction. "I was to sleep with anyone who was willing to pay for it. Man, woman, older, younger, fat, skinny, black, white, purple, green, anyone. I was to be bought and sold and used. And not just me. Plenty of the other victors I came to know - Cashmere, Finnick, Gloss, probably Enobaria but who cares - they all participated. Habitual, transactional, rape."
"Why didn't you refuse?"

"At first because it didn't feel like such a bad deal, you know? Sex is a transaction anyway; a give and take of pleasure. President Snow made me feel like I owed him. My family was rich, they were happy, I didn't want to ruin that. If Cashmere were alive, she'd say she did it for her parents, the scumbags that they were. Gloss probably did it to keep Cashmere out, but she was roped in anyway. Finnick did it for his family until they were killed. Then he did it for Annie Cresta." Johanna's eyes met Cressida's with an ironic smile. "Love is weird."

"Then what happened?"

Johanna sighed, gripping the sides of her chair. "I had a bad experience. A terrible night with a woman who nearly killed me. I'm sure she's still picking pieces of my flesh from under her fingernails, washing my blood from her hair. Just as I still bear the scars." Johanna unzipped the front of her uniform, exposing not only her faint scars from the arena, but the branching purple ones from her torture. She pointed out a faint white line that made a small smile from underneath one of her breasts to the other. Cressida nodded and in spite of her lips being set in a firm line, it was clear that she was stunned. Her eyes betrayed her. Johanna zipped her uniform back to her collar. "I asked Snow to release me from my servitude and he refused. Well, I kind of stormed into his office and told him I wasn't doing it anymore. Within a day or so my parents and my baby sister..." Johanna stopped speaking, not wanting her voice to break. She cleared her throat and continued. "My baby sister was a pile of ashes in my own backyard.

"When they asked me to join the rebellion it didn't take me but five minutes to help. I agreed to help protect Katniss and they told me to gain her trust by protecting Nuts and Volts." Johanna paused, smiling sadly. "Beetee and Wiress. So I did. I lost Blight, a District hero and my mentor, in the process." Johanna closed her eyes, recalling the heat and salt of the arena. The pulsing jungle, the jabberjays, the blood rain, Blight's gurgled scream. "I was captured by the Capitol along with Peeta and Enobaria. Peeta had just killed Brutus and I was going to kill 'Baria but they trapped us."

"Would you be able to tell us what they did to you?"

"Well they wanted information," Johanna informed with a sickly sweet smile. "But I would rather chop off all my arms and legs before I'd give them anything. So they soaked me in cold water and ran electrical currents through me. For weeks." Johanna ran her fingers through her hair, curling her legs underneath her. "They locked me in a cell next to Peeta. We heard each other's screams." Johanna's eyes moved away to the window, lost in the memory of hearing his strangled screams for Katniss at night. Her screams for Katniss. Protect her.

"All of this," Cressida began, tapping a pen against her lips, "for Katniss?"

"For my sister," Johanna replied. "For my parents. For Blight. For Seven. For all the tributes that were killed in these games. For all the tributes I killed myself. For me." Johanna sighed, her eyes meeting the camera. "And yeah, for her."

The camera crew left. Life returned to normal. As normal as Johanna had ever lived through. A job during the day, a woman at night. Stealing bits of temporary happiness. For three days, there was normalcy.

On the fourth day, the world shifted. Johanna was awoken from her slumber, arm wrapped around Nova's bare waist, by the incessant beeping of her communicuff. The emergency warning flashed and she stared at it quizzically. Without much thought she dressed in her uniform, leaving the sleeping woman on her bed. As she got close to town, she realized the issue. The dam was
springing a leak. Water was gushing from a crack near the top, flooding the area that had just been cleaned of debris. Carpenters and construction workers stood at the top, attempting to plug the hole when Johanna heard the noise.

It sounded like trees being felled. A long, rumbling crack. Then, water. Everywhere. It burst through the pipe in the center of the dam where the control room was, cascading down in a single hard sheet on the ground below them. People began screaming, running in all different directions. Within just a few seconds there was a giant pool of rushing water making its way toward the forest. People began drowning under the hard press of the water. Children, women, men, all screaming for help as the water filled their lungs.

Johanna leapt into the river, screaming upon contact. Soaked. Wet. Cold. Waiting for the electric shocks that never came. Wincing at imaginary insults and interrogation in her ear. But she swam. She gathered people from the water, sputtering and drowning. How had they never learned to swim? Johanna began carrying them to safety on the banks of the newly formed river in what used to be a placid settling of water. Other men and women jumped in, dragging people to the sides of the river. Johanna bobbed in the water, frantically searching the white foamy tops for signs of life.

The air started to feel thin. Her vision obscured, painting the water in a yellowish glow. Was she dying? She couldn't tell. The water began to recede and Johanna began swimming toward the edge. She pulled herself up onto the concrete bank and immediately curled into a ball like a swatted spider. Her body shook hard, convulsing to the imaginary electrical shocks.

Her hearing was impaired. Everything sounded like rushing water. She felt two arms snake underneath her: one around her back, the other under her knees. Screams. Her screams or someone else's? She didn't know.

Johanna was really tired of waking up in hospitals. She let out a groan as she tore out the morphling IV, blood spilling on to the floor. Wearily she got to her feet, stumbling toward a long, sleek metal table with gauze on it. She tore the gauze with her teeth, wrapping it around the wound she made. A glance around the hospital revealed other people with various injuries, blue-faced and clinging to machinery to keep them alive.

She felt like a failure. All these people were hurt because of her oversight. Johanna woozily walked toward a little girl she recognized from town, stumbling and nearly taking out a cart of supplies. Before she hit the ground two arms slid underneath her armpits and brought her up. "Whoa." Johanna's entire body went rigid. That voice. Even in her stupor, that voice pierced like a needle. "How did you get out of bed?"

Johanna wrenched herself free from the woman's grip and whirled around. She made herself dizzy and as her eyes focused, Katniss came into view. "How did you get here?" Johanna's voice was intended to be full of malice but it sounded hoarse and low. Katniss was dressed in her Mockingjay outfit, complete with the rifle around her back and bow over her shoulder.

Katniss smirked. "How do you think, brainless?" No, this wasn't right. Johanna didn't want to hear Katniss's teasing tone. She didn't want to hear her use the word she had mistakenly transmitted from Nova to her. She didn't want to see those fucking eyes. Where was her distraction now? Katniss's expression turned serious as Johanna felt behind her and sat on the edge of one of the cots. "Plutarch received some intel that Snow has sent assassins from the Capitol to take out the remaining victors." Her throat bobbed. "Lyme is already dead."

Johanna gripped the sides of the mattress. It was all too much. Water. Assassins. Katniss. Victors. "I don't care. I'm not leaving."
Katniss kneeled in front of Johanna, placing her hand on her thigh. "Please, Johanna. We didn't come this far just to have you killed. Come back with me to Thirteen where it's safe." Johanna felt Katniss's fingernails dig into her pants. "We're allies, remember? You said it yourself. Let me protect you like you did for me in the arena. Let me keep you safe."

"Who protects them?" Johanna barked, sweeping her arm to indicate all the people in the hospital. "Who keeps them safe? Because apparently I'm doing a shit job of it." As her eyes met Katniss's, there was overwhelming empathy. Katniss knew what it was like to feel the responsibility of a lot of people on your shoulders. And the weight of the regret of letting them down.

"The dam wasn't your fault. Do you know how many lives you saved?"

Johanna scoffed loudly. "Before I collapsed like a big idiot?"

"Nobody died. You, and some other Seven citizens, got everyone out. Nobody drowned." Johanna still was not pleased. No fatalities didn't mean that it was a success.

"Johanna!" Both Katniss and Johanna quickly looked toward the sound of the voice. Nova came rushing into the hospital but before she could get close to the bed Katniss withdrew her rifle and pointed it at her, standing directly in front of Johanna. Nova quickly put her hands in the air in surrender, but her voice was annoyed. "What the hell? Jo, tell her to put the damn weapon down."

"Who are you?" Katniss asked, keeping her aim on Nova's head.

Nova scowled in annoyance. In a swift movement she kicked the gun out of Katniss's hands, grabbed it in mid-air, and aimed it back at the girl. Katniss was deadly quick, reaching for her bow and loading an arrow in the time it took Nova to aim the gun down. A good, old-fashioned standoff. "I'm a friend," she said through gritted teeth.

"For fuck's sake will you put your weapons down?" Johanna stood from the bed and put her hand on Katniss's shoulder. "I know her."

"Fine." They each lowered their weapons and stared hard at each other. "If you're her friend then help me convince her to leave. She isn't safe here. President Snow has sent out Peacekeepers assigned to purge the remaining victors."

Nova let out a laugh, still grasping Katniss's gun in her hands. Johanna remembered when she first saw Nova with a gun in her hands, clad in her white uniform. Her hair cropped short with her rebellious red streaks. She remembered the gun sitting on the dresser next to the bed in the cabin as she gripped the headboard and moaned in pleasure. "And she's safe with you? Are you kidding? You go to Twelve, they incinerate it. You go to Eight, they level that too. You get to Two and blow the whole thing up. Disaster follows you, kid."

Johanna was torn between feeling slightly smug at Nova's defense of her and a little offended that she had no faith in Katniss. Johanna peered over at Katniss and saw the redness creeping up her neck. She was pissed. Johanna stepped in between them, playing the unlikely role of moderator. She placed her hand gently on Nova's sternum. "Is what she said true?" Nova asked, moving her steely gaze from Katniss to Johanna. It softened considerably.

"Probably. I don't think Plutarch would lie. I have no business in Thirteen but I'm sure he would see losing another victor as a failure on his part. Won't help is future prospects."

Nova sighed, appearing lost in thought for a moment. "I'll stay. I'll take care of them here. Go." Her amber gaze tracked to Katniss briefly, then back to Johanna. She placed her hand over Johanna's on her heart. "I want you to stay, but more than that I need you to be safe." Wetness
spotted her eyes as she cleared her throat. "When this is all over, you know where to find me."
Nova used her free hand to grasp around the back of Johanna's head and pressed her lips against
her forehead. "I'm gonna miss you, brainless."

They pulled apart and Nova handed the gun to Katniss, whose eyes were anywhere in the room
but on Johanna and Nova. She mumbled a thank you and grabbed Johanna by the hand, pulling
her from the hospital. Johanna stopped by her house to grab clothes, shoving them in the sack she
had stolen from Katniss. She picked up a bracelet and slid it onto her wrist. It had been her token
in the arena, a small wooden bracelet with a small axe burned into the top, and an "M" burned into
the other side. A gift from her father. The last she'd ever receive from him.

Wordlessly they made their way back to the hangar, where surprisingly the camera team was there
to receive them. They boarded in silence, strapping themselves into the seats and preparing to take
off. Johanna's brain felt like it was sloshing through mud. This was all too familiar to her trip to the
Training Center after the second reapings. Leaving her home to go to a place that could potentially
spell her death.

The ride back to Thirteen was deathly quiet. Johanna was kept awake by the daydreams that
usually transformed into nightmares at night. The rest of the crew were chatting softly to each
other, looking at the footage on a small screen in Cressida's hands. "This is all really great. We'll
cut this up tonight and I'll have Beetee interrupt the President's speech tomorrow."

"Great," Johanna replied drolly, her eyes faraway and fixed on an unassuming spot in the
hovercraft.

"Have you given more thought to going to the Capitol, Katniss?" Cressida asked, aiming her gaze
at the girl next to Johanna. Johanna looked over confusedly. Cressida cleared her throat. "We are
sending Katniss, Gale, Finnick and Boggs to the Capitol to film."

Johanna let out a caustic, mean laugh. "Oh really? Plutarch is sending arguably the four best
soldiers in this country to go play make believe?" Johanna shook her head, leaning back into her
seat. "This whole fucking thing is just a big joke to him, isn't it?" She leaned forward. "We are not
pieces in his games. You think Gale pulled Twelve out of fires to play dress up? Finnick gets
raped for almost ten years for this? And Katniss, forget it. She'll never live a normal life and she
won't get to see the bastard pay for it?" Johanna turned her attention to Katniss. "And you agreed
to this?"

"Katniss neither agreed nor disagreed," Cressida informed with a frown.

"Right. The ever-deliberate Mockingjay. Can't possibly make up her mind on what she wants." Jo
Johanna unbuckled herself and left the seating area for the vacant conference room one door over.
She should have stayed in 7. How did she get herself roped into this again? She was ...happy in 7.
Thriving, even. Now she was back, smothered underground like a mass grave in 13.

She knew how. Her choice had been made long before Katniss had even showed up.

Upon their return, Katniss and Johanna trudged back to their room, settling into their compartment
as if no time had passed. Nothing looked different, other than Johanna's bed being made, which
she never did. It was around dinner time, but Johanna had no stomach for eating. "You should
come," Katniss urged. "They're going to air your propo after dinner."

"And what would I do with all the applause?" Johanna asked, rolling over on her bed to face the
wall. "I'll pass, but thanks. You go have fun. I'm sure everyone is dying to know what the
Mockingjay thought of all that." Johanna didn't turn over to see Katniss's reaction, but she heard
Hours later she had fallen asleep, giving up on waiting for Katniss to get back. She had shuddered dreams of rushing rivers, watching her family drown, unable to save them. She was frozen on the banks of the river, cowering in fear as the water leapt and swallowed her parents and sister. She awoke slowly, confused at the feeling of wetness on her skin.

For a moment she was panicked, as if this had all been a dream and she was still in the Capitol. But then she felt the warmth of Katniss's arms around her. She had gotten underneath Johanna's arm and brought her hand back up, digging her fingers into Johanna's shoulder. Her other arm was underneath their heads under the pillow, and then wrapped around Johanna's other shoulder.

The wetness was tears. Katniss was crying into her back, the tickling trickle of the water sliding across Johanna's shoulder blades. "Katniss?" she called out hoarsely into the darkness. "Are you okay?"

"I'm so sorry," Katniss whispered in a high-pitched voice. "I watched your propo. I didn't know. Your family - what Snow did to you. The - the rape and the torture. Johanna, I'm so sorry."

Johanna was exasperated with everyone's sorries. Everyone was so fucking sorry for being too late to help. But the agony in Katniss's voice stalled any mean-spirited comebacks that were lining up inside her throat. "Thanks."

Katniss buried her nose in the crook of Johanna's neck, sending shivers down Johanna's spine. Her wet, hot breath bounced against her skin and Johanna wasn't sure if her daze was caused by any lingering head injuries, or the feeling of Katniss's lips so firmly pressed against her skin. Of course Katniss didn't mean her touches to be erotic, but that's not how Johanna's libido was interpreting them.

"I will protect you," Katniss affirmed, lips and tongue grazing unintentionally against Johanna as she spoke. "I will keep you safe."

On any other day, in any other bed, Johanna would not allow herself to be coddled in such a way. The conviction in Katniss's voice held still trepidation. She took Katniss's hand from on her shoulder and laced their fingers together, then wrapped it tightly around her midriff. What she wanted to say was "Why?" Why the sudden need to do this? Was it just pity? Sympathy? Unfortunately Johanna couldn't muster up the confidence to ask. "You protect me and I'll protect you. Deal?"

In spite of her tears, she could feel the movement of Katniss's lips as they widened into a smile. "Deal."

Johanna fell asleep with one thought in her brain: When she had gotten into her bed, it already smelled like Katniss.

Author's Note: Welp that was lengthier than I had imagined. I just really wanted to get to that scene there. Thank you for the amazing response to this fan fic! I'm really enjoying the push-and-pull of sticking to canon and "Joniss-ing it up" as Jena Malone put it. Don't hesitate to leave a review and let me know what you think!
The building blocks to Johanna's personality were varied as they were integral. Her abrasive attitude, her sarcastic wit, her honor, her untrusting nature, the wholeness that she gave to everything she did. Much of who she was forged in the heat of the arena. She never stopped looking over her shoulder, she never stopped using her anger as fuel, and she never thought the best of people.

Most glaringly of all, she was proud. An element of her character that had been apparent since the first time she opened her eyes and saw the fires burning outside her windows. Her father named her Johanna after her grandfather, John. Other people had names reflecting the district's trees, mountains, lakes, rivers, or ocean. But Johanna Mason had a proud, firm name. A name passed down from before the Dark Days. One that you could etch it stone and no amount of erosion would wear it away.

In the Capitol it was etched in stone. A pillar in the main lobby with all the names of the victors on it. Hers was there along with six others, including Blight. There had been a big ceremony of carving her name into the stone after she won. A truly over-the-top affair with wine and roses and the overwhelming smell of blood in Johanna's nose.

But also, there was pride.

Only seven people from 7 could count themselves as victors. Only one other woman, who died years before Johanna was reaped. She stood alone, a warring goddess amongst men, a proud member of an elite group of people who all wished they were dead. What sort of pride can one hold when it stands on piles of children's bones?

They attempted to break her pride in the Capitol during her torture. Shouting the names of her family members at her, the names of the people she had sworn to protect and didn't. They told her she was nothing. She was useless. She was as good as dead. But if she was, they would have killed her. Every day she lived, the pride in her heart stayed constant. A reminder that she was not any of the things they said. She was a victor. She could handle anything they threw at her.

Within her pride was her power.

So as she stood in the doorway in front of the field, she grasped her hands tightly. They integrated her back into training under the promise that if she passed the exams, she could go to the Capitol. But the training was done rain or shine, and that day the sky was nearly as gray as the inside of 13 itself. The rain pounded against the ground in relentless sheets, unbroken and powerful.

Johanna jumped into a rushing river beneath an exploded pipe. Why couldn't she take a little rain? She had gone through her baptism by fire and had expected to be able to handle the water now. She stuck out her hand and watched the water puddle inside her palm. Quickly she shook it off and returned her hand to her uniform, rubbing it furiously against her thigh.

"You don't have to do this, you know."

Johanna didn't turn around. She'd recognize that voice in the middle of a screaming Capitol crowd. Johanna's pride had taken a few too many flogs to it recently, and this was another strike. Now that Katniss knew about her torture, about her aversion to water, she knew why Johanna cringed when the pipes shuddered in their compartment. She knew why Johanna couldn't step foot in the rain. She knew how brave her actions had really been back in 7. Hell, even Coin had given her a compliment when she came back. Though the compliment was nestled in an insult, like one
"I know that," she snapped back, still facing out into the rain. The other soldiers were muddily jogging along, their boots sloshing in the water. They almost looked thankful for the rain; it cleaned the sweat and grime from their faces. She knew she didn't need to be so proud around Katniss. The gray-eyed girl saw right through her anyway. But she had to have something. If she wasn't a fearsome protector, what was she? Just another ill-fated idiot following blindly behind the beleaguered, hesitant leader of the rebellion.

"You didn't let me finish." Johanna finally turned halfway around, leaning on the doorframe with her arms crossed over her chest. "You don't have to do this, but you should. Your test is in two weeks and this," she pointed to the pounding rain, "this is going to be why you fail."

"What are they going to do, toss a bucket of water on me? Wouldn't be the first time."

Katniss flinched at Johanna's quick reminder of her torture. She knew the casual way she spoke about it irked Katniss, and like most things that irked Katniss, she did it anyway. After they had woken up from sleeping in the same bed, Katniss had wanted to hear about what happened. Not so much about the logistics, but about how Johanna felt. In the early morning light, delirious from sleep and from the fuzzy warmth of Katniss's arms, she told her.

She felt powerless. She felt abused. All she wanted was warmth and dryness. To be home. To murder Snow. Confusing, conflicting feelings of anger, sadness, desperation and pride. She didn't tell her how often she thought of Katniss. How sometimes, just thinking about how she was supposed to be helping Katniss win this rebellion kept her alive.

"They ferret out a soldier's weakness. Mine was not being able to follow orders."

"Surprise, surprise."

Katniss glared at her. "Yours will probably be water. They'll likely make it rain or flood the street. Something to put you off your game."

Johanna suddenly became angry at the water. All those years swimming in the lakes in 7, or learning how to sail boats with Finnick in 4, all for what? So she could barely even touch a bathroom sink without throwing up? This water was not going to defeat her. "I'll pass even if they try to drown me."

Katniss took a tentative step toward her. How did she always know when Johanna's doors were opening slightly? "Would you be... open to letting me help you?"

Help? Johanna Mason didn't ask for help. She didn't ask for help when she was ten and stuck up high in a tree with no way down. Her father wouldn't have come for her anyway. He always told her not to climb the tall trees if she couldn't get back down. She figured it out and climbed down herself six hours later, shaken and hungry. She didn't ask for help when she was reaped and in need of allies to stay alive. She won by herself. She didn't ask for help when she was tied up in a room in the Capitol, soaking and hurt.

Uncertainty flashed in her eyes before she plastered on a smirk. "Is this a ploy to see me naked, Mockingjay?"

Pre-Thirteen Katniss might have been rattled by that. The same way she had totally rattled her in the elevator by stripping nude. That was a display of pride and power, too. Prudish, too-good-for-you Katniss forced to stare at the body Johanna had built herself over years of murder and anger.
"Please, like you haven't shown me everything there is to see already."

Challenge accepted. Johanna moved toward Katniss, invading her personal space in a way she knew would make Katniss uncomfortable. Their bodies nearly touching but separate, her hair hanging over her face as she leaned in closely. To her surprise, Katniss barely even blinked. "Oh there's a lot of things I haven't shown you yet."

Instead of parrying her come-on Katniss simply looked annoyed. Her thinly veiled sexual innuendoes were always a defense mechanism, but when the person she was defending herself against realized that, Johanna knew she was in trouble. "Are you going to let me help you? Or are you going to fail this test and make me go to the Capitol alone?"

"Dramatic much?" Johanna asked, unmoving. Shy of fighting, the verbal banter with Katniss was as close as she was going to get to some release. "You'll have Finnick and your best friend Boggs. Cressida, the Avox and his brother. Even your boyfriend is going."

Cressida had conveniently left out the part where Peeta was going to the Capitol, too. Not that he didn't deserve it - he was tortured just as much as she was - but it irked Johanna to think she'd have to compete for Katniss's attention. It would wound her pride to see Peeta protecting her. Especially protecting Katniss from her. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Could've fooled me. I watched the games. Getting him medicine, kissing his boo-boos. That cute little suicide pact you had after that District One boy got eaten to death." Johanna knew she was getting close. She was getting close to the point where Katniss would snap. She didn't know why she insisted on doing this. But she knew she always would. Getting Katniss to emerge from her safe little bubble was something she liked to do. "I was in the second one. Sitting on the beach, wondering if that shellfish was going to be my last meal, while you and lover boy were off getting each other gifts and swapping spit."

Like magic Johanna suddenly felt herself getting pushed backward until she hit a wall. Katniss's forearm was at her throat, applying a gentle but firm pressure. She suddenly wished she was a little bit taller so Katniss wouldn't seem so imposing, or that their lips weren't so close. "Fuck you, Johanna."

Johanna bit her lip. "That's more like it, girl on fire." Johanna didn't know when she and Katniss had begun riding on the same wavelength. Somehow though, Katniss knew what she meant. *Push me, don't pity me.* Johanna wanted her help, not her sympathy. Katniss blinked a few times as this realization dawned on her and she slowly let go of Johanna, but kept their bodies flush. The pit of Johanna's stomach began twisting as Katniss stared without a break into her eyes. This was far too much, like the moment they had before the hovercraft. Johanna averted her gaze, looking back outside at the rain.

"Let's go."

Before her Games, Johanna had not been one for taking baths. Wasting water in such a way was breaking a rule somehow. Hot water was rare to begin with, so why waste it on a bath? Instead Johanna had always preferred to just strip off her clothes by the lake and scrub herself clean in the waters there. Sometimes she'd grab a bit of oils and lavender, mixing it in her hair and washing out the sawdust from the logging.

The feel of the bathtub pressed against her back felt foreign. Katniss hadn't even turned on the water yet and Johanna felt herself shivering. The drain, only a few feet from where she sat, sat open-mouthed and gaping at her. She knew it would make that awful gurgling noise as the water got sucked into the abyss. She pulled her feet up, sitting in a fetal position against the back of the
Katniss grabbed a footstool from a classroom and brought it into their compartment, as well as ushering Buttercup into the room for "moral support" as she called it. He didn't like water either. Scruffy, unbathed thing, just like Johanna herself. Katniss crouched next to the tub. She plugged the hole in the drain, alleviating some of Johanna's anxiety. At least she wouldn't have to hear that sound. "Okay, I'm going to turn on the water. Warm. Just kind of coat the bottom of the tub, okay?"

Johanna shivered. Not just from her nudity, but from the anticipation of the water hitting her skin. Katniss jerked the faucet, pre-empting the pipe's groan by forcing the water out. Johanna watched the clear line crawl toward it until it hit her toes. She sucked in a deep breath and caught Katniss's eyes. They were steady, unwavering. The water moved upward from her heels, coming in contact with the bottom of her butt. It pooled around her and settled behind her, lapping at her lower back.

Katniss shut the water off. She sat down next to Johanna, opening one of the training textbooks. Johanna clenched her teeth. There was no way she was going to be able to quiz her on the terms with the water touching her skin. "Don't," she said, as Katniss opened the book. "Can we just ...talk about something else?"

Katniss nodded, placing the book on the tile floor next to her. Buttercup assumed the text as his bed and sat on it, giving Katniss a purr. She placed her elbows on her knees, clad in her sleeping wear. Her bare feet touched the tile as she stared off into the distance. Johanna watched her carefully. There was something she wanted to say.

"Who was that girl in Seven?"

Katniss didn't seem to have the courage to look at her directly as she asked. She stared at the tile wall, the towel holder, the small garbage can. "Which girl?" Johanna ventured, barely hiding the smirk on her face as Katniss tilted her head and gave her an indignant stare. "She's a friend of mine."

"I gathered that." The ice in Katniss's tone was almost colder than the water that was vibrating at Johanna's feet. Katniss leaned forward and pushed the faucet again, adding another inch to the water and giving it some warmth. Johanna shuddered hard but didn't move. "I meant, what is she to you? How do you know her?"

Johanna closed her eyes and tipped her head back, leaning it against the wall. Her hands still gripped her knees as they hugged her chest. "She was a Peacekeeper in Seven. She grew up in Two. She used to kind of look out for me when I was growing up. I wasn't exactly an easy preteen." Katniss chuckled. "She got me out of trouble a lot."

"So she was a Peacekeeper and now she's a rebel?"

"I guess. I wasn't exactly around for her transformation. I was a little busy protecting you and your boyfriend on a spinning island of death." Katniss looked down at the tile, sufficiently chastised. "I hadn't seen her since just after my family was murdered. She told me she joined the rebellion pretty much right after I did. Was fighting in Two until Gale blew it up."

Katniss became very interested in the loose thread on her pants. "And you two were, er, are involved?"

Johanna laughed. Involved. What a truly Katniss way to roundabout ask if they were having sex.
"If you mean, 'Are we fucking?' The answer is yes." Johanna stared down at the water. "She was my first." Katniss leaned forward, probably in an attempt to not have to make eye contact with Johanna, and pushed more water into the bath. It now was just covering the tops of Johanna's feet. "I was young. It was before I was reaped. After that, everything changed. I mean, you saw the propo. I wasn't exactly in the best shape to be having a relationship. And she had gone back to Two."

"Do you love her?"

Johanna paused on that thought. There was a time in her life, when she was a teenager drunk on whiskey and youth, when that answer would've been yes. It felt a lot like love. Or what Johanna assumed love would be like. Like being devoured in flames from the outside in. "I think I did, then. This whole time, even with the two Games and Snow attempting to break me, I still kinda thought that I'd come out of this. Different, but I'd come out. I'd be okay. She was kind of my way of confirming that. A little bit of who I was before all this shit. But being with her in Seven... It didn't feel right."

Katniss looked over at Johanna, eyes a little glassy but otherwise intent. "Because you don't love her anymore?"

"No," Johanna said, looking down at her knees. "Because I'm not capable of love anymore."

The pipes above their head creaked, obviously someone in another unit was using the shower, and the noise made Johanna squeeze her eyes shut. She gripped the sides of the tub as a few droplets of water came out of the showerhead above her and she was about to take flight. Katniss leapt over the tub, landing softly in front of her. She placed her hands on Johanna's arms and held with her with a gentle pressure. "No, no, stay with me."

"I can't, Katniss. The noise. The water...

"Yes you can," Katniss urged, holding her tightly. Johanna began to tremble uncontrollably, tears slipping from her eyes without her permission. Johanna shook her head and Katniss took her chin between her fingers and held her head still. "Look at me." Johanna didn't. She couldn't. She was supposed to be protecting Katniss and she was rendered immobile by a few droplets of water? "Look at me!" Johanna opened her eyes to see Katniss's firm stare. "You are a victor. You can take anything they can throw at you. You're Johanna Mason." Her voice softened. "And you're capable of anything you put your mind to."

They weren't talking about just the water anymore.

She placed her other hand on the side of Johanna's face and held her cheeks in her hands. "You are safe here with me. Do you understand?" Johanna nodded numbly, teeth chattering and body shaking. "I won't let anything, anything, happen to you." Katniss held Johanna in place until she stopped trembling. When she did she stood up in the water, seeing how much of the water had dampened her pants. She held her hands out and pulled Johanna up. "You did really well."

"Yeah, right up until I couldn't stop shaking." Johanna tip-toed out of the tub and grabbed the nearest towel, rather furiously making herself dry again. She pulled on her sleeping uniform, immediately missing the freedom of 7 where she could just sleep in the nude, and trudged out of the bathroom. The lights were off when she got into the compartment and she blindly made her way to her bed.

It creaked under her weight as she got underneath the thin sheet and tried to make herself warm again. She was freezing. Katniss unplugged the drain and let the water out, as well as gather up Buttercup. He skittered across the floor and Johanna felt him make himself home by her feet.
Katniss seemed to move to the middle of the room, then stop. She padded to her own bed and laid down.

Johanna shivered, grasping the sheets tightly with both her hands. She felt like someone turned on a cooling unit and was blasting it all around her body. She didn't realize her teeth chattering was making so much noise until Katniss spoke out into the blackness. "Is that noise you? Are you cold?"

"N-no, I'm f-f-fine." Johanna mentally cursed at herself for stuttering, but she couldn't help it in the cold. "F-fuck." Johanna rolled her eyes at how she sounded. No wonder Katniss probably preferred to be around Peeta. He was warm and not broken by the Capitol. Even in his state of being a walking grenade, he was still probably better equipped to protect Katniss than she was.

Within a few moments she felt Katniss slip in the bed behind her, spooning her and holding her close. "Johanna, you're freezing."

"It's fine. I-I'm fine. I don't want to make you cold." Katniss began rubbing her arms and Johanna had to bit her lip to physically prevent herself from moaning out loud.

"That's not how heat works, brainless," she replied, and Johanna could hear the smile in her voice. "We're keeping each other warm."

"Feels like you keeping me warm. Just like it feels like you protecting me, not the other way around." Katniss tensed behind her and Johanna sighed into her pillow. "Fuckin' protect you unless there's a rain storm. Then bye-bye Katniss, you're on your own. Can't get wet like the dumb cat."

Buttercup hissed in protest, as if he understood the insult. "We protect each other." The soothing way she rubbed Johanna's arms was slowly putting her to sleep. Katniss abandoned her one arm in favor of running her fingers through Johanna's hair. The hand that had been stroking her arm moved farther down her body, tracing the edges of her thighs and her calves which were curled against her. The coldness wasn't an issue any longer. Johanna's eyes fluttered closed as she surrendered to the comforting feeling of the light touches. They stayed that way for a while, with Johanna floating in and out of consciousness. Every time Katniss's fingers brushed against her neck or hip she'd be awakened again by her libido, then soothed to sleep by the fingernails against her scalp. "Feel better?"

Suddenly something as stupid as pride seemed to be pushed far back into the reaches of her mind.

The back-to-front sleeping they had done together so far seemed safe. Johanna didn't want that anymore. She wanted to feel Katniss's heartbeat. She wanted to possess Katniss in the small way that she did. She turned over and buried her face in Katniss's sternum, wrapping her arm around her waist and holding them close. She felt Katniss's heart pound in her chest against her lips, even though the cotton material.

"You don't have any idea," Johanna mumbled, half asleep. The warmth of Katniss's pulse against her and the heat of their bodies touching made her woozy and comfortable. "You don't have any idea how you make me feel."

Johanna's mind began to wander off into her subconscious, finally giving way to the sleep her aching body needed. But she could've sworn, as clear as the night sky that hung thousands of feet above them, that she heard Katniss whisper and place a kiss on her forehead. "Yes, I do."

Johanna was the only one taking the test three days before they were set to leave for the Capitol.
Everyone else had already been tested and filed into their groups. Between sharpshooting lessons with Gale and the water lessons with Katniss, she felt like she actually would pull this off.

She sat with Katniss in the waiting room as they prepared for the Block. She had blazed through the obstacle course, passed the written tactics exam, and the weapons proficiency had been a joke. All that was left was her "weakness" simulation. She was expecting water. She knew it, they knew it. So maybe they'd do something else like jabberjays or fire.

Katniss held her hand tightly as they waited for her name to be called. Her knee bobbed up and down nervously and Johanna unclasped their hands and placed her palm on her knee, steadying it. "You more nervous than me?"

Katniss blushed and nodded. "Probably." She put her hand over Johanna's. "You've been working so hard for this. I don't want you to have to stay back. I want you to be there when I kill Snow."

Johanna grinned widely. "Oh I will be. Even if I have to kill a crew and fly there myself." Her name was called loudly over the speaker in the abandoned room. She stood up, smiling down at Katniss. "All right, Mockingjay, wish me luck."

Katniss stood up slowly, then quickly pulled Johanna into a tight hug. Her fingers rubbed the nape of Johanna's neck and she had to firm her legs to keep herself from swooning. Katniss's lips brushed her ear. "I'm proud of you." Johanna lifted her face from Katniss's embrace and pulled back to look at her. Her gray eyes were stormy, darting down to look at Johanna's mouth with startling speed. The air, which had before seemed thin it its manufactured chilliness, suddenly hung thick around them. Katniss leaned close, so very close that Johanna could feel the heat of her lips. Her head tilted just so that their noses wouldn't bump should they make contact. Her eyes closed.

Nothing. Katniss backed away with one silent step, unable to look Johanna in the eyes. "Good luck," she mumbled, quickly making for the exit. Johanna blinked a few times in rapid succession. Had they almost kissed? Did she imagine that held breath of Katniss's as they got that close? She shook her head to clear her mind of those thoughts. There stood one obstacle between herself and watching Snow perish at the end of Katniss's arrow and she could not think about her lips and her eyes and how fast her heart was beating in anticipation of something she didn't know was even coming.

Her head doctor sessions were going much better, especially since Katniss had begun helping her get over her fear of water. They'd sit in the tub after Johanna's training sessions and she'd let the water fill a little higher each time. Johanna couldn't quite tackle the shower head yet, but the tub water was okay. They'd talk about growing up in their respective districts, talk about what Prim was learning. It was the closest to a real friendship she had ever had.

On her way back from a particularly easy meeting the day before she was leaving for the Capitol, she literally bumped into Peeta. He looked uncharacteristically angry and Johanna swallowed down her immediate defensive reaction. If someone approached her with that face she'd assume they were hiding a weapon. "Got somewhere to be?"

Peeta eyed her up and down. She and Peeta hadn't interacted much since coming out of the Capitol with conflicting stories. It didn't take a man like Beetee to figure out Peeta probably resented her for telling Katniss that she thought he was programmed to kill her. They could have been sharing a compartment, starting the life together that Peeta wanted.

Inside Johanna's gut though, she felt it wasn't what Katniss wanted. Living within that feeling was
a little bit of Johanna's pride.

She chose me.

In a manner of speaking, of course. "You gotta problem, Bread Boy?" Johanna crossed her arms over her chest, raising an eyebrow expectantly. Peeta compressed his lips and shook his head no. Johanna huffed a short laugh and turned away from him, continuing down the hall. "You know what? Yes. Yes I do." Johanna whirled around on her heel and motioned for him to speak with an open palm. "I'm not going to the Capitol anymore. Seems that they only had room for one more person and they chose you." Johanna bit her lip to prevent a smug smile from reaching her lips. "I don't know what you've been saying to her. I don't understand why she doesn't believe me. Most of all, I don't understand why she went to Seven to get you back."

Johanna was both impressed and appalled by his words. "I should've just stayed there with a big target painted on my back, is that right?" Johanna took a step toward Peeta, not close, but the predatory intention was clear. "I saved your life. Yours and your girlfriend's. Do you have a problem with me being here?"


Johanna narrowed her brown eyes at Peeta's blue ones. How, if no one knew she had left, did Nova know to come find her? She had assumed some Capitol spies had seen her training the recruits in 7 and that's how Nova knew. Who would have spread that around? "Plutarch sent them to come get me. Because of Snow eliminating the victors."

"Is that what Katniss told you?" Peeta sounded less than impressed. Johanna nodded her head numbly. She felt like she was high on morphling. "Katniss threw a fit when they said they were doing a propo and they wouldn't let her go. Insisted that you were not safe there alone." Johanna's mouth opened and closed a few times but no response, witty or otherwise, emerged from her mouth. "You didn't know, did you?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't have come back if she hadn't said I was in trouble." Johanna felt the little balloon of pride begin slowly seeping air inside her chest. Katniss had lied to her. Why? Just to have her back here? So she could be a useless cog in this stupid rebellion? "Why do you care anyway? You still think I'm the big bad wolf here, don't you?"

Peeta firmed his stance and nodded his head the affirmative. "I know what I saw, Johanna."

"As do I."

Peeta shook his head. "No, you don't. And I don't trust you in the Capitol with her."

Johanna tilted her head to the side mockingly. Her lower lip protruded in a menacing pout. "Oh no? Afraid I'm going to steal your girl? No, what you're truly afraid of? That she's already mine."

Peeta pursed his lips, looking as if he was trying to hold something back. Words. Words were this boy's weapons. Sure he had a few splatters of blood on his hands, but words were how he fought. "I'm afraid you're going to kill her. But I know how I can stop both those things from happening." Peeta leaned back, never breaking eye contact with Johanna as he shouted. "Hey Haymitch, can I see you a second?"

Haymitch appeared in a doorway, his bedraggled hair hidden beneath a 13 issued beanie cap. He looked at Peeta tiredly. "Can I help you?"
Peeta stood in front of Johanna, sizing up all his height, just a hair taller than Katniss, and smirked. "Nova." He pronounced the name so clearly, with such emphatic dictation, that Johanna was almost amused.

Johanna furrowed her eyebrows in surprise. How did he know her name? Haymitch looked at her with panic in his eyes and rushed forward. He pushed Peeta against the wall roughly. "Are you crazy? What would you do that for? Do you have any idea what you've done?" Peeta had the humility to look down at his feet as Haymitch approached Johanna slowly. "Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be all right?" The way he circled her, like she was a bomb about to explode, made her angry. "What the fuck is going on?" Haymitch suddenly grabbed around her arms and held them behind her back tightly. She struggled against him in rough, sharp movements. "What the fuck are you doing? Let me go!"

"Peeta go get the guards. Go get Boggs. Get somebody." Haymitch's voice was hard and authoritative and most of all, laced with uneasiness. "Johanna, try to stay calm."

"What are you talking about? You're the one that attacked me! Let me go!" Johanna tried to wrench free but Haymitch was pretty strong. His years of drink hadn't rendered him as useless as she thought. He was sort of like Peeta in that way. They possessed a strength that was hidden beneath their frail exteriors. Or maybe being dry in 13 had finally gotten him back in somewhat of a normal human shape.

"That was your trigger word," Haymitch explained as calmly as he could. "Your trigger word was Nova."

Johanna continued to struggle as her mind started to piece that together. Nova? Hadn't she said that? No, she realized. She never called her name in bed. She hadn't even referenced her by name to anyone. Shit. She didn't feel any different, though. No murderous urges. "Just let me fucking go!" she yelled, attracting attention from the people nearby.

Then, she saw her. Katniss came into her view and it was like a thousand ringing alarm bells in her mind. Her mind raced without her. Katniss in the arena, killing Blight. Katniss as a mutt, dripping saliva and blood and tearing at her throat. Kill, the voice said to her. Kill her before she kills you. Johanna began struggling harder against Haymitch. She felt as if nothing in the world would be right, everything would be suspended and wrong, until she killed Katniss.

But her conscience. "Johanna?" Katniss questioned, looking from her to Haymitch. That voice. It grated inside her head and she squeezed her eyes shut. It felt like a million tracker-jacker stings inside her brain. "Haymitch, what happened?"

Haymitch was using all of his strength to hold Johanna back, she could feel it. She could feel the strain of his muscles. He said something. Words. Peeta. Trigger. Katniss's eyes widened in horror and she took a step back. "Let me go, Haymitch!" Johanna began screaming, tearing her body and attempting to break free. Tears began streaming down her face as she caught katniss's eyes. Her feelings were conflicted. "I'm going to rip your throat out!" Johanna called to Katniss. "Let me go!"


"Don't let me go," she pleaded, dropping to her knees. Her body struggled against him in intermittent bursts, like electrical pulses she couldn't control. "Don't let me go. Please don't let me
hurt her. Please." Her body began shaking with hard sobs. Tears streamed down her face and entered her mouth as she continued to beg him to hold her back. She looked up through blurry eyes and saw Gale standing next to Katniss, his hand protectively on her waist. Good, Johanna thought. Protect her. I failed.

**Failure. Mutts. Blood. Kill kill kill.**

From behind her Johanna heard a voice. "Lock her up immediately. Complete isolation."

Murmurs, whispers. "Yes, the vault. Now." Coin. Johanna felt large shackles clap around her wrists and the strong hands of two men on each of her arms. They yanked her to her feet. She saw Katniss go for her and Johanna immediately moved aggressively, but Gale held Katniss back.

Just barely, through the din of her anger and the swirling red vortex in her brain, she realized Katniss was not on the attack. She was screaming "no" over and over again. Why was she screaming no? Who was she screaming at? Johanna sagged her body, feeling weighty and boneless as the guards dragged her down the now very populated hallway.

A syringe appeared near her arm and she finally realized why Katniss was screaming as the needle sunk into her skin and flooded her veins. This was more potent than morphling. One word. She didn't know where she caught it. From Coin? From Haymitch?

**Execution.**

Johanna dreamt entirely in red that night. The intense morphling they gave her did nothing to soften them. Everything felt hot. Her dreams, her brain, her skin, her blood. Everything felt like it was on fire. When she awoke an indeterminate amount of time later, she had to squeeze her eyes to adjust to the lack of light.

Vault was right. The room was concrete on all six sides. No windows. The door was a thick steel that possessed no window to see in or out of. There was nothing on the ground. Not dust, not any dampness, no loose pebbles. Just sleek, cold concrete that seemed endless. Johanna was shackled on both her hands and her feet, reminding her of her time in the Capitol. But this was worse.

This she deserved.

How could she have been so blind? She was a monster. All this time she had been living in the same compartment, sharing meals and laughter, when she was just a name slip-up away from killing the person that she cared for the most. She didn't know when Katniss had taken that title, but she did, and Johanna couldn't stop herself from thinking it.

**There's no one left I love.**

The door slid open and Johanna looked up from the ground to meet the reddened eyes of Katniss. She closed the door quietly behind her. Johanna felt her body pulse with the short circuiting she had experienced in Haymitch's arms.

The whispering voice in her brain was screaming. *Kill her, kill her, kill her.*

She flexed her hands and jerked against her restraints, causing Katniss to pause in her steps. Johanna's jaw tensed and she spoke through gritted teeth. "I know they didn't let you down here." Her voice was hollow. She hadn't heard it since she stopped begging Haymitch to keep her at bay. She must have screamed a lot in the night time. Katniss managed a small smile and shook her head. She took another step tentatively toward Johanna. "Stay away from me."

"I wish I could." The chains on the wall did not allow Johanna to extend forward. Her arms were
kept at her sides, chained to her feet. The chain itself was maybe only a foot or so from the wall. Katniss got close enough to sit directly in front of Johanna, just beyond her reach. "I can't believe he did this to you." Johanna raised her eyebrow, offering just enough sass to make Katniss roll her eyes. "Okay I can. I just-" She swallowed and looked down at the ground between them. "They want to execute you as a traitor to the rebellion."

Johanna sighed and looked away from Katniss to the corner of the room. A small spider had set up a home there but Johanna figured he'd die soon. There was no way any bugs were getting in there. Just her. "They probably should."

"I'm not going to let them. They promised to wait until after this was all over. Coin assured me immunity for the victors."

Johanna coughed out a sharp laugh. "When Coin is President you won't have any power, Katniss. Think about it. Coin isn't going to let you make any decisions after she gets a hold of this country. All the concessions she's made for you? You think she's going to miss an opportunity to publicly execute another traitor? Especially one as famous as me." Johanna smirked. "She might even have you kill me herself, the sick fuck."

A stinging, pounding headache tore through Johanna's brain and she slammed her head back into the wall. Katniss startled a little but didn't move from her kneeling position in front of Johanna. "Looking at you," Johanna said, wincing, "is painful. I want to hurt you. But I can't. I won't."

"I know you won't." Katniss reached forward and cupped Johanna's cheek with her hand. Johanna trembled a little but she held firm. The voice in her head was screaming again. The pad of her thumb crossed over Johanna's lips, as if she was tracing them into her memory. She ran her hand around the back of Johanna's neck and leaned forward, kissing her on the forehead.

She pulled away and stared into Johanna's eyes, and Johanna could see the intense sadness held within those hues. "Kill him. Promise me you'll kill him," Johanna whispered.

"I promise."

"On something you care about."

"I swear it on my life."

"On your family's life."

Katniss nodded. "On my family's life." She sat back on her heels, creating more distance between them. Which was good because the urge to kiss Katniss had been almost stronger than the urge to kill her. "Why do you think I'm going anyway, brainless?"

Johanna finally smiled a little. "I just needed to hear it."

"I also promise to get you out of here. If I'm in the Capitol anyway, you can't kill me, right? There's no use in you being in this dungeon if there's no possible way for you to hurt me. Probably the last use of my Mockingjay card." Katniss stood up, dusting the legs of her pants with a few swipes of her palms.

"Sure you don't want to save it for someone more worthwhile than a dead woman?"

Katniss looked mildly amused. "We made a deal, remember? I protect you, you protect me. Just because you can't hold up your end, doesn't mean I can't hold up mine." She walked backward toward the door. "I'll see you soon."
Johanna nodded, swallowing down the lump in her throat that was battling with the anger in her chest. "Katniss?" Katniss turned from the door and looked at her, eyes conveying the same sadness she had seen when she walked in. "Please don't die."

It was a close to I love you as she was going to get.

Author's Note: Now I made myself sad. Please leave some reviews and let me know what you think!
True to Katniss's word, within about three days Johanna was released back into the 13 population under the guard of just one man instead of two. She shuffled down the hallway, a piece of shiny metal on her wrist. In place of shackles they had used something similar to what she had in the Capitol: a cuff that would electrocute her if she went outside the bounds of 13. It was the best they could do and the compromise Katniss had arranged with Coin. Johanna looked down at it, seeing the shimmering light of the conductive electricity running through the material.

Johanna made her way back to her compartment, opening the door. She was hit with the immediate realization that Katniss was gone. Her bed was made, her drawers all closed, her side of the room completely barren. Johanna closed the guard out of the room and went to Katniss's drawer. Inside were still a few of her things. Her hunting jacket, the parachute with the spile. The pearl was gone. With a frown Johanna realized she had probably taken it with her.

She trudged over to her bed and sat down on the edge. Something glinted in the light under Katniss's bed so she got to her knees and bent down, reaching underneath. With a smile she withdrew a bow and a small quiver. Nobody was allowed to have weapons except for the people training and the guards, but somehow Katniss had snuck her own hunting bow in.

Johanna grinned and shoved it back underneath the bed, safely keeping it away from any prying eyes. In her three days of isolation she had tried to think of ways to block out the murderous thoughts. The voice that whispered kill in her brain was strong, but she could override it after a while. She made a point to make sure she could see Dr. Thorne during Katniss's time in the Capitol. Maybe he'd have some way, like the hypnosis, to circumvent those thoughts.

She got back onto her bed and looked down at her pillow. She got comfortable on the mattress, sliding her arm underneath her head. She felt something metal hit her hand and she withdrew it. A rush of tears came to her eyes as she fingered the light copper pin in her hand. Katniss's mockingjay pin. She grasped it tightly in her palm and laid back down. With her fist close to her chest she drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Soldier York allowed her to continue training, even though there wasn't much for which to train. Each day she'd go outside, rain or shine, and do a few miles of jogging. She'd run through the obstacle course drills and spend the rest of the afternoon practicing shooting with the bow and arrow. Wielding a bow almost felt like holding the archer herself. She'd close her eyes and picture how Katniss looked aiming her bow. Her arm straight out, unwavering in its direction. Her body turned perpendicular her foe. Her other arm at an angle near her face. Her eyes narrowed. Her breathing shallow.

Johanna let the arrow fly and for the first time, it sunk into the bullseye. Katniss would've been proud. She would've wanted to hug Johanna, but she would've pretended like she didn't want Katniss's hug. But the light in her eyes, it would spell how pleased she'd be.

Katniss flashed into her vision, falling to her knees after Johanna sunk the arrow into her chest. Johanna stumbled a few steps backward, gripping the bow in her hand. No, that wasn't right. She didn't want to kill Katniss. She sniffed in a few long, deep breaths and tried to will the images of Katniss dying out of her brain.

This had to stop. Johanna dropped the bow on the ground and stormed off the shooting range and back inside 13. She knew that Dr. Thorne would see her if she just kinda barged in there, so that's exactly what she did. He looked up from his notebook with a smile. "Johanna, how nice to see
"Right. Look doc, they pulled something in the Capitol and now I think I need to kill Katniss. I need you to fix me. Fix this, fix my brain. Do whatever it is they pay you to do down here and fix me." Johanna sat in the chair across from him and crossed her legs.

He cleared his throat and took off his glasses, placing them in front of him. "We don't know what they did. We don't know if the used hijacking or hypnosis? If it's hypnosis then perhaps I could help. If it's hijacking then I don't know if I can help you."

"What the hell is hijacking?" Johanna had never heard that word before.

"It's a method of torture that's highly experimental. They use tracker jacker venom and manipulate existing memories. I don't know if that's how they did this for you. I think that perhaps once President Coin establishes power in the Capitol, she can contact the doctors there and they can shed some light on the process."

Johanna almost laughed in his face. The thought that Coin would spare anyone, even a doctor, who had aided the Capitol was laughable. Clearly he thought Coin was on the up and up. Johanna knew she wasn't. Johanna knew the second this rebellion was over, the victors would be the first to be gone. Immunity or not, it was only relevant so long as Katniss was the Mockingjay. No Mockingjay, no immunity. Coin and Snow were cut from the same cloth, but with Snow, you knew which side he was on.

Johanna stood up abruptly, knocking her chair over backward. "So you're saying I just fucking dawdle around this rabbit warren until Katniss is dead? And when she survives this rebellion, which she will, I'll never be able to see her again!" Her angry voice broke mid sentence and she slammed her palms against the desk, startling the older man. "Please. I don't want to hurt her."

Dr. Thorne pushed his glasses up his nose, much in the same way Beetee did in the arena. "Do you love her, Johanna?"

No I want to rip her throat out and watch her bleed to death. Johanna shook her head fiercely, digging her nails into the wood of his desk. Her wild eyes focused once more and she dropped her gaze to the floor. "If I could love anyone," Johanna began slowly, "it would be her."

Dr. Thorne smiled, getting up from his chair. In all the times Johanna had seen him he rarely moved from that seat. If she was laying down sometimes he would walk around the room, but she didn't often want to lay prone in the long chaise. It felt weird. He placed his hand on her shoulder and smiled kindly, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "All this time and now she's finally said it. Irony." He shook his head regretfully and patted her back. "I'm gonna see what I can do. But I have to warn you, this won't be easy."

Johanna offered him a small smile. "Nothing worth it ever is."

Johanna sat in one of the high-backed leather chairs in the control room, watching the recent footage shot by Cressida. Everything looked like it was going according to plan. Johanna had to clench her fists together as she saw them do a shot of Peeta and Katniss back to back taking down targets. She couldn't attribute the emotion to jealousy or rage but either way she was unhappy. They had been gone almost two weeks and evidently were very close to the Capitol. Much closer than Plutarch and Coin had anticipated.

Once the meeting was over and the room cleared, the squad safely tucked into an abandoned
apartment for the night, Haymitch walked over and sat next to Johanna. "How you holdin' up?"

Johanna raised an eyebrow and gave him an unimpressed stare. "How do you think?"

Haymitch smiled and rubbed his stubble, scratching his cheek. He placed his hand on Johanna's back - the second time in two weeks someone had done that - and gave her a sympathetic smile. If anyone in 13 cared about Katniss as much as Johanna that wasn't an Everdeen, it was Haymitch. "You know, I had a hard time believing all this." Johanna shot him a droll look. "Not the torture. I mean, you and Katniss."

Johanna knitted her brows. "Me and Katniss?"

Haymitch smirked. "Look I might be a drunk - or was a drunk - but I'm not stupid. Neither if you open up to anybody and yet somehow, you opened up to each other." Haymitch sighed. "She trusts you. She doesn't trust anyone. Not even me, really." Johanna rolled her eyes. "When Snow put that trigger in you, he thought you would be the best weapon. You already 'hated' Katniss, so it would be easy. There'd be no conflict." Haymitch's thin lips spread into a smile. "But what he didn't know was how determined Katniss is. When she sets her mind on something, she gets it. She got inside you more than any torture he ever could've dreamt up."

"What's your point, Haymitch? You're not my mentor and I don't need or want to sit here."

Haymitch chuckled and took the wireless earpiece from his ear and set it on the table. He took the bottom of Katniss's mockingjay pin that Johanna had fixed to her shirt and smiled. "I thought it was gonna be the boy." He walked out the door, pausing as he got to the door handle. "I'll need that back when you're done."

Johanna looked down at the ear piece, then back toward Haymitch who had already slipped out the door. She hooked the small plastic piece into her ear and was greeted by a hum of static in her ear. She pressed her finger against the piece and felt heat beneath her touch. "Haymitch? Katniss. Her voice rang clearly through the ear piece and Johanna had to take a second to process it. "Haymitch what's going on?"

"It's not Haymitch, brainless," Johanna replied, and she heard the small gasp on the other line. She could hear Katniss moving and opening and closing a door.

"Johanna?"

"No it's Prim."

Katniss let out a very soft chuckle. "It's really nice to hear your voice."

"I'd say the same but I've had to watch your little rebellion propos all day." Katniss chuckled again and Johanna smiled, leaning back in her chair.

"I miss you."

"Do you? Looks like you've got enough company."

Katniss sighed and Johanna imagined her rubbing her forehead like she did when Johanna was being particularly stubborn. "Johanna..." Johanna knew. Even though her brain wanted her to kill, murder, slit her throat, she knew this was the same girl who steadied her in the bathtub. The same girl who held her in the nights when she screamed because of the nightmares. The same girl who had, time after time, put her life on the line for Johanna.

*You protect me, I protect you.*
"I miss you too, brainless." Johanna thought of all the stupid, sentimental shit she could say. How sleeping, eating, breathing, bathing... everything was harder without Katniss there. She couldn't pinpoint the moment that Katniss became all of those things to Johanna, but she was. There was no going back. "Look, I should go. Haymitch will get hanged right after me for giving up his little toy from Coin."

"You're probably right. Okay. Well, I'll see you soon, Johanna. You be safe."

"You too." Johanna sighed, hearing the steady breathing of Katniss on the other end. "Hey Katniss?"

"Yeah?"

"I-" Love you. "Wish I was there with you"

"Me too."

After she told Snow she wasn't going to be his whore anymore, Johanna hadn't gone directly back to 7. She had stayed in the Capitol for less than a day, admiring the shops and being both disgusted and impressed at the candy-colored decor and stone white buildings. It felt like gloating that she could wander the Capitol unharmed, unrestrained by the yoke of President Snow. When she arrived back in 7, there was no one at the train to greet her. If her parents were working, someone would have gotten a car so she could get home.

But no one was there.

That should've been her first clue that something was amiss. Instead she found someone to give her a ride and leisurely drove back to her home in the Victor's Village. The man, someone who looked familiar but Johanna didn't know, kept stealing glances at her in his rearview mirror. Johanna was used to the stares - the price of celebrity - but the way he kept shifting his gaze was not shy.

It was sympathetic.

The smell of burning ash was prevalent for blocks before she got home. By the time the car had rolled up near her house, she knew. She could feel it in the very pit of her stomach. Blight was standing on her front porch, waiting for her. She barely saw him since they both usually just drank a lot. But he looked stone sober. Her legs felt like jelly, moving her in slow motion toward her house. The black smoke still rising high into the air.

She couldn't protect them. The whole reason she won her games, to go home to her family, gone. She couldn't even cry. Her eyes felt as dry as the smoke-filled air. It was as if every vein, muscle, organ in her body had been sucked out and she was a husk, floating around. She wasn't angry. She wasn't sad. She was nothingness. Blight was speaking but his voice was so different. It was warm and almost brotherly, whereas normally it was hollow and drunken.

People change their voices when they deliver bad news, as if the softness of their voice will lay the blow more gently.

When she walked into the meeting room in 13, she should have had the same sense of foreboding. Haymitch, Coin, Beetee, and even Dr. Thorne were sitting around a table in various stages of duress. Her mind was so discombobulated from speaking to Katniss the night before that she couldn't appraise the situation like she had been trained to do.
No amount of preparation would have been enough, anyway.

"Johanna, please sit down." Coin's voice lacked the usual authoritative ice that she normally had. Johanna shook her head. She didn't want to sit. "Suit yourself. We've called you here because..." She looked to Haymitch, whose eyes were reddened. In any other district it would've been the mark that he'd been drinking.

"Johanna, Katniss didn't make it."

None of those words made sense. Not in that order, not coming from Haymitch's mouth. She might have asked him to repeat himself but she couldn't speak. She couldn't do anything. She just stood.

"We're so sorry to have to deliver this news to you. We know that despite the circumstances, you and Miss Everdeen had become quite close. Her death is a tragic blow to this entire country, not just the rebellion."

The gears in Johanna's mind clicked. Katniss was dead. All the hot, wet, red rage that had been boiling in her veins seemed to blow away like steam. The constant near-headache in her temple vanished. Very calmly Johanna took a few steps forward. "Now, the rebellion is not over. We still have a few more days of fighting left. I'll be sending a group of medics in -" Johanna lifted one of the empty chairs and tossed it across the room, shattering a large monitor. Bits of glass and electronics fell to the floor.

Haymitch got up from his seat and went over toward Johanna, who rushed at him. "You were supposed to help protect her! What good are you?" Johanna sobbed and pounded against his chest, clawing at his gray uniform. "We were supposed to protect her. She was supposed to be the only one to live."

"I know," Haymitch said, cradling Johanna's head in his arms. Her body sagged against him and he slowly got to his knees, the cracking of his unused bones the only sound other than Johanna's hard sobs. "I'm so sorry Johanna."

"Nobodies sorries have ever brought back the people I love," Johanna mumbled into his shirt. Her cries became harder, loud, harsh breaths being sucked in like a drowning sailor in the midst of a raging ocean. "Fuck!" she screamed. She couldn't control her breathing. She couldn't control anything. She got to her feet and shook a finger toward Coin. "You did this. You fucking bitch. You made her go to the Capitol. You knew the risk! Why? Did you really hate her that much? Because she didn't care if you were president or not?" Haymitch tried to step in between them but Johanna stepped around him. "I will fucking kill you for this!" Haymitch shoved Johanna out of the room, slamming the door behind him. She leveled her wild, unfocused eyes at him. "Oh I won't kill her here. No, I will wait until she thinks she's safe. And then I will strangle her with my own fucking hands."

"Johanna you're not helping. You killing President Coin is not going to bring Katniss back."

"I kill Snow."

"What?"

Johanna grabbed a handful of his shirt. "I. Kill. Snow. You go tell her. I don't care about the immunity. Katniss is dead and I want to be the one to send that motherfucker into his grave. If Coin wants me dead after, so be it. I have nothing left to live for anyway." Johanna whirled away from the blond man and went down the hallway, wiping at her face fiercely. No more tears. Tears can't resurrect the dead; if they could she'd be at home with her parents and sister.
She got to her compartment, having steadied her breathing and regained her composure. She
opened Katniss's drawer and tears flooded her eyes as the familiar smell of leather invaded her
nostrils. She took out the hunting jacket, rubbing the material between her fingers. Something like
this, so soft and durable, probably had cost Mr. Everdeen a fortune when he was a teenager.

Johanna slipped her arms inside the jacket, pulling it around her body. She crossed the room to
Katniss's side and laid down gently on the mattress. Her face hit the pillow and she breathed in
deeply. Katniss. The scent of her shampoo and the earthy scent of the outdoors. Johanna let the
tears come out now, dampening the pillow beneath her face.

She was gone. The fire within her had been extinguished in one fell swoop, like pinching the end
of a candle. She was gone.

Prim looked pretty worse for the wear as they boarded the hovercraft for the Capitol. Johanna had
chosen her seat next to her, feeling as if there was only one person who perhaps understood her
grief. Johanna was clad in Katniss's father's hunting jacket, Katniss's bow over her shoulder as
well as her small quiver. A long way's away from the militarized bow Gale had or the
personalized one Katniss had, but it would do. If not, she also had a weapon Beetee had made for
her which looked like a sniper rifle, but altered somehow. ("You'll know how to use it.") And of
course, a small hatchet tucked into her belt.

This is what she was now: archer, gunman, axeman. 12, 13, 7.

Johanna sat quietly, staring blankly at the wall across from her. She felt a tug on her sleeve and
looked over to see Prim looking up at her. There was no trace of Katniss in her sky blue eyes,
corn silk hair or pale complexion. But somehow, deep inside those inquisitive eyes, lay the same
strength. "Is that her jacket? My dad's jacket?"

Johanna lifted up her arm and nodded. "Yeah. Sorry. I'm sure you or your mom probably wants it.
You can have it once this is all over." I'll probably be dead anyway. But she didn't say that, this
kid had enough death for several lifetimes.

Prim shook her head. "No, you keep it. I think... I think she would want you to have it." The tiny
hand that was on her sleeve slowly dragged down to her hand, and Prim clasped them together.
Johanna saw the small glimpse of her arena token on her wrist. Arena token. Mockingjay. She
was full of symbols of rebellion. Of course, Prim. Prim was the mockingjay, too. Something the
Capitol did not want to exist: a person with an infinite capacity for hope. "Do you, did you, love
her?"

Johanna looked down at her feet. What use was there in pretending anymore? There was no one
to hide from. "Yeah I do." Johanna couldn't use the past tense.

Prim managed a small smile and grasped her fingers even tighter. "She cared a lot about you. She
talked about you a lot. How well you were doing with your water therapy, how good you were
becoming with the rifles. She was really proud of you."

Johanna swallowed down the lump in her throat but it did nothing to mask the glossiness of her
eyes. "Thanks kid."

"I thought she was going to marry Peeta. I mean, me and my mom knew she wasn't married yet
really, or pregnant, but that's what I thought." Johanna tensed a little. Prim sensed this, the same
way Katniss always sensed her and squeezed her hand. "But after he triggered you? I don't think
I'd ever seen her so angry before. Not even when they announced the Quell. They had to pull her
off him and give her morphling to get her to calm down. Made her sleep in our compartment so
me and Mom could watch her."

You protect me, I'll protect you. Deal?

Another broken promise. Katniss would show up in her dreams, dressed like she was going hunting, like everything was normal. Johanna would rush to see her, overjoyed that she was alive, but Katniss would evaporate in front of her just before they could touch. Just before she could say I love you. In the three nights since hearing the news, each night's dream was the same.

Katniss had promised twice to make Snow pay for his crimes. Once in the training center during the interviews. "Snow made me wear it." "Make him pay for it." In that moment Johanna had finally seen a small glimpse of the real Katniss Everdeen. Not the pawn in the games, but the glittering darling of the Capitol. The scared little girl who was not married to her prince or excited about her celebrity.

Swear on your family's life.

They had both broken promises. But like the phoenix her father had described, Johanna refused to be buried in the ashes of her grief. No. Killing Snow would drive her anger. She would rise from the ashes of all the people she had killed, inadvertently or not, and kill the man who had set the flames.

They had made the decision not to tell anyone, even with the rebellion nearly a success, that Katniss had died. The Squad was holed away in some clothing shop, awaiting the news of the end of the fighting. Johanna continued with the medics, clad in their white uniforms, mostly because they were the only way to get to the mansion.

And also because protecting Prim had now become her mission. If Katniss were there, that's what she would do. Protect Prim. That's what she'd been doing since the day she volunteered. Even earlier, since the day her father died. But then no one was protecting Katniss. Johanna had failed in her attempt. So she followed Prim and the others through the chaotic streets of the Capitol. The last groans of the resistance were around them, Peacekeepers with eyes out for rebels but mostly trying not to get trampled by desperate Capitol citizens.

Just outside the mansion there was a large flock of Capitol citizens begging to be allowed inside. Peacekeepers kept their guns trained on the crowd, intent on killing anyone who dared enter the mausoleum of Snow's. Like Katniss, Johanna watched as Prim sensed the most helpless people of all: the Capitol children. The Everdeen women would never, ever rest until they'd helped every broken soul. Because it's what Katniss would want, Johanna followed Prim near the area where the children were.

A hovercraft appeared overhead and the children shouted for joy. No, Johanna thought. They have watched the games and think the parachute brings food, gifts, maybe candy. But there is nothing good to be gleaned from free gifts from the enemy. Johanna gripped Prim's arm. "Wait."

"Those kids need our help! They could be hurt, Johanna." No. Everything is an arena. This is still the games. Prim is Rue and Johanna is Katniss and without thinking, Johanna pulled the bow from around her and steadied it in her grasp.

Johanna shook her head. "No, those parachutes. Why are they dropping gifts? Why are they -" Her question is answered by the large explosion of about twenty parachutes going off in the hands of the children. Blood splattered everywhere, the air filled with the high-pitched screams of wounded kids. Crying, wailing, useless shouts for their parents.
Prim jerked forward but Johanna held to her tightly. "Johanna, let me go! I have to help them!"

"No!" Johanna barked, using her superior strength to hold Prim still. "Those parachutes on the ground, they're still full. It's a trap. This whole fucking place is a trap." Prim still jerked on Johanna's grip but with less resistance. Other medics filed in, but they were not under the Mockingjay protection. They are not the hope of Panem. They are not the last trace of Katniss that Johanna had.

The second round of parachutes exploded, this time sending fireballs up into the air, over the barricade of the City Circle. Johanna gathered up Prim in her arms, facing her away from the downpour of fireballs. The heat seared their skin but they were far enough away to escape the majority of the damage. In the screams of the fallen Capitol children and selfless medics, Johanna heard the first, really clear call of freedom.

There would be no more hunger games now. No more Snow. No more Us Vs. The Capitol. Katniss should've seen this.

The days between the trial of Snow and the execution were short. Johanna spent them curled in a ledge beneath a window, staring out into the beautiful expanse of the mansion's yard. Sometimes special clients of Snow's would insist on meeting in one of his bedrooms. Usually prominent political members in the Capitol who wanted everyone to know for what they paid. Johanna would sit on a ledge, much like the one she was on now, and wait for them to arrive.

The remainder of Katniss's prep team had come in, styling Johanna's hair and buffing her skin. They had tried to make her wear the Mockingjay suit but she had refused. Seeing it had nearly brought her to the brink of insanity. Instead she opted for jeans, a pair of hunting boots, a shirt and Katniss's father's jacket. She would not represent the Mockingjay Cinna had developed, or the one Coin used for her rebellion. She would be the girl who traversed the woods and took care of her sister. The girl who sat by her side, stroking her hair as she tried to get over her fear of water.

The quiet, witty, somewhat scared girl that Johanna had come to admire. The one she missed with every beat of her heart.

On the day before they were set to execute, Johanna went down the hospital to visit Finnick. Evidently he had nearly gotten his head torn off by a mutt in the sewers and was still in recovery. Peeta was somewhere down there too, recovering from his burn injuries from having been too close to the City Circle. Johanna didn't visit him.

Something about Finnick that no matter what the situation, he always managed to look better than everyone else. Even now, with the big gash across his neck and the scars on his cheeks, he still struck a handsome face. Johanna entered the room quietly, sitting in the chair next to his bed. Like a true victor, he opened one eye as he heard the noise. He even managed a smile.

"Johanna," he whispered. He pointed to a screen that began to illuminate with words. Can't talk.

"That's for the best, I was tired of hearing you anyway." Finnick chuckled and Johanna placed her hand on his arm. "Did you see what happened with the parachutes?" Finnick nodded. "It aired live?"

Finnick nodded again. All over the TV. Saw those kids. Boom.

Johanna looked down, then scooted the chair closer to Finnick. "Without Katniss, you're the only person I trust. I need to ask you a question and I need you to answer me honestly." Finnick's face
turned into a frown and he nodded again. "Do you think that was Coin?"

*Why Coin? Why not Snow?*

"Why would Snow kill Capitol kids?"

*Why would Coin?*

"To prove a point. To eliminate anyone who might still be with Snow. The hovercraft had a Capitol logo but... wouldn't Snow have used a hovercraft to go into hiding? Why kill a bunch of kids? And to air it? Doesn't that reek of fucking Plutarch?"

Finnick blinked hard a few times. It was evident on his face that this was not the first time he had thought it. They were both victors, they had been in the arena and seen the parachutes. They were also soldiers. They knew the price of warfare and the extent people were willing to go for power.

*What do we do?*

Johanna gave a glance to the door where a nurse was standing talking to a doctor. "Nothing," she said quickly with a smile. "You just get better. I hear you're going to be a dad."

Finnick smiled a real, wide, genuine smile that nearly broke his face. Johanna ran her fingers through his soft, sandy hair affectionately. Hearing of Annie's pregnancy had been one of the only bright spots of the last few days. Though really, even the smallest match burns brightly in complete darkness.

---

They held a vote on a hunger games using only Capitol children. Enobaria, Peeta, Beetee, Haymitch and Annie. The only living victors. Katniss had been right all along, even if her motivations were somewhat ulterior. They had purged all the remaining victors in the districts, young and old. Only those under Coin's protection had survived. Except Katniss.

Her absence hung heavy in the room. But Johanna knew how she would vote. She would have taken one look at those kids going up in flames, those medics that could have been her sister, and she would vote no. Screw the Capitol, usig the kids one last time. Annie, Finnick (via television monitor) and Peeta voted no. Beetee, Enobaria and Haymitch voted yes. Johanna looked from Peeta, then to Coin.

The games never end, do they? "I vote yes. For Katniss."

After the vote Johanna was whisked away to get ready for the execution. She didn't know what would become of her after this. Probably death but that would be okay. At least death would be a release from grief and heartbreak.

Johanna strapped the rifle to her back and slung the bow and quiver over her shoulder. She gave herself a look in the mirror. It all smacked so blatantly of Katniss. The tiny braid they had put in her hair, the mockingjay pin, the jacket, the bow. The only thing that represented Johanna herself was the axe she had tucked in her belt. Only because without it, she felt unprotected.

Old habits die hard.

The crowd was wild as Johanna stepped out into the City Circle. There was momentary confusion as to why Katniss was not present, but it didn't matter. Johanna looked up to see the cameras having focused on the mockingjay pin. The crowd roared louder.

Johanna stepped out slowly into the circle, facing just a few yards away from Snow. He looked
pretty bad - puffy lips, green skin, blood coughed up onto the ground at his knees. Johanna took out an arrow and loaded it onto the bow.

She aimed it at the rose in his lapel. Then, she placed the bow and arrow on the ground. Her eyes flicked up to Coin, then back down to Snow. "I made a few promises. So did Katniss. I'm here to uphold them both." Johanna took her rifle from her back and aimed down the sights. She pulled a small lever a few inches back, clicking it into place. She steadied her finger on the trigger.

With one shot, both presidents of Panem fell to the ground dead.

The rest of that day was a blur. The crowd shouting, people pushing, guards grabbing her. The only thing she had done was pick up Katniss's bow and quiver and clutch it to her chest. Everything else just seemed to happen around her. Which was fine. Within a few days she'd be dead too, either at her own hand or the Capitol's. They had done her the service of keeping her in a bedroom, complete with all of her things. The hunting jacket was over a chair, the bow and quiver on a desk. Her mockingjay pin was fixed to her shirt, her token still around her wrist. Whole but empty.

Katniss called to her again in her dreams, but again she would disappear. Johanna would apologize for not protecting her, but just as Katniss would lay a conciliatory hand on her cheek, she would vanish again.

So when Katniss appeared in her doorway again one night, Johanna was unmoved. "No more," she groaned at the apparition. "You're not here. You're dead."

"Do I look dead, brainless?" Katniss asked, placing her hands on her hips. Johanna sat up in her bed, rubbing her eyes.

"You never look dead. You always look beautiful. And then I fucking go to touch you and you disappear. So let's just skip it tonight, yeah? Let's just get some sleep. I'm gonna be dead in a few days anyway." Johanna glared at the ghost. She hated this dream.

Katniss cocked her head to the side. "You really don't think it's me, do you? Come here." Johanna wanted to stay in bed, but she thought perhaps if she entertained this dream, she would finally sleep. Even the mutt nightmares were better than this. "In your dreams, I disappear?"

"Yeah brainless, when we touch."

Katniss held up her hand at her side and nodded her head toward it. "Go ahead. Let's see if I disappear again." Johanna rolled her eyes but held up her hand. Just as their hands touched, she imagined seeing Katniss disappear. But she didn't. She felt warmth. Her eyes shot open. "Still here."

"But." Johanna nearly threw up. "How is this real? How are you real?" Johanna pulled her hand away from Katniss and ran her fingers through her hair. "Wait, you know what? I don't care." Johanna took Katniss's face in her hands and brought their lips together in a desperate kiss. If this was real, then there was not a moment to waste. Even if she woke up from this dream, it would at least be a good one.

She broke away for only a second to catch her breath. Katniss spun her around and slammed her against the door, placing her palm behind Johanna's head to cushion the blow, the other hand wrapped around her waist. Johanna let out a quiet gasp that Katniss used as an opportunity to deepen the kiss, sweeping her tongue into Johanna's mouth with purpose.
Johanna was certain that this is what going crazy felt like. One moment despair, the next, ecstasy. Feeling Katniss's body pushing against her, hearing her quite sighs into the kiss, smelling her scent... To Johanna's surprise, kissing Katniss felt a lot like fighting with Katniss. Dueling for dominance, teasing and pushing until the other one broke. Her hands roamed all over the parts of Katniss she had been aching to touch. Her hips, her stomach, her arms, her breasts. Every covered, but still amazing inch. Each time she touched something new she was rewarded with a soft moan that sounded like absolute heaven.

She used her slight height disadvantage to trace kisses down the jugular vein of the brunette, causing Katniss to tip her head back and allow her access to the entire hollow of her throat. Johanna smiled into her skin, lacing kisses and nuzzling her nose across her throat, licking and kissing her way from ear to ear. "Oh, Johanna," Katniss moaned, snatching a fistful of Johanna's hair to pull her back up to her mouth.

Johanna broke first, pulling away and panting breathlessly. Her hands rested on the sides of Katniss's neck, staring into her gray, unwavering eyes. She swallows the lump in her throat. "I missed you," Johanna confessed breathily. She couldn't express in any words just how much. The way lungs miss oxygen when submerged underwater. "I didn't protect you."

Katniss smiled sadly and kissed Johanna on the lips once more. "Yes, you did. You kept Prim safe. I had to stay in hiding because Haymitch thought that if you believed I was dead, it would break your trigger." Her mouth twitched. "It worked."

"But you didn't get to kill Snow."

Katniss sighed, running her fingers through Johanna's hair. "It didn't matter. Coin told me the cost. It was a sacrifice I was willing to make. For you You came back to me."

Johanna tried to use insults on the tears in her eyes to prevent them from falling. Stupid, useless tears that never served any purpose. "You shouldn't have lied to me. All of them. Everyone lied to me."

Katniss's happy gaze turned doubtful. "To help you."

Johanna moved out of her grasp, feeling particularly sober all of a sudden. "I thought you were dead!" She angrily pointed her finger at Katniss. "I thought you were fucking dead. Do you know - do you have any idea what that felt like? For days there was nothingness. Just...emptiness. Gnawing at me. Consuming me." Johanna threw her hands in the air. "It was like losing my family all over again! It was so fucking painful Katniss!"

"Johanna, calm down. I'm alive."

"And that just makes everything okay? No. No you don't get to just walk in here and - and be real and kiss me like that and just-" Johanna put her fingers on either side of her nose, inhaling a deep breath. "I think you need to go. I need -- I need to be alone."

"Please don't be like this," Katniss begged, her gray eyes shimmering. "It killed me to have to do this to you. But I couldn't bear thinking that you'd be like that forever."

"Well I didn't get to make a fucking choice, did I?" Johanna interrupted. Everyone had played her for a fool. Even Prim. Johanna felt like the biggest idiot in Panem. "Just get out. Now."

Katniss shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry that you were hurt, Jo, but I'm not sorry about lying to you. Winning this rebellion wasn't worth it to me if I couldn't - if I couldn't ever see you again."

Johanna looked away from the younger victor and Katniss took that time to give her one last,
despondent stare before leaving the room

Is this was protection was? Lying? Keeping each other in the dark for the greater good? Johanna got into the bed, curling underneath the blankets and tucking them under her chin. Katniss was alive. She was alive and they had kissed.

She was alive but she was a liar. It was like having her leg amputated, and then a few days later finding out that they're just going to stitch it back on. Things don't just come together again because you want them to.

She felt angry. She felt betrayed. But deep beneath those layers of hostility, Johanna buried a piece of happiness in there, like a pearl dropped from an oyster into several feet of sand.

She was alive.
The mansion was bigger than Johanna remembered. Before they started keeping a guard at her door (after she wasn't there when Paylor came to see her, oops) she wandered the halls, finding rooms she had never seen. And rooms she hadn. She kept those doors closed.

One room she remembered having sat at the large bay window, smoking a fat cigar that they had left in the room for the client. He was an older gentleman - Johanna had seen him with his smokin' hot wife and three young kids at some Capitol event before he elicited her services - with a belly full of alcohol and a tiny dick. His eyebrows were the same bushy salt-and-pepper color of his mustache; definitely old enough to be her grandfather. He had smoked a cigar the whole time Johanna had been there, riding him and smelling the musty odor in her nostrils as he would pant and sweat beneath her, though he was putting forth no effort. He wanted to be choked. Johanna never understood it but she was always more than happy to oblige. Staring into his fat face, watching his eyes bulge as she fucked him nearly to death gave her a satisfaction the sex never would. Knowing that she held the power over his life or death within her hands was far more euphoric than some passing orgasm.

He cried a little when they were done. Johanna wasn't sure if it was a morally based cry or one of those weird post-coital emotional cries but she didn't care. The tears fell into his mustache and soaked it and Johanna raised a nostril in disgust. What a pathetic little prig.

She decided he didn't deserve the cigars that Snow had left for him in the white box. Not with his subpar performance. She had washed up in another room, giving him time to clean himself up and get redressed. Johanna never redressed. She didn't want them to think this was some cut and dry transaction. Her naked body they had just used would still exist in all its glory when they left. When she returned, he was sitting on the bed, tying his shoelace. She sat on the big bay window, looking out into the courtyard below. Snow's granddaughter was there that day, frolicking in the gardens. Johanna lit the cigar, rolling it around in her mouth and letting the smoke fill her throat before expelling it upward.

"Aren't those for me?" he asked, motioning to the white box as he straightened his bow tie.

Johanna laughed, crossing the room in her nudeness, watching the redness creep up on his cheeks. Yes, this was embarrassing. Not the fact that he had just come inside her, no. Her nudity. Men were such idiots. She rolled her eyes and patted him on the chest. "I think the cigars might be a little much for a prissy little lady like you."

He huffed indignantly and Johanna merely raised her hand and wiped a tear off his face. "You're lucky I don't report you to Snow." She blew smoke directly in his face and turned around, strutting back to the window and curling her body toward herself. He left and slammed the door, leaving Johanna alone in the room. She looked down in the grass, watching the blonde little girl play hide and seek with one of the staff. She lightly chewed on the edge of the cigar as the tears she had been holding in began to fall with more frequency.

Real lucky.

Back in her current time she was sitting on her bed, awaiting her trial. Haymitch had been pretty clear that since she was considered of sound mind she would be tried for Coin's death. They had tried to bargain with Paylor and Plutarch, stating Coin's agreement to immunity for the victors, but it was considered null after Johanna's rogue actions.

It had been three days since Katniss's visit that night and she hadn't returned since. More than
likely they were keeping them apart since Katniss would be used as a witness. No amount of
testimony was going to help. She had directly threatened Coin's life in front of people. She was
going to be sentenced to death. A death she had been expecting since the day she was reaped,
though that felt like another lifetime. That Johanna had died, she figured, but this one would be
permanent. She wouldn't be reborn again. Not this time. She wasn't that lucky.

Haymitch was the only person allowed to talk to her before the trial. Finnick, Katniss, Beetee,
Gale, Peeta, Boggs, Cressida, Dr. Thorne, Plutarch, Nova and Soldier York had all been
summoned to the Capitol over the last three days to be used as witnesses. Johanna wasn't allowed
to watch or see them before or after. Instead they locked her up in a comfortable cell, awaiting her
chance to defend herself. But she wasn't planning on defending herself.

"Okay, Miss Mason, it's time." The guard at her door unlocked the gate and led her out into the
hallway beneath the courthouse. Her feet and hands were shackled - what else was new? - and she
was wearing some dreadful uniform they had given her. A tight white prison uniform definitely
leftover from Snow's day. The blankness of it had his special touch.

She was brought out into the courtroom, forced to sit behind the witness stand with an armed
guard stood next to her. There were so many people in attendance. The room was filled with both
regular and Capitol citizens, rebels and victors. Johanna could even see people using ladders
outside the windows to get a peek inside at her. Would she ever stop being watched? She caught
Katniss's eye and felt the tumult of emotions run through her. She wanted to hold her and stop her
from the crying she was doing. She also wanted to slap her in the face for pretending to be dead.
That was always the struggle with her feelings to Katniss. Kiss her or kill her, there was no in
between.

The lawyer, a man Johanna had never seen, approached the bench. He had been sitting with
Haymitch so Johanna assumed he was her lawyer. There wasn't an opposing lawyer anyway. She
guessed it was her against the country anyhow. "State your name for the record, please."

Johanna raised her eyebrow and sighed. "Johanna Mason."

"Not Soldier Johanna Mason?"

Johanna looked confused. "Soldier? No. We can use Presidential Assassin Johanna Mason, if
you'd prefer." Johanna grinned and looked up at the judge, a burly man who was not amused. "I
like just Johanna."

"Okay then, Johanna. We have heard testimony from all of your colleagues and fellow victors.
From your doctor and your squad leader. They have all offered a little bit of insight into who you
are and why you might've done what you did. But since you told no one that you were going to
assassinate the new leader, President Coin, you will have to state for the court why."

Johanna shrugged. "Because I didn't like her." Haymitch hid a chuckle in a handkerchief and
wiped his mouth.

"Why didn't you like her, Johanna?"

Johanna sighed. She rubbed her face, making her shackles jangle on her wrists. "She was another
fucking Snow. All about power, about keeping the power all for herself."

The lawyer kept pacing in front of Johanna, his hands behind his back. "And what did you care?
She seemed benevolent. You took it upon yourself to kill her. It looked a lot like exacting
revenge." Johanna didn't say anything. She could feel the weight of Katniss's eyes on her but she
refused to look in that direction. "Johanna, tell everyone what happened in the weeks before you assassinated the president."

Johanna leaned back in her chair. "You mean my killer robot routine?"

The lawyer chuckled and nodded. "Yes. Start there. Mr. Mellark and Miss Everdeen have told us a lot about what happened that day, but I'd like to hear it straight from the source."

Johanna sucked in a deep breath. She wondered what they had said. "When I was in the Capitol they did something to me. Aside from the really great soaking and electrocution. They put something inside me that if I heard a word, one specific word, I'd go crazy and try to kill Katniss."

"Why do you think they did that? Why you?"

Johanna shrugged her shoulders and looked away. "I don't know. Haymitch said he thought maybe it was because Katniss and I didn't get along so good in the Quell. That I'd be easy to persuade."

The lawyer stopped in his steps, giving a look toward Haymitch, then Johanna. "Is that true? Did you have some animosity toward Miss Everdeen?"

Johanna laughed softly. "At first I guess. She's a little hard to swallow." The man nodded for her to continue and she rolled her eyes in annoyance. "I mean, yeah, at first I didn't really like her. But I don't have to like her to protect her. What else was I gonna do? Sit on the beach and braid her hair?" The audience laughed a little and Johanna smirked. "She was a little busy locking lips with Bread Boy over there to notice anyway."

The tension in the room became a little uncomfortable but the lawyer didn't seem to mind. "Did that bother you? How close she and Mr. Mellark were?"

"Maybe a little. Just seemed saccharine. The rest of us fighting for our lives, losing our loved ones and they go and 'get married' and 'pregnant' and all." Johanna's eyes moved down to her hands. "The night of the interview when she came out in her mockingjay dress, I realized she was not that girl. But it took me a while to get to know that girl."

"When did you get to know her? In Thirteen?"

"Yes."

"How so? Mr. Mellark stated he told everyone, including Katniss, about your supposed hijacking."

Johanna looked at Katniss from across the room. "She trusted me." Her eyes flicked back to the lawyer. "I guess she shouldn't have."

"Why not?"

"Look around, fool. I killed not only the last President, Snow, but -" "And why did you kill President Snow, Johanna? Those of us on the outside assumed that he would be executed by Katniss herself. The face of rebellion."

"I don't..." Johanna faltered and he seemed to seize on it.

"What else happened before you killed Alma Coin? Did you share a compartment in Thirteen with Katniss?"
"Yes."

"And was it there that you two became close? How did that happen?"

Johanna gulped and looked up at the judge, then over to Katniss. "We just... we protected each other. I thought Peeta was the one with the trigger so I wanted to keep her safe from him. And she wanted... she wanted..." Johanna cleared her throat. "I don't know what she wanted."

"Perhaps she cared for you."

Johanna hoped her glare was cold as it met with warm gray hues. "Yeah, maybe."

"And you cared for her, correct?"

Johanna was getting tired. "Yes."

"So what happened when Mr. Mellark used your trigger?"

Johanna gripped the edge of the bench, remembering in vivid detail the sight and feel of that moment. "At first it was nothing. Haymitch was holding me back. Then I saw her and I...it was like my brain was drenched in blood. All I could think was that I needed to kill her. That everything was wrong and hot and itchy until I could wrap my hands around her throat."

"The accounts we have from those we spoke to who were there say you begged to be taken away. Doesn't sound like a killer to me."

"Tell that to the kids I killed in my games." The lawyer looked down at his feet and Johanna continued. "I didn't want to actually kill her. I knew that what I was feeling was wrong. I had promised to protect her from danger and then I was the danger." Johanna's voice began to rise unsteadily. "Do you get it? I swore to protect one person, one fucking person who was supposed to bring about the end of this stinking country and the stinking games and I was the person who she was to be afraid of. He took away everything from me. Even her. From right underneath me."

"Who took her away?"

"Snow! He took my family, my life, my body, my choices. Then he took away the only thing I cared about."

The lawyer's voice seemed to soften as he stepped toward Johanna, his hand near her own hand on the edge of the barrier between them. "Protecting Katniss?"

"Just Katniss."

"You're both in the same room now. How come you're not foaming at the mouth to kill her?"

Johanna chuckled. "They broke it."

"Who did?"

"Everyone. After the squad went to the Capitol without me they told me that..." Johanna's voice dropped to a whisper, her eyes painfully far away. "They told me she was dead. They told me she died in the Capitol."

"And how did that make you feel?"

"Relieved, at first. Relieved that she was dead. Not just because of the trigger, but because I
wasn't the killer. Then I felt -- I felt angry. Angry that she had been put in that situation and I wasn't there to protect her. Angry with Coin for purposely putting her in that stupid Mockingjay outfit and forcing her to fight. Angry that she wasn't here with me anymore. That she had left me alone. Again." Johanna's voice got impossibly small, like she was a child. "She had promised to stay. To protect me." Johanna wiped her nose with her hand, embarrassed at her tears. "I should've known better. Everyone I love leaves."

"And you felt Alma Coin was responsible for the death of Katniss?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you killed her?"

"Partially." Johanna sucked in a deep breath. "Just before, I was with Prim and the medics."

"Primrose Everdeen? Katniss's younger sister?"

"No, Primrose Everdeen, hulking Career tribute from One." Johanna rolled her eyes. "Yes. I went with them to the Capitol. Sort of my way of, I don't know, helping Katniss. I knew she would want someone to protect Prim. So we went to the Capitol when they dropped the parachutes on the kids."

"I remember that. Quite a lot of lives lost in that senseless act."

"Because of Coin."

"That hovercraft had a Capitol seal."

"All the more reason that was Coin. That trick? The snare? That's a Hawthorne trick. We had gone over it in those dumb meetings they made me attend. It just felt like Coin's hand. She killed Katniss, she wanted another games, she dropped those parachutes. She was just as guilty as Snow himself. I killed Snow for every single kid who's ever had to step into that arena. For my fucking mother and my father and my baby sister. For Finnick and Cashmere and the other victors who were raped and prostituted. For me." Johanna steadied her breathing and leveled her gaze at the lawyer. "And I killed Coin for what she would have done to us had she gotten the chance. For what I thought she did to Katniss. I'd do it again. I'd do it a hundred times. I am not sorry. Armed with the knowledge that I had, I'd still shoot them both."

"And if you knew Katniss was alive? Would you still have killed President Coin?"

Johanna peered down at her feet. "Maybe. I don't know. I'll never know because they tricked me. I was just a piece in everyone's games, as usual."

The deliberation took less than a few hours. Johanna sat on her bed in her cell, still shackled at her hands and feet, but allowed to walk around the room freely. Technically she could strangle herself with the chains but she didn't want to kill herself. Not anymore at least. She had thought about it a few times being whored out in the Capitol, a few times after her games, and very seriously after killing Snow and Coin.

But Katniss was alive.

Alive and had taken part in duping her for a week. Even getting her little sister in on the big joke. Haha, what fun, let's pretend Katniss is dead so Johanna doesn't want to kill her anymore. She had
come to care about the Mockingjay more than she originally planned and that plan was more painful than they had realized. A soft knock at her door broke her train of thought and she grumbled. She knew who was behind that knock.

"Go away Katniss."

The door opened anyway, as Johanna knew it would, and Katniss walked in the room, closing the door gently behind her. She looked sadly toward Johanna, clad in her prison uniform and shackles, and slowly entered the room. "When I asked you what happened if you were right about Peeta, do you remember what you told me?"

Johanna looked up at the girl from her bed, not bothering to sit up. She tried to remember that night. All she could remember was the painful squeezing of her heart as she thought Katniss still loved Peeta. "Nope."

Katniss crossed the room. She was wearing her casual attire again - boots and jeans and a soft t-shirt that was worn from too many scrubs over a washing board. As soft as Katniss's skin itself. "You told me he'd come back to me. That he always does."

Johanna snorted and sat up, placing her shackled hands in her lap. Katniss stared down at them with pity. How many times were they going to see each other like this? Johanna held back, under guards, in shackles, unable to touch Katniss. Unable to touch anything at all. "Great. That work out for you? All's well in the lives of Panem's greatest love story?"

"That depends." Katniss sat down on the bed next to Johanna, fumbling with something in her hand. "What is Panem's greatest love story? It can't be Peeta's. His starts with a girl he loved from afar, a girl he nearly died to protect, a girl he did everything for but she--" Katniss looked down at her shoes guiltily. "She never loved him. Not in the way he wanted. She didn't want to be his bride, bear his children. She thought maybe she did, at night when the nightmares came and only his arms would drive them away. Unfortunately for him, his story ends with heartbreak. Going back home alone."

"And when I did you broke my fucking heart." Johanna couldn't hold in her words any longer. "And when I did you broke my fucking heart."

"I was trying to save you," Katniss pleaded desperately. "Johanna I know how this looked. I was just as angry when I found out that Haymitch knew about this whole rebellion and didn't tell me. That all of you were risking your lives for me. That he didn't save Peeta."

"That's not the fucking same thing!" Johanna yelled, causing Katniss to wince. "Your boyfriend getting his ass beat in the Capitol is not the same as me trusting you and finding out that you were dead. I don't trust just anyone, you know. I put my trust in you and you broke it. Those were not the words she wanted to say but they were truthful. Johanna watched the hurt and sadness flicker through Katniss's eyes until she landed on a different emotion: love.

"Do you trust me?"

"I did. You think I just go around kissing all the pretty ghosts that walk in my room?" Katniss
smiled and slid off the bed, kneeling down in front of Johanna. "Whoa. Girls from the Seam move fast, huh?" Katniss stared up at her indignantly, a blush flaring across her cheeks. The thing Katniss had been fumbling with in her hand was a key. She placed it in the shackles at Johanna's feet, unlocking them and tossing them to the side. She got up slowly, then placed one knee on either side of Johanna's thighs. The key clinked inside the lock of the shackles at Johanna's hands and Katniss took them off, hefting their weight on to the floor. Her hands grasped Johanna's wrists, rubbing small circles on her pulse points.

"You can go home." Johanna's mind went blank. Katniss said something about Johanna being lucky that the judge was lenient. That he believed Johanna thought Coin was responsible for those children's deaths.

Real fuckin' lucky.

"Home?" Johanna questioned, looking up into Katniss's eyes. The four poster bed had a large canopy on it, shrouding both of them in near darkness. Where was home? Seven? Thirteen? Johanna didn't know where she felt at home anymore. She did, but she didn't want to admit it.

"Come home with me," Katniss whispered, pressing her forehead against Johanna's. Her lips brushed against Johanna's as she spoke. "Come with me to Twelve. Stay with me." Katniss's eyes searched hers for an answer, for something, for hope. Johanna could provide none of those. She merely pressed forward and caught Katniss's lips with her own. Her hands moved to Katniss's hips, digging into the soft flesh she found there, exercising her newfound freedom. Katniss's fingers danced along her arms before wrapping both arms entirely around her neck.

Johanna had never felt so thoroughly enveloped into a kiss before. Each part of Katniss was touching her, lovingly kissing her lips and massaging her tongue against Johanna's own. She wanted to lay back and take her. Take what she thought was hers now. Take what she had fought for, so long and hard. Take what she knew she wanted in the first five minutes they met.

They pulled away from each other slowly, regretfully, as Katniss's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "So you'll come?"

"No."

Katniss shook her head in bewilderment. "What?"

"I'm not going with you to Twelve. That's not -- that's not my home." Katniss swung her leg over and sat next to Johanna, listening quietly. "I thought you were dead until a few days ago. I grieved for you. I can't just take some train to your district and be okay again."

"So you'll go to Seven?" Katniss asked. "With her." There was no question of the "her" of which Katniss was speaking. Nova. She was probably on a train back to 7, if they were operable already. Haymitch had mentioned briefly she was doing well there. People liked her, respected her. But Johanna didn't feel at home with her either.

"I don't know where I'll go." Johanna stood up, flexing her hands as she paced around the room. Where would she go? Nowhere seemed to be inviting to her. Seven had so many memories of her family, but also contained the only sense of community she ever felt she belonged in. Twelve would have Katniss and Prim and Mrs. Everdeen, even stupid Buttercup, but also Peeta and Haymitch and other reminders of the hellish year or two it had been. Thirteen was out of the question.

Katniss shook her head, standing up off the bed and padding across the room to Johanna. "I'm not going to give up on you. I protect you, you protect me, remember?"
Johanna crossed her arms over her chest. "Snow's dead."

"What do you think that means? We go back to being strangers? I can't do that Johanna." Johanna couldn't admit that she couldn't do it either. She couldn't sleep anymore without Katniss there to hold her. Forget taking a bath; she was nearly back to washing down with rags again. Most painfully, her heart was still absent from her chest, planted firmly in the desperate girl in front of her. "We made a deal."

"That whole deal went out the window when you and everyone else told me you were dead!" Johanna ran her fingers through her hair roughly, surprised for a moment at the length.

Johanna saw the old Katniss flare up as she poked a finger into Johanna's chest. "I was still protecting you, Johanna! I was still fighting for you! Every deal I made, every move I made after I left Thirteen was to try and keep you alive and safe. We didn't know how else to break the trigger. I told them that I would fix it. That I would help you with that like I did with the water, but they told me this was the best way. Then Coin told me that if I was to play dead, then I wouldn't be allowed to kill Snow. I said fine." Katniss placed her hands on Johanna's arms that were still held tightly to her chest. "Because I love you." It wasn't a gentle I love you. It was a fierce, unequivocal statement.

There was no use in lying. Though she had never said it, all of her actions since returning from the Capitol had spelled it out. "Do you?" Johanna couldn't look Katniss in the eyes just yet. Staring down at the carpet she continued. "Because that hasn't worked out so well for anyone else who has said the same, few as they are."

"I don't care," Katniss shrugged. "I love you, and I'm not leaving you again." A small smile lifted on her lips. "You're the one who called me stubborn."

"But I don't trust you."

Katniss smiled sadly as the tears fell off her cheeks. Johanna had to resist the strangely strong urge to wipe her tears away. "Then I will earn that trust back."

"Fine." Johanna moved away from Katniss, going over to the plush armchair on which the guards had placed her stuff. She picked up Katniss's father's hunting jacket and handed it to her. "Go home. Be with your family. You've earned that." She inhaled deeply and swallowed to keep the lump in her throat from erupting.

Katniss placed her hand on the jacket but didn't take it. "Keep it. As collateral. I will come find you." Her lips moved into a slightly mischievous smile. "If only for my jacket."

Katniss tipped downward and captured Johanna's lips in a gentle but firm kiss, reaching around to put the jacket around Johanna's shoulders. She pulled on the lapels and drew Johanna closer, weaving her tongue into Johanna's mouth with a swell of desire.

No, Johanna didn't trust Katniss just yet. But that didn't mean she didn't want to feel the heat of their bodies together or taste the inside of her mouth. She wanted all those things, and much more.

Summers in District 4 were much more pleasant than anywhere else in Panem. The stifling heat in most of the districts was unbearable, but the constant breeze from the sea kept 4 a balmy temperature that was always great for swimming. Johanna sat on the edge of the beach, carefully positioned by the water to only get the tops of her legs covered as the tide moved in and out. The sun had done wonders for her skin, helping tan out the vicious scars that were on her body. Finnick had said the saltwater had some sort of healing properties, but these 4 nutjobs thought the
sea was all sorts of magic. As she sat now, clad in only a swimming bra and tiny pair of swimming shorts, most of the scarring was nearly invisible against her tanner skin.

Johanna couldn't deny though, how much better she felt there than nearly anywhere else she had been in years.

She watched the boats on the sea as they drifted toward the docks, filled to the brim with shellfish and freshly caught seafood. The brine and salt smell wasn't what she was used to - she still enjoyed the pine and oak smell of home - but she made do. Coming to 4 had been a no-brainer after speaking to Finnick. He wanted someone else there to help care for Annie while he convalesced. The boy had a steel constitution because only within about two months he was back diving into the water and retrieving coral from the ocean to add to Annie's collection.

Annie was remarkably pregnant by mid-July. She still managed to waddle herself to the ocean and swim a little. Somehow, the pregnancy seemed to stabilize her a little. Having another life to fret over must have pushed her own hellish daydreams into the recesses of her mind. Of course, having Finnick by her side helped as well. At first Johanna had stayed with them in their home, but as Finnick got stronger it began to feel claustrophobic. Their love siphoned all the air in the room and Johanna found it sickeningly sweet. And bitterly reminded her of the love she was missing.

So she moved into a cabin that stood on stilts above the water. It was close to masochistic, always teetering over the open sea as she slept. But the water here was soothing. It didn't creak from pipes, it was just everywhere. Water powered their homes and made these people's livelihoods. It was nothing of which to be afraid. Her phobia was better. Not cured, she probably would never be cured, but better. She could take a very abbreviated bath with a small amount of water, and of course she could dip into the ocean. Living there had been cathartic. No reminder of the games, no harsh winters, nothing. Just herself, the ocean, and the constant songbirds of love in Finnick and Annie.

They were at the hospital that had just been finished, only a few miles outside of where they lived. Johanna watched the sun begin to tilt itself toward the horizon, ready to settle down for the night. A shadow appeared over the sun that she was tanning herself with and Johanna huffed in annoyance. She looked over in the direction of the offending person, stopping short when she saw the perpetrator.

"You're gonna miss a chance to swim in this ocean? Look how peaceful it is." Katniss smiled down at Johanna, crouching down next to her in the sand. The water was particularly peaceful. Usually big waves rocked the boats a mile or so away from shore, but everything looked very settled. Even a few dolphins could be seen far off, leaping into the air and hitting the horizon with their snouts.

"Still not really a big swimmer."

Katniss smirked and drew a few lines in the sand. "That's not what I heard. I hear you've been doing well with your swimming."

Johanna scoffed, her already hot pink cheeks roasting in the sun getting slightly redder. "Great, you and Odair been keeping tabs on me?"

Katniss laughed, looking out toward the ocean. "Yeah well, when someone doesn't return my calls I have to find some way to find out how you are." Johanna rolled her eyes but had the good grace to look somewhat embarrassed. She had been ignoring Katniss's calls under the presumption that if Katniss really wanted her, she could come and get her. "And it was Annie, not Finnick."
Johanna sighed, leaning back onto her palms as the water lapped against her calves. "You can go ahead and enjoy yourself, Mockingjay. I'll keep watch." Katniss rolled her eyes and kicked off her shoes. Much to Johanna's surprise, she also flung off her shirt and shimmied out of her jeans. Clad in only a bra and underwear she jogged into the ocean, diving gracefully beneath the surface.

Johanna felt an irrational jealousy toward all the stupid saltwater that was getting to touch that skin. It occurred to her suddenly that there was no reason she shouldn't be touching that skin, either. Not one to be outdone, Johanna stripped off her swimming bra and shorts, placing them next to Katniss's pile of clothes. Stark nude, which was not uncommon for her in the climate, she eased herself into the water. It was up to her thighs when she began to shiver.

Katniss noticed her discomfort as she bobbed in the water, keeping herself afloat. "You can do it. Just dive under really quick. Like ripping off a bandage." Johanna glared at her and Katniss shrugged. "You're the one who wants the tough love. So just get in here, Mason."

Johanna begrudgingly kept stepping forward, her eyes closed. When she opened them, she caught Katniss staring at her, lip tucked between her teeth. She raised an eyebrow and Katniss merely blushed. Johanna kept inching into the water until she was submerged to just over her breasts. She was bending her knees slightly, her feet still firmly planted in the soft sand.

Katniss swam closer to her, backlit by the sun and looking like some kind of sea goddess. Johanna couldn't help but smile a little. She felt Katniss's hands grip around her thighs and pulled her up, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around Katniss's waist. Her arms went around her shoulders as both Katniss and the anti-gravity of the water held her up. Katniss leaned in, her saltwater-coated hair brushing against Johanna's face as her lips pressed near her ear. "I've got you." Katniss walked around in the water, dipping Johanna a few inches in and raising her up, getting her used to the feel of the water around her. "I want you to lean back and put your head under the water for a second."

Johanna was going to object but then stopped herself. "Okay, but if I do, that stupid top you're wearing goes out to sea. Deal?"

Katniss pursed her lips and blushed, nodding her head. "Fine." Johanna sucked in a deep breath and leaned back slowly. Katniss's hands held her back firmly as she submerged her head under the water, then came back up, pushing her longer hair behind her. They returned to their close position as Katniss let go of Johanna for a moment to unclasp her bra and toss it over her head. "Happy now?"

Johanna allowed herself a moment to appreciate Katniss's breasts in the crystal clear waters. She bit her lip, looking with wanton desire into Katniss's eyes as she traveled her gaze back up to her face. "Almost." Johanna grinned and pulled their bodies flush together. She heard Katniss gasp in her ear as their naked torsos touched, and she snaked her fingers into Katniss's wild, sea-soaked hair as Katniss's breasts gently moved against her own. "Better," she whispered into her ear.

They stayed like that for a while, entwined in each other and bobbing in the gentle ocean. Katniss ran her fingers through Johanna's hair, moving them from her ear. "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

Katniss smiled and placed a kiss underneath her ear. "My mother is here working in the hospital for a few weeks. Prim's here too. And your buddy Buttercup." Johanna pulled back so they could face each other, spinning around slowly in the ocean as Katniss held her up. "I was hoping you'd let me start earning that trust back."

"Were you now?" Johanna smirked and moved her hands over Katniss's shoulders and down to
her sternum, stopping just above her breasts. "Why should I?"

There wasn't any malice in her question, just a playful opposition. Johanna didn't like to make things easy for Katniss. Katniss pouted. "Because I want us to be friends again."

"Friends." Johanna dragged her fingers down Katniss's stomach, in the valley between her breasts, running her fingers along the underside of them. Katniss shivered under her light touch, her eyes fluttering closed. "All this just to be friends?" She made a small semi-circle beneath Katniss's breasts, careful to trace around her nipple and deny her pleasure.

Katniss's eyes opened as Johanna moved her fingers tenderly around her breasts. Her eyes flashed frustration and desire, as well as the soft gaze of embarrassment. "M-more than friends." She tried to move into Johanna's touch but the girl skillfully avoided her. Katniss made a small whimper of frustration.

"How much more than friends?" Johanna palmed the small heft of Katniss's breasts in her hands, leaning her face close to Katniss.

Abruptly Katniss grabbed her hands and placed them directly on her naked breasts, prompting a small moan to escape Johanna's throat. "A lot more." Johanna smiled into their kiss as her hands reverently moved over Katniss's breasts, pushing out breathy moans from the younger girl. It sounded like music to Johanna, as calming as the waves on the shore but shooting a thrill into her groin.

Katniss panted heavily as they broke apart, taking Johanna's hands in her own and holding them to her lips. "Maybe next time we'll get you to dive under the water with me."

Katniss began walking toward the shore as Johanna stood in the water, shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe I will. Maybe if I do those shorts come off next."

Katniss turned on her heel and walked backward in the sand, raising her eyebrow. "If you're lucky, Mason."

Johanna smiled as she began walking out the water, shaking her head at the topless girl who was now stealing Johanna's shirt for herself. "I'm already lucky."

Author's Note: Nawt the end just yet. :) Thanks for all the support!
Safe

Around a week later Johanna and Katniss found themselves on the beach of 4, watching Finnick and Annie officially bring their child into the world. The local custom in 4 was sort of folksy beautiful. The child would be dipped in the sea, baptized in the salty seawater as they announced his name to the district folk who gathered around. There were a lot of them, seeing as how the celebrity of Finnick and Annie reached the entire district. They named him Atlan, after the old name for the ocean that swallowed part of what Panem was before it was Panem.

Katniss spent most of the day with her mother and Primrose enjoying the party on the beach. Johanna was with little Atlan, sitting with the newborn on her stomach as he slept. With one arm protectively over them both she looked over to Katniss, who was staring at her with a peculiar expression on her face. They shared a smile and Johanna turned her attention to Finnick, who came to sit next to her.

He picked up the baby, fixing his swaddle and placing him on his shoulder. His scars, the deep one around his neck, were nearly gone. Maybe that seawater was magic. "So, uh, how are things going with the Mockingjay?"

He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and Johanna smirked. "Fine." Finnick canted his head to the side. He knew her better than that. "I think she might stay here with me," Johanna confessed, tugging on her lip to suppress a smile.

Her lips turned upward as he pulled out of his famous smiles. "Really?" The genuine light in his eyes made Johanna's heart warm. Other than Katniss, Finnick was her only real friend. One of the only people who could cull a real reaction from her. "You're staying? I figured you'd go back to Seven. Or to Twelve, with Katniss."

Johanna sat up on her elbows and shook her head. "There's nothing in Seven for me now but ghosts." Her mind flashed briefly to Nova. She was a ghost too. A ghost of who Johanna was, who they both used to be to each other. "I like it here. I've got you, this sea." She gave herself a moment and breathed in the salty air deeply. "It's like a big fuck you to Snow, you know? Wanna use water against me? I'm gonna fucking live in it you stupid prick." Finnick laughed. "Sometimes I miss the smell. The smell of pines and maple. But that's about it."

Finnick nodded his head in understanding. "You know if you drive about four hours north, you're basically on the border of Seven and Four. Lots of trees there. Where the sand and grass recedes and opens into a forest. If you get homesick, you can always go there."

Johanna smiled and nodded her head in thanks. What she couldn't say, as her eyes drifted back over to Katniss who was tickling Prim, was that she didn't get homesick anymore. Her home was wherever Katniss planted her two feet. On whatever shore Katniss landed, Johanna would be there like the tide to meet her.

Johanna sat in the bathtub inside her cabin in 4, soaking the bubble-filled water. She rested her head against the side of the tub, looking over at Katniss, vigilantly keeping watch over her bath to make sure she was okay. Johanna's fingers gripped the edges as she tried to keep her cool. "Hey Katniss?" She put a small tremble in her voice just to make sure this worked.

"Yep?" Katniss glanced over from the small journal she was writing in toward Johanna.
"I'm getting a little, uh, antsy in here." She bit her lip and looked over as innocently as possible. "Would you come in here with me? I think it would help me relax."

"Oh! Um, okay." Katniss had been living with Johanna in her cabin for two weeks and they were no further along in their relationship than before, not for lack of trying on Johanna's part. Katniss was so eager to gain her trust she had been pretty much focusing all her attention on getting Johanna to be better with water. It was appreciated, of course, but Johanna was more interested in other ways they could get closer.

Katniss shot her a look and Johanna rolled her eyes. "Really?" Katniss continued to glare at her so Johanna closed her eyes. "Fine. It's not like you have anything I haven't seen before." Johanna heard the soft thump of Katniss's robe hitting the floor of the bathroom and she smiled. Katniss slid into the bath, which was spacious enough for them both, and settled in between Johanna's legs. She leaned back tentatively against Johanna's chest. "You can come closer, Mockingjay. I don't bite. Not unless you say please."

Katniss glared at her over her shoulder and Johanna stuck out her tongue. Katniss slid back until Johanna finally wrapped her arms around her and pulled them close. She heard the small gasp that Katniss expelled as her butt came in contact with Johanna's sex. She rested her head on Johanna's shoulder and finally relaxed into the bath. "I could fall asleep like this," the younger girl murmured.

Johanna silently agreed. The water was warm and the air was even warmer, being the middle of summer in 4. The open window provided some breeze, but it was still a tad uncomfortable in terms of heat. Johanna didn't like the air conditioning unit they had installed; it reminded her of the thin, stale air in the Capitol. "I could keep you awake if you want," Johanna goaded with a grin.

"Johanna," Katniss warned.

"I know I know. God, sometimes I swear you're as prudish as they day we met in the elevator." Katniss squeezed her thigh indignantly and Johanna smirked. "Pure as the freshly fallen snow." Katniss splashed her and Johanna chuckled, ducking her head to down kiss the side of Katniss's neck. "It's okay baby girl. I think I like the idea of being a pioneer."

"A pioneer?" Katniss repeated, shifting in the water as Johanna continued to place small kisses on her neck.

"You know, the first to discover you. Like the great explorers of centuries ago. Mapping the world." Johanna unlaced her fingers from Katniss's and moved them around her stomach, wrapping around her hips and slowly dragging them up her sides. "Mapping your world. Your fields and your oceans." She bit down very lightly on Katniss's neck and made her moan, moving her hands along her abdomen. "Your peaks." With a smirk against her skin she traced around Katniss's nipples, getting herself a delicious gasp in response. "And your valleys." Her palms began a slow decent in a "v" formation down Katniss's stomach.

"I think you're relaxed enough," Katniss squeaked in a high-pitched tone, pulling herself from the tub and splashing water over the sides as she got out. She grabbed one of the towels (Johanna had roughly three billion towels) and wrapping herself in it. Johanna could see the head to toe blush on Katniss's skin and she smirked as she leveled an even gaze at her. Katniss left the bathroom in favor of the bedroom and Johanna watched her disappear until the door was closed.

Now the bath felt too cold. Johanna got out of the tub, drying herself off with the same rough quickness she had done since getting out of the Capitol. Just because she was okay with sitting in the water did not mean she wanted to stay wet. She left the towel on the windowsill to dry in the heat and walked into the bedroom where Katniss had already turned off the lights and gotten
underneath the covers.

It was much like being in 13 when they slept; pretending it was to get rid of the nightmares when really, Johanna knew, it was for the tactile sensation of feeling the warmth of another body. Specifically her body. She always had a habit, even as a little girl, of curling behind the person in bed with her. Katniss would attempt to wrap her arms around Johanna from behind but Johanna would either switch or snuggle into Katniss's embrace facing her.

Katniss had grown used to her nudity, no longer scandalized by the feeling of Johanna's skin behind her. For the first few times she had audibly breathed when Johanna slid in behind her, the heat of her body pressed against Katniss with only one thin layer of cotton between them. It made Johanna smirk to still be able to unnerve the girl on fire with just a little contact. Tonight was much the same, with Katniss in a light tank top and sleeping shorts, curled around her pillow.

Johanna moved in behind her and felt Katniss relax and move into her embrace. There was nothing official between them, at least as far as Johanna was concerned. They'd kiss but go no further than that. Katniss was soft-handed with her. Johanna knew, regretfully so, that she brought this on herself by telling Katniss she didn't trust her.

With a contented sigh she nuzzled her face into Katniss's hair, wrapping her legs around Katniss's calves and her arms around her torso and hugged her tightly. As she often did as she was falling asleep, she began placing kisses along Katniss's back near her neck, each a small gesture of thank you that Johanna didn't verbalize during the day. For every glare she gave at Katniss's help, every roll of her eyes at Katniss's encouragement, these kisses were the balm. Johanna thought Katniss knew it too, because often she'd see her smile and she'd hold Johanna to her tighter.

"Johanna, can I ask you something?" Katniss's soft words startled Johanna a little but she continued placing small kisses on the top of Katniss's back.

"As long as it doesn't involve me moving, go for it."

Katniss moved on to her back, forcing Johanna to stop kissing her. Her gray eyes were impossibly large in the moonlight, staring up at her in earnest. Johanna swept her fingers along Katniss's stomach, staring at the other girl. "I know we haven't, um. We haven't--" Her eyes moved away and Johanna smiled tenderly, waiting for Katniss to come out with the words. "We haven't done anything serious together. You know, intimately. Does that bother you?"

Johanna nudged Katniss with the end of her nose in the shoulder motioning for her to roll over. Katniss did as she was beckoned and Johanna again attached herself to Katniss's back, enveloping her once more. In between light kisses she answered. "Nobody's ever... cared so much about me before. So no, the fact that we haven't had sex yet doesn't bother me. I've had a lot of sex. I haven't had a lot of people who actually give a shit about me sticking around. That's what's more important to me. That you stay."

Katniss attempted to roll over but Johanna held firm to her; not only because she liked this position but because she didn't dare look Katniss in the eyes. Not like this. She could already feel her lips trembling as they continued to press upon the tops of Katniss's shoulders. "Johanna, I'm not leaving."

"That's what they say." Johanna somehow managed to squeeze Katniss even tighter. "That's what they say, but if you haven't noticed I haven't been particularly lucky with people I've come to care about."

Katniss sighed, playing with Johanna's fingers that were clutched around her stomach. "I had almost no perception of love," Katniss began, sighing. "I thought it was just something that
hopefully happened. You meet someone that you're compatible with, practically-speaking, and you hope that down the line, you develop feelings for him." Johanna tensed. "That's how I felt about Gale, and about Peeta. That I should love them, and that maybe I would. But then I met you."

"Then you realized it starts with barely tolerating each other?"

Katniss chuckled softly and shook her head, still facing away from Johanna and her gentle kisses. "No. I met you and it was like being swallowed in fire. I didn't understand why I was feeling what I was feeling. I slept in your bed every night because I just missed you so much. And I hated myself for getting that way especially since you were determined to keep me away, and because it's not who I was. I wasn't the type of person who lets other people control her feelings. I had enough of that as the Mockingjay." Katniss sucked in a deep breath. "You kept pushing me and pushing me and I realized, I liked it. I wanted to be pushed and pulled and challenged and loved." Katniss paused. "I was really hopeful about that last part. You broke my heart when you left that day."

"You should have asked me to stay."

Katniss tensed underneath Johanna's touch. "I did ask, brainless. I practically begged you to stay and you laughed in my face."

Johanna pulled away from Katniss's touch and the younger girl turned over to face her. Johanna stared down hard into Katniss's gray hues. "I mean, you should've really asked."

Katniss's dark eyebrows furrowed in frustration. "What does that even mean? And like you would have listened to me anyway. You've always done whatever you wanted. That day was no exception." Katniss's eyes dropped to their shared blanket. "I felt like you did it just to spite me."

Johanna let out a cackle. "Of course you did, because you're self-centered." Katniss glared up at Johanna. "I'm not saying you're a bad person, I'm saying you blame yourself for fucking everything, so of course you blamed yourself for me leaving. But it wasn't about you, Mockingjay."

"Bullshit," Katniss shot back, rolling her eyes. "You left because you got scared. I was getting close to you, and you bailed."

Johanna felt her chest tighten. "So is that why you're here, then? Because I didn't give you enough time in Thirteen to fix me?" Johanna scoffed and tossed the blankets off her naked form. "Fuck you, Katniss. I don't need anyone to fix me."

Katniss sighed in exasperation and got out of the bed, turning to face the other girl. Johanna watched her expression intently. The only way she knew Katniss was feeling something powerful was because she wiped her face clean. "I'm not here out of obligation."

"You think I don't know you by now, Everdeen? Pity is how you operate. Kiss Peeta when he's dying in the arena, kiss Gale when he's hurting. But I was the one they fucked up beyond measure, and here you are." Johanna's eyes clouded over as another thought floated through her mind. "You didn't even believe me, did you? They told you I was a head case and your fucking savior complex came shining through and you wanted to fix the poor, broken victor from Seven."

"I never said I wanted to fix you!" Katniss shouted back, tossing her hands in the air in frustration. "I did believe you, and I wanted to help you."

"You said you thought Peeta was different, but he was the fucking same. We both know it."
Katniss faltered and Johanna smirked, crossing her arms over her chest. "Was that part of the therapy, too? Before you decided to let me love you, and then tell me you were dead? Was the first theory that maybe if you manipulated me into caring about you, I couldn't possibly be triggered to kill you?" Johanna cocked her head to the side. If Katniss wanted a way out, this was her chance. Johanna knew she could push Katniss away. She would never admit how much she hoped it wouldn't work. "Maybe this is the last part of your twelve-step program into making me a more productive victor, hm? Get me though some water therapy, use your body to placate my affection for you?" Johanna sneered at her. "You're still just a piece in their games, aren't you? Snow would be so proud."

Johanna knew, as always, she had stepped just one toe over the line. Katniss's entire face and neck went red with blush and she stormed around the bed, reaching her hand up to slap Johanna clear across the face. Johanna raised her arm to respond in kind and Katniss nabbed her wrist and spun them, shoving Johanna onto the bed. She wasted no time in wrangling the snarky victor by straddling her hips, and leaning down to bruise her lips in a searing kiss. Katniss pulled up, gray eyes aflame. "Shut up." She laced kisses from Johanna's lips down her neck, taking small bits of the hollow of Johanna's throat. "Fuck, Johanna, just shut up," she murmured against her skin.

Katniss leaned up and whipped off her shirt, and Johanna didn't stop her eyes from widening to drink it all in. She wanted to touch Katniss's chest but the younger girl had her hands pinned to the bed, so she settled for feeling Katniss's breasts touch her own when she bent back down to capture their lips together. "You have no idea," Katniss whispered against Johanna's skin as she nipped down her clavicle to the small swell of Johanna's breasts, "how crazy you make me." Johanna groaned as Katniss's warm tongue lapped around her aroused nipple. Katniss's teeth pinched the nub and Johanna hissed in pleasure. "Half the time I talk to you I can't decide if I want to slap you or kiss you."

"You always were a little slow," Johanna ribbed. For her attitude, Katniss dragged her teeth down Johanna's throat, then sunk them into the meat of her shoulder. Johanna yelped and her hips rose against Katniss's, searching for relief for the now pounding ache in her core. Katniss shook her head in impatience and took Johanna's now free hands and planted them on the hem of her shorts. Johanna could take a hint. She slipped her fingers underneath the hem and pushed the fabric down as far as she could go. Katniss shifted around until she was able to pull the shorts off, then placed her naked body on top of Johanna's. She gyrated her hips for long minutes as she languidly kissed Johanna, ratcheting up Johanna's desire tenfold.

Mercifully, Katniss snaked a hand between them and started rubbing against Johanna's slick folds. For once, Johanna didn't mind that she wasn't on top. Being near Katniss, even underneath Katniss, made her feel safe in a way she could never have replicated with anyone else. She threaded her fingers in Katniss's unruly brown locks and then used her other hand to mimic Katniss's actions on her inside the younger girl.

Katniss gasped and crushed their lips together, her hips hungrily seeking more attention with small thrusts. Johanna felt around the girl's lower lips, soaking her fingers in the plentiful arousal she found there. She let it slip through her hand as she moved the pads of her fingers up back to
Katniss's clit. Katniss began doubling her pace against Johanna, letting out whimpers and grunts as they both pushed each other toward ecstasy.

"Tell me, Johanna," Katniss compelled with her lips next to Johanna's ear. "Tell me if this feels like I'm trying to fix you." Katniss's fingers dipped lower until they found Johanna's entrance and she plunged two fingers deep inside Johanna. Johanna gasped and thrust her hips into the contact. "Tell me," Katniss demanded against her lips, kissing her fiercely in between words. "Tell me what this feels like for you, Johanna." The hand Johanna had on Katniss's clit left that area in favor of circling around to Katniss's ass and squeezing it tightly. She couldn't think about reciprocation at the moment. Katniss's demanding voice and her fingers pushing inside her most intimate parts shut down her brain. "Tell me," she growled, baring her teeth.

Johanna felt the cresting of her desire begin to spread inside her stomach. "I-- fuck." She couldn't finish that sentence. The oncoming orgasm was building too quickly, like a tide Johanna was about to drown in. Unlike in real life, she would gladly drown in this. "I love you," Johanna finally panted breathlessly. "I love you, and I hate you sometimes, and I feel like I want you so badly that if you stop I'll rip your throat out."

Katniss blinked a few times, her pace slowing down, until a small grin made its way across her face. She then ducked her head to Johanna's neck and returned her attention to fucking her. Johanna quickly scaled the heights of her pleasure, gasping and thrashing in orgasm as Katniss's fingers manipulated inside her.

This is what they were. Tumultuous. Passionate. Fire. But in that fire, Johanna thought as she practically threw Katniss onto her back and settled her mouth between Katniss's legs, was safety.

Johanna's tongue swirled methodically inside Katniss, her fingernails digging into Katniss's hips as her arms curled around her legs. Johanna thought that there was probably no sight more beautiful than the one she had now: Katniss propped up on her elbows, her head tipped back in pleasure, her chest heaving in uneven pants, her hair wild and long, hitting the bed as she whimpered for release. While gently lapping at her clit Johanna slowly slid one finger inside Katniss, feeling her close tightly around her. Katniss gasped and Johanna stilled her movement.

Katniss glared at her. "If you stop I'll rip your throat out." Johanna grinned and continued to slowly move in and out of her, applying gently pressure on her nub as she added her index finger inside Katniss, moving against her walls and coating her hand in Katniss's arousal. "Fuck, Johanna." Johanna bit her lip in pleasure at hearing Katniss lose control. She picked up her pace with her fingers, fucking her with more force and using her lips to suckle on Katniss's clit as she brought her toward orgasm. Her walls clenched tightly around her then pulsed hard as Katniss yelped her name out holding Johanna's face to her sex as she rolled through her climax. Her head hit the pillow and her fingers released Johanna's hair as she collapsed on the bed with a few soft chuckles.

Johanna licked her fingers clean and laid down next to her, tossing her leg over Katniss's body and kissing her shoulder. Katniss breathed in slowly and deeply, her unfocused eyes staring up at the ceiling. Katniss trembled as Johanna's fingers traced up her arm. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

Katniss looked over at Johanna, a smirk on her lips. "Do you really think I'm that fragile?"

Johanna pursed her lips in annoyance. "No brainless, but you are the one who'd never done this before. I was just making sure." Katniss grinned and kissed the crown of Johanna's head and then the tip of her nose. Johanna blushed a little at the cute gesture and threaded her fingers through Katniss's hair. "Besides, you protect me, I protect you. We made a deal."
"A deal you kept trying to back out of." Johanna glared at her and Katniss smiled. "But I'm glad you're back in. Because that," Katniss flopped back down on to her back, "is something I need to repeat."

Johanna laughed, snuggling herself into Katniss's side as they laid together in the darkness. She rested her head next to Katniss's ear and smirked. "And that's just one way to do it. You're going to have to stay a while if you want to go through all the ways I can make you come." Katniss's eyes widened as she slowly turned to face Johanna. "What? It's true. I wasn't so sought after in the Capitol for nothing."

Katniss's delirious gaze turned serious as she gently placed her hand on the side of Johanna's face. Johanna put her hand on top of Katniss's and smiled at her. "I hate that that happened to you." She kissed Johanna's hand and pulled her closer, wrapping her in her arms. As they lay there, naked and unarmed, Johanna realized she had never felt so safe. "And I love you, too, by the way," Katniss rasped, threading her fingers through Johanna's mop of black hair. "I knew it the day you left for Seven. I might have known it before, but that's when I knew. Because I didn't want you to leave. I couldn't bear it. Then I saw you with her and it drove me nuts."

Johanna's mind flashed to when Nova kissed her goodbye on the forehead, a clear indication of their intimacy. How painful that must've been for Katniss. But Johanna didn't feel too bad, she had to endure a lot as well. "I didn't know."

"You couldn't see what was right in front of you, typically." Johanna bit down on Katniss's neck which caused Katniss to grip her hands in both surprise and pleasure. "But I did. The whole time. I burned for you."

Johanna kissed the small red mark she had made on Katniss's neck and laid her head down on the pillow. "My girl on fire," Johanna whispered against Katniss's skin, holding her close.

"And mine." Katniss lolled her head over to kiss the crown of Johanna's head. "Nobody is getting to you ever again. I will keep you safe. Always."

Johanna knew she would. Johanna always felt safe around fire.

Updated 8/9/15

Author's Note: Here's where I thank everyone who took the time to read this story, especially those kind enough to drop some reviews and let me know what you're enjoying and what you aren't. I hope you guys have enjoyed the changes I've made here, too.

Again thank you so much for all your support for this fic (and the others). It has truly blown my mind. :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.mercury45.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!