It was only natural to see pale blue flashes on your skin from time to time. Reassuring, even. It meant your soulmate was out there somewhere. It was much more worrying when no phantom lines ever marred your skin.

Effie was very used to those blue flashes. They lasted a few minutes for minor injuries and sometimes a few hours if the wound ran deeper. She was very used to it for the simple reason that whoever her soulmate was, he kept scraping his knuckles and his knees – causing the child no small amount of embarrassment every day, because unlike him she was a proper lady who
wouldn’t dream of creasing her dress or, god forbid, running. The biggest injury that had befallen on herself happened when she was seven and she tripped down the stairs because of her brand new heels. She ended up with bruises all over and a slap on her bottom from her mother for not being careful enough and having torn up her brand new dress. She had wondered at the time if her soulmate had seen the bruises and had been worried about her. She certainly worried a lot about him.

She kept her eyes wild open at school, watching the most unruly boys and trying to figure out who matched her phantom injuries but to no avail. Her friends mocked her mercilessly for the pale blue scratches on her hands and legs, of course, arguing that their soulmate at least weren’t so prone to injure themselves.

When she was eleven, she cried out in pain in the middle of class before bursting into tears. The pain had been sharp but had vanished quickly, she felt unconsciously that it wasn’t hers, that it was just as fleeting as those pale blue lines on her body, but for a second it hurt. She was sent to the nurse office but refused to explain that her back had burned something awful, she pretended she had a crick in the neck and had moved too quickly instead. She didn’t know what possessed her to lie. She was sent home. Her father wasn’t pleased about that.

It was only in the safety of her room that she took her dress off and craned her neck to see her back in the huge full-length mirror that took up half of her wall. Surely enough, there were a collection of angry blue lines crisscrossing on her creamy skin. She started crying again, in fear and confusion. Whatever had happened to her soulmate, it was clear it must have hurt a lot for her to feel it so sharply. She didn’t understand where the lines came from and she was scared, she ran to her older sister, certain that at sixteen, Lyssa would hold all the answers. Lyssa told on her. Once her parents had seen the marks, they sent her to her room and had a violent argument. Even all the way upstairs, Effie could hear the words: whipping, District, and barbarian very clearly.

She didn’t understand what it meant any more than those blue lines that took days to fade. It was the longest time phantom injuries ever remained branded on her body. She was almost terrified of what it would mean when they would fade, terrified it would be the last thing she would have to remember her soulmate by.

As her mother made a point of reminding her every day, not everyone ever found their soulmate and that was just as well. Some people died too early, some people were never meant to meet, some people simply didn’t truly believe in all that non-sense... Her mother and her father weren’t soulmates but they had chosen each other and that was the important thing – or so Elindra kept on repeating.

Effie only breathed a little easier once a pale blue scrape that didn’t belong to her appeared on her knuckles again. It meant that, whoever he was, his back had healed and he was back to his usual reckless antics. She wished he would be a tad more careful though. Mother forced her to wear gloves when the marks appeared on her hands now and they were lovely gloves but very impractical.

At twelve, Effie learned to never mention the phantom marks on her body. It always sent her parents in a twisted argument behind closed doors with shouts that seemed to rock the whole house.

At twelve, Effie also found out who her soulmate was, albeit accidentally.

She hadn’t been paying much attention to the Games that year, despite the fact that the Quell was all anyone was talking about. She had a falling out with her friend Emilia and, as a consequence, was in the process of making sure the rest of their friends took her side rather than Emilia’s. It might have seemed trivial but Effie wasn’t ready for a social suicide and losing her hardly won
influence would be a social suicide. So, that morning, she kept distracted eyes on the screen while talking on the phone with Beatrix, repeating every nasty thing Emilia had ever said about her.

When the knife slashed District Twelve’s tribute’s upper arm, Effie didn’t think anything of it. Until she caught sight of her own arm in the mirror. Exact same place. Exact same shape.

Something heavy dropped in her stomach but she dismissed it, telling herself it was nothing but a coincidence.

She watched the Games more attentively after that, she watched Haymitch Abernathy and even though his injuries seemed to match the blue lines appearing on her body, she convinced herself the proofs were still inconclusive. She still found herself rooting for him to everyone’s puzzlement. The girl from One would make a finer victor, everyone kept telling her. They made fun of her for liking the underdog.

The underdog though, was her soulmate.

She knew for certain the second the axe caught him in the side. The pain... It lasted for a second but it made her grunt all the same. Her family thought it was a groan of sympathy or shock and dismissed it. Effie knew better. She pressed her hand against her stomach, knowing that if she were to take off her clothes, she would find a huge blue gap there. She kept her hand on the phantom wound as Haymitch dashed through the arena, trying to escape his opponent, praying he would run fast enough. It was a little hard to run when you were trying to keep your guts inside your stomach though.

When he reached the cliff, Effie bit down on her bottom lip. She didn’t ask herself how she felt about her soulmate being a District boy – it certainly explained everything from the numerous bruised knuckles and knees to the crisscrossing lines on her back: whipping, her father had said; District people were whipped for not respecting the law. The thought of disobeying the rules was so foreign to Effie she was almost horrified by the very idea. Or she would have been if she hadn’t been so certain she was about to watch her soulmate die right in front of her.

It was strange. She had never met him before but she already knew she would feel his loss acutely. For all her mother’s speeches, she knew a soulmate was a part of you, a part of your soul, and that when they died, you simply lose something not matter that you never properly found it to begin with.

“Brilliant.” her father commented when Haymitch avoided the axe. “That one’s got a brain.”

She felt proud of Haymitch, even prouder when the axe bounced back and killed One’s tribute. He had won.

Her soulmate was a victor.

And handsome too.

She sported a maniac grin for days, bought every posters, cards and figurines, and she kept her secret to herself, plotting a way to meet him in person. She begged her mother to bring her to the Crowning but her mother had no love for victors from Twelve and it was her father who took her, still admiring the tribute’s ingenuity. Effie was determined when she wanted to be, she sneaked away from her father in the crowded City Center and slowly but methodically made her way to the front row while Caesar interviewed Haymitch.

She only let herself breathe once she was right in front of the stage, in full view of the new victor. His grey eyes passed on her without stopping. She waved at him but either he didn’t see or he
didn’t care. Annoyed at not being noticed, she dug her fake nail in the center of her palm hard enough to draw blood.

On the chair, he startled and glanced at his hand but he didn’t seem to notice the fact she was waving his bleeding hand for him to see.

The disappointment was crushing.

All the more so given that she had been forced to decline going to Gelinda’s pool party because she was still sporting the blue line of his injury on her stomach.

Weren’t soulmates supposed to look at each other and fall madly in love? He had looked at her, she knew he had looked at her... Irritated and angry, she made her way back to her father, barely listening to the harsh scolding about running off.

She declared she didn’t like Haymitch anymore and wanted to go home.

It left her father puzzled but he complied with her wishes.

The blue line on her stomach only faded a month after his victory – proof, if she needed one, that the injury was extensive. There were no more scraped knuckles and grazed knees after his crowning, only the occasional bruise that faded in seconds. She spied him on TV sometimes: with every new year, he seemed to become a little duller, as if he was completely giving up. She wasn’t completely surprised when he started making the headlines for his drunken antics.

She started her modeling career at seventeen.

She was popular, reliable and people loved her. It only took her three years to be the girl everyone wanted to be. She launched fashion, she gave interviews to magazines, she went to so many parties it sometimes felt as if she never slept, she had a thousand friends and a billion of suitors... She had met a few victors but never Haymitch and that was just as well because she would have probably killed him if only for getting involved in whatever brawl and getting a black eye right before she was due on the cat walk. No amount of make-up managed to hide the light blue phantom bruise and it was embarrassing.

She was twenty-three when Head Gamemaker Torello approached her and offered her a job as an escort. It was the ultimate consecration, escorts were worshipped, and she accepted before even asking to which District she would be assigned – she was later told there were a lot of promotion opportunities anyway.

She was nervous on the train that took her to Twelve for the Reaping. Nervous, but excited. And, perhaps, a little hopeful.

Hope was crushed the second Mayor Undersee introduced her to Haymitch right before the Reaping. Haymitch took a look at her forced bright smile, at her outstretched gloved hand and sneered.

“You won’t last the year.” he snorted.

And that was the end of that. Any idea of confessing her secret flew out the window.

He was dedicated to making her quit and he spared her nothing from the worst public humiliations to every nasty gibes he could throw at her. She hated him. She hated him so much she was just as dedicated to annoying him by refusing to be driven out the door.

That dynamic lasted three years.
It was exhausting and hard on her nerves but this was a war and she would die before admitting defeat.

The fourth year, she snapped during an argument and tried to slap him. He grabbed her wrist, shoved her against the wall, and the next thing she knew they were kissing. The kisses weren’t nice. Nobody had ever kissed her like that before. It was messy, brutal and it unleashed something wild in her she hadn’t been aware was there. She didn’t even flinch when he tore the dress off her, barely pausing long enough to berate him over the unnecessary crime against fashion, she was too busy ripping the shirt off his shoulders to care.

She had always assumed sex with your soulmate was different from regular sex with regular people.

She had been right and wrong. Sex with Haymitch was different. Just like she had never been kissed like he kissed her, she had never been used in that manner either. He never paused to ask her if she was sure – she wasn’t sure but she was very obviously willing anyway – and he wasn’t gentle like her previous lovers had tended to be. He didn’t hurt her either, he was careful about that she noticed, at the slightest wince of discomfort on her part he slowed down and shifted angle until she couldn’t help but whimper in pleasure. She hadn’t been aware she had a kink for rough – if anyone had asked her before, she would have been horrified at the question – but she couldn’t deny it was working for her. She could feel her climax building.

Which was why it was all the more frustrating when he came without waiting for her and didn’t have the decency to make sure she finished too before leaving her room in a huff, shouting that it never happened.

She was only too happy to agree with that.

It happened again, of course.

Every time they argued, the tension was there and they ended up against the nearest flat surface, working out their disagreement by biting, clawing at and kneading each other’s skin. And it was good, oh so, so good… He didn’t care much about her pleasure at first and she learned to take what she wanted from him by force if necessary but after a while, he decided he loved hearing her moan or beg him in rapture and he made it a little easier for her to relax and enjoy without having to wonder if she would end up satisfied or frustrated that time around. It was so good she started arguments for the sole purpose of ending up pinned to a wall. He wasn’t fooled. But then again, he used the slightest excuse he could find to pick up a fight too.

On their sixth year of working together, he managed to corner her into taking off her wig and make-up. She had never let him see her without them before. For one, it wasn’t something any man in the Capitol would have ever asked, for another she was reluctant to let him see her looking like her ugly plain self. But Haymitch knew how to cajole her into doing his bidding when he really wanted to and so she ended up lying down on his bed, naked and bare for him. She didn’t mind the naked part, she was confident about her body and he had seen her a hundred times by that point. It was the bare part that had her blinking back tears as the grey eyes studied her in that intense way of his; the knowledge that no make-up was hiding her imperfections, that no make-up made her face look like the beautiful woman the public had learned to desire was too much to bear for her. There was nothing to desire in her plain curly blond hair, in the bags under her eyes and in the lines that were starting to appear. She couldn’t even look at him, didn’t want to see the disgust and the rejection on his face.

“You’re beautiful.” he simply said, after a few minutes.
Haymitch never lied to her. That was something she treasured in their odd relationship. The Capitol was all smoke-screens and hypocrisy. She had never had a friend she could trust to tell her the truth before – and, yes, the truths Haymitch slammed on her were sometimes more than she could stomach or accept, but she trusted him not to stab her in the back. Haymitch never lied and he wouldn’t lie about that anyway. He had called her ugly when she was at her most radiant enough times.

No Capitol man would have said the same to her in the same circumstances without lying, looking so bare and plain was considered ugly in that part of the country and ugly was the worst thing that could happen to a Capitol – all the more so when they were twenty-nine, unmarried, not so popular anymore and would probably end up being Twelve’s escort forever.

But Haymitch meant it. The sentiment was heartfelt, the words were sincere and when he brushed his fingertips on her cheek and repeated it, with a touch of surprise, she believed him. She felt beautiful in her bareness.

She fell in love right then.

Or maybe she had been in love from the start.

Who knew how those soulmate things worked.

Their dynamic changed slightly after that. They still bickered, argued and fought almost every day and they were still wild and violent in bed but, sometimes, it was more tender. Sometimes, he lingered in her bed. Sometimes, they talked – real discussions about his nightmares, her shifting opinions on the Games and the Capitol that she knew to keep secret from everyone else, the scars on his back from when he had been caught poaching when he was fifteen... She liked to think they were friends. He told her once that he had planned to marry his girl, back before his Games, even though she wasn’t his soulmate because he didn’t believe in fate. She didn’t know if that had been a message or just a half-drunk confession.

Each time, they had sex, she saw the pale blue marks on his skin from where he bit or squeezed her flesh too tight. He must have seen the reflections on her too. She was never shy about nibbling on his neck or clawing at his back. He must have seen the marks but he never said anything. She wasn’t sure he made the connection.

Years passed in the same fashion. She knew better than to voice her feelings or ask for more than he was willing to give. She didn’t know what he felt for her, sometimes he acted as if he hated her, sometimes he held her in his arms as if she was the most precious thing he had ever touched. It was confusing and maddening but she learned how to live with it.

Until Peeta and Katniss came along.

When they won, she almost fainted from joy – or exhaustion, both were equally possible – but his arms were strong around her and kept her upright. For a few minutes, it was all hugging. She passed from his arms to Cinna’s and then to Portia’s to end up right back against him and they were laughing, so, so happy she could have cried...

It was after that it took a turn for the worse, once the euphoria had died down and they realized just how much trouble they were in. The stunt with the berries, naturally, hadn’t pleased the Gamemakers at all and the last time they had been upstaged like that, Haymitch’s family had paid the price. There were the other things too, insignificant in light of the victory perhaps but huge in retrospect: Katniss’ partial loss of hearing in one of her ear and Peeta’s leg. The fact that no matching phantom injuries appeared on the other’s body didn’t work in their favor even though
Katniss’ oath that she didn’t care one bit about that during the crowning helped a little with their star-crossed lovers charade.

“Who cares about soulmates?” Haymitch scoffed, later on, after she had asked if he thought it was what was stopping Katniss from returning Peeta’s sincere feelings. They were back in her room and she busied herself by taking her wig off while he watched from the bed. “Never met mine and I’m doing just fine like that. Won’t get my hand forced by something that doesn’t exist.”

“It exists since the proofs are there.” she pointed out. “The phantom injuries...”

“Fate’s a fickle bitch and I refuse to believe in her.” he cut her off. “My soulmate’s probably somewhere, living a happy life with a husband and kids, and that’s good ’cause I won’t be forced with someone.”

“It doesn’t feel forced.” she hummed distractedly. “It feels like... Finding a missing piece.”

“How would you know?” he frowned, watching her like hawk. “You found yours and you didn’t tell me?”

She didn’t meet his eyes, seizing the pretext of peeling the fake eyelashes off her eyelid instead. “I found him when I was twelve. He wasn’t interested.”

“Well, my point exactly then.” he snorted. “Your soulmate’s an idiot and you deserve better than that. The whole thing’s a sham, sweetheart!”

She didn’t dispute the point.

The Tour came and went, the Quell was announced and soon enough they were back right where they had started, trying to keep Peeta and Katniss alive. Haymitch was hiding something from her, she knew without having to ask. She didn’t want to ask because Peacekeepers that weren’t so discreet were shadowing her everywhere she went and she was scared of what it meant.

The children had been back in the arena for two days when the wine glass slipped from her fingers.

Haymitch barely glanced away from the screen on the penthouse living-room, too engrossed in Johanna, Beetee and Wiress’ trek through the jungle.

“You’re okay, sweetheart?” he mumbled.

“I’m fine.” she sighed. Tired, would have been the truthful answer but he hadn’t slept much more than her in the past few weeks and so she didn’t want to complain. She should have called an Avox but she couldn’t be bothered to go in search of one so, instead, she crouched and started picking up the pieces.

Thirteen years and he had never suspected anything.

The piece of glass that embedded itself into her palm shattered the status quo.

She cried out in pain and he was next to her in a flash, cradling her hand in his and pulling out the piece of glass to inspect the wound. It wasn’t serious enough to require stitches but it was deep enough that the phantom injury remained on his skin a few minutes. He noticed it just as it was starting to fade. His grey eyes darted from the quickly disappearing blue gash on his hand to her palm where a matching wound was still bleeding and he suddenly met her eyes with a horrified look.
“Haymitch...” she tried but before she could stop him, he had grabbed another piece of glass and cut his forearm.

When the pale blue line appeared on her skin, he took a step back.

“Haymitch, please, it’s not... It doesn’t change anything.” she whispered.

“I can’t do that right now.” he spat. “I can’t... I can’t deal with you right now.”

She didn’t understand what that meant until he sent her home two days later, even though the Games seemed to be close to a resolution, with the strict instruction to wait in her apartment and not to be difficult when the moment would come. She didn’t know what he was talking about, he simply told her to follow whoever would come to her with a Mockingjay pin without asking questions.

Nobody with a Mockingjay pin came knocking at her door.

Peacekeepers did knock it down though.

The rest was all a blur. She was arrested, interrogated, tossed in a cell with Portia and then taken to another cell with Johanna... And then... Then she really regretted that Haymitch had found out about the soulmates thing when he had because there was no way he wouldn’t see what they were doing to her and it made her sad. She would have protected him from that if the choice had been hers.

They told her he was dead.

She called them liars.

She knew he wasn’t, there were phantom scratch marks on her arms.

°O°O°O°

Haymitch had never been paying close attention to the phantom marks on his body. He had never needed a soulmate, not when his brother had been hungry and he was the one making sure he was fed when their mother’s small income wasn’t enough, not when his girl was so full of life he didn’t even care their phantom injuries weren’t matching because he knew in his heart she was the one he was going to make his life with, and certainly not when, after he had won the Games, his life had become a self-imposed desert. Any soulmate of his would end up a toy of the Capitol, a pressure point, and he didn’t want any more dead on his already guilty conscience.

She had never been a huge inconvenience anyway. She wasn’t a thrill seeker and thus not prone to getting hurt. He could remember one time when he was twelve – which would have made Effie seven, he figured – when he had found himself covered in those phantom bruises. The little blue scrapes usually faded in a matter of seconds but that time, the bruises had remained on his skin for several hours. He could remember his mother taking a look and shaking her head, telling him whoever she was she had certainly almost broken her neck. He had been worried for a while because even though he hadn’t felt a need for a soulmate, he had still felt a connection with that stranger and he would have hated to lose it, knowing that it would have meant her death.

It gave a new light on things, knowing his soulmate wasn’t a random stranger in whatever District, a faceless person he shared a link with, but Effie Trinket. Everything he had gone through, he now revisited about through her perspective.

He had always been a lot more reckless than she was, even more so in his youth and he wondered how she had felt when she had seen all those phantom marks on her body, probably a new one
every day... He wondered how she had felt when he had been whipped for poaching at fifteen, certain the pain was sharp enough to go through the link, certain also she must have sported the blue lines for days... She must have been around eleven, then. She must have been terrified. She was twelve when he had won, she was twelve when his stomach had been sliced up and he had to hold his own guts inside his own body with his own hands... That was when she had understood, most likely. She had told him she had found his soulmate when she was twelve, she had just neglected to tell him it was him. And he had rejected her, or so she had said... He had no memory of ever meeting her prior to her becoming an escort.

Still, he wondered how she had felt all those times, when the phantom injuries had appeared on her and she had known it was him who was hurt, him and not a faceless stranger...

It certainly made it different for him to know the injuries were hers.

The mirror in his compartment’s bathroom in Thirteen was small and square, not big enough to show him everything he wanted to see. Not that he truly needed to anyway. The blue lines were everywhere, some angry blue, some pale and ready to fade... There was a phantom bruise on his cheek and everyone was giving him pity looks everywhere he went. He usually hid the wounds as well as he could, under multiples layers of sweaters, not because he was ashamed of them but to protect her privacy.

He was still angry at Plutarch for failing him not once but twice.

Now, not only was Peeta lost but so was Effie.

The Gamemaker had almost convinced him she would be alright at first, arguing she was still a Capitol citizen who was completely clueless about the whole thing and that they would probably release her after a while. During the first couple of days, it had appeared Plutarch was right. And then, right in the middle of a briefing, he had felt it: the pain. Sharp and fleeting, strong enough to knock the air out of his lung and make him groan but gone as soon as it had come. A ripple of her suffering. He hadn’t been overly surprised when phantom injuries had started to pop on his arms but when he had lost his temper Coin had condemned him to a cell until the effects of his withdrawal had disappeared.

It wasn’t withdrawal, although it didn’t help, because he had been cutting down on his liquor for weeks now. It was her pain that was driving him mad with helplessness. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could try... The blue wounds appeared on him and he scratched at them for no good reasons other than to let her know she wasn’t alone.

Then Katniss had finally got her act together and they had taken him out of his cell, satisfied that there was not a drop of alcohol left in him.

It had been good to focus on something else than what Effie might be going through. Katniss had given a curious glance at the phantom bruises but never asked, Finnick had looked half sorry and half jealous.

“At least you know she’s still alive.” he had told him.

And yes, he supposed that beat Finnick’s perfectly smooth skin where no phantom injuries were to be seen.

But, he mused, as he made an inventory of all the newest blue bruising around his shoulder in the too small mirror, it didn’t make it any easier. The throb of pain was almost constant now, like a buzz in the back of his head, almost a phantom limb, and he couldn’t imagine the state she must have been in for him to feel it so acutely. The shoulder, he decided from the particular form of the
bruising, was most likely dislocated.

He punched the mirror in anger and only regretted it once he saw the blood on his knuckles. She had enough wounds without him adding his own.

When he walked out of the bathroom, Beetee gave him a once over, his friend’s eyes stopping on the very real injured knuckles before mapping out the rest. He could have put on a shirt but he was used to sleeping bare-chested and they shared a compartment, there wasn’t much of him Beetee hadn’t seen yet anyway.

“Do you know who she is?” Three’s victor asked.

Haymitch swallowed back his instinctive answer to *fuck off* and hopped on the upper bunk bed with more difficulties than he would have liked. He was old. Old, tired and damaged and it fucking figured that she would get torn to pieces because he had screwed up.

“Maybe *they* know and they’re using her against me.” he said, voicing out loud the suspicion he had been mulling over for days. He didn’t want to say who his soulmate was. He didn’t want to give anyone in Thirteen the ammunition, just in case.

“It’s Snow’s style.” Beetee agreed. “You didn’t answer my question, it’s alright though, I can take a wild guess.”

“You’re betting on Enobaria, aren’t you?” he snorted but the joke felt wrong. He couldn’t make that topic light.

“Absolutely.” his friend humored him. “You two would make a charming couple.”

He waited until Beetee had left his wheelchair for his bed before switching the lights off, hoping he would manage a few hours of sleep before his communicuff would beep with the next emergency. Once in the dark tough, despite his exhaustion, he couldn’t sleep.

“Do you have one?” he asked his friend. “Soulmate, I mean.”

There was a long silence and he almost regretted the question.

“I used to.” Three’s victor finally replied.

“Wiress.” Haymitch guessed, cursing himself for his stupidity.

“Yes.” Beetee answered. “And I know what you want to ask but honestly I don’t know. Yes, I know she isn’t suffering anymore but her being dead... A piece of me is missing. A huge piece. You don’t want that, Haymitch, and I don’t think she would either.”

It was hard to decide what Effie would want or not when she wasn’t there to tell him herself. She was the one bossing everyone around and keeping things on track, not him. He was doing a poor job of it with Katniss. With or without blue lines on her body telling her what was happening to Peeta, the girl was falling apart and he simply didn’t know how to patch her back together.

After the bombing and her subsequent revelation that Snow was using Peeta to hurt her, he was really scared that it would be her undoing and that was why he pushed even harder than before for Coin to launch a rescue. He volunteered, naturally, as much to help Peeta, Jo and Annie as because he had his own agenda and wanted to go look for his escort. Boggs ignored him and thus he was relegated to babysitting Finnick and Katniss while the real soldiers do the job.

“Is that what happened to you?” Katniss asked, once Finnick had started telling the world exactly
what use Snow reserved to his victors. She nodded sadly when he was done telling her about his family and his girl and then she pointed at the fading bruise poking out of his sleeve. “And her? You always say the soulmate thing is crap but... Do they have her?”

Had Katniss even spared a single though to the escort who had declared them all a team and who had helped him make sure the girl would come out of the arena twice? Had she spared a thought for the matching tokens that had probably been taken as a dissident gesture?

“She’s missing.” he mumbled, twisting the golden bangle on his wrist.

“You know who she is then?” Katniss asked clearly taken aback.

He thought even if she had never cut herself with the broken glass, he would have figured it out by now.

Effie remained missing.

Plutarch’s agents couldn’t find her and she hadn’t been with the victors at the time of the rescue. It soon became apparent why when Peeta tried to strangle Katniss. They had only been too happy to let them take the boy, it had been the plan all along probably, the other two victors didn’t cost them anything. Jo knew nothing of importance and Annie had no value at all.

They executed Portia and his heart almost stopped, certain Effie would be next.

She wasn’t.

But this time when the phantom injuries started to fade, they weren’t replaced with new ones. The bruising on his shoulder was the last to disappear. His tanned skin was his own again but it didn’t reassure him.

He kept telling himself it was for the best and that it didn’t mean anything. After all, they were all saying you knew when your soulmate died. Missing piece of whatever... You were supposed to know.

As he sat next to Katniss’ bed, after she was shot in Two, he pondered that stupid idea while waiting for the girl to wake up, and decided it was bullshit. How were you supposed to know? He was already missing her, he was missing her so much he couldn’t breathe, so why would it be any different if she was dead? Or was she already dead and that was what this yearning for her meant?

There was a tray with needles under plastic wraps in a corner of the room. He snatched one and disposed of the plastic wrapping in the bin, he would get in trouble for stealing it but he could deal with that later. He stabbed his forearm with the needle, right under the edge of the ridiculous bangle he had gotten back from Finnick, and he forced the needle up, leaving a bleeding gash in its wake. It was deep and large enough to be noticeable. It vaguely looked like a question mark. He hoped she would understand. They had always been good at understanding each other without having to voice out anything.

He was almost tempted to write something but thought better of it. If the Capitol ever found out and decided to use her as a carving board to send him messages, it would kill him.

He waited.

He didn’t know what he was waiting for anymore: for Effie to reply his signal or for Katniss to wake up.

The wound wasn’t deep enough to have lasted more than a couple of minutes on her skin. When
an hour flew by without any sign from her, he closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, forcing himself to swallow the lump in his throat.

He saw it when he was about to rub his eyes. It faded fast, it was gone in the blink on an eye, and he wondered if he had dreamt it : the pale blue marks of teeth on his hand, under his thumb.

He almost collapsed with relief.

He threw himself in the rebellion with renewed energy after that, eager not only to see that war brought to an end but, also, to find her.

Everything moved quickly after Two had been taken. Earlier than Haymitch thought possible, he found himself on the outskirt of the Capitol with Coin and her strategy team, fearing at any minute that the star squad would finally be located and confirmed dead.

Someone later told him Annie cried out when Finnick died. He didn’t know if it was true or if he believed it.

He simply knew he had never been as relieved as when Snow’s official surrender went through and he found both of his kids still alive. Peeta was mostly fine, Katniss was another matter entirely. He took his first sip of liquor in forever when he heard about Prim. He downed the bottle when he realized who had truly given the order to drop those parachutes.

The first few days in the Capitol were a blur. There were too many things to do, be it in with the new rebel government or with the kids : decisions needed to be made if anything else. There were still Peacekeepers holding on in some buildings, the rebels were still fighting to take those last outposts, they were still emptying prisons...

On the fourth day, Plutarch clapped him on the shoulder with a cheerful grin.

“We found her. She’s alive.” the Gamemaker told him. “I wouldn’t say fine but she’s alive.”

Plutarch had her transferred to the Presidential Mansion hospital with the rest of the VIPs. He rushed to her gurney as soon as they took it out of the hovercraft, they rolled her away before he could take a good look at her but Plutarch had told him the truth : she was breathing.

He wouldn’t have called her fine either though. Her shoulder was dislocated, had probably been for some time – and Haymitch could date it to the very day, he had sported the bruises for weeks – and there was some concern about her gaining back a full range of movements. She was dehydrated and malnourished but other wounds she had sustained during her captivity had healed on their own. Some had festered but that was nothing the Capitol medicines couldn’t counter.

She floated in and out of consciousness for a few days.

Haymitch couldn’t stay with her full time, he had Peeta, Katniss and Annie to check upon and Coin to keep an eye on. The President was finally showing her true colors and he didn’t like them one bit. The massive arrests of anyone having ever participated in the Games didn’t exactly take him by surprise but he wasn’t expecting it so soon either. He had to bodily stand in the doorway of Effie’s hospital room to stop them from taking her.

It took Plutarch’s intervention to send the soldiers away – not a small feat either because by the time the Gamemaker was alerted, he had punched two of them and his knuckles were bruised. He felt sorry for that when he saw the matching blue marks on Effie’s hands. She had seen enough bruising for a lifetime. He brushed his fingers against the phantom injuries, wishing they would fade quicker. He only realized too late that Plutarch was still standing there, a knowing look in his eyes. What Effie was to him wasn’t public knowledge yet but he didn’t see a point in hiding it
anymore. Not when it could finally be an asset.

“She’s my soulmate.” he sneered when Coin demanded his presence in her brand new presidential office. “You’re going to execute the soulmate of one of the latest victors still alive? You really want to go down that road?”

No, Coin didn’t want to go down that road and so Effie was spared the humiliation of a public trial and a likely execution.

That was one thing less to worry about.

Katniss was getting better but her mother was slowly taking her distances and Haymitch didn’t like that. He understood losing Prim was a huge blow – hell, it was a huge blow to him and he had barely known the kid – but he also knew the girl would need someone and while he fully intended to be there for her, he also knew he would ultimately fail like he failed everyone.

He certainly failed to be there the first time Effie woke up properly.

He picked up flowers from the Mansion garden but lost his courage halfway to her room and flunked them in a trash bin.

His stance was defensive when he entered her room, not keen on hearing everything she had a right to blame him for. Her blue eyes tracked him all the way from the door to the chair at her bedside but she remained silent. She had gained back some colors but she was still abnormally pale and she looked so frail he was certain a simply touch would be enough to leave a bruise.

The awkward silence lingered for a few minutes and then, since she didn’t seem ready to start the fight that was bound to follow, he began with his own accusation : “You should have told me from the start.”

“I tried to.” she said. Even her voice sounded fragile, he hated it. “After you won. You didn’t notice me.”

He rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t have noticed a dancing elephant after I won, Effie.”

And she had been twelve. He might have noticed a sixteen years old but a twelve years old?

“I was vexed all the same.” she huffed. “I had written you off and I was only comforted in that decision when I met you.”

He looked down. The possibility that she was happy to ignore their link had never occurred to him actually. He was an arrogant ass, he mused.

“You’ve always been so adamant that you didn’t care about your soulmate...” she continued hesitantly.

“But I care about you.” he snapped. “I...”

The words he wanted to say wouldn’t come out though.

“Haymitch...” she sighed.

“You’re a part of me. You were long before I found out about those stupid phantom injuries.” he scoffed, trying to make light of those feelings that were consuming him to the point he thought he would explode. “Those last few months... I missed you, sweetheart.” He grabbed her hand, needing to touch her, to reassure himself that she was truly there. “I’ve had enough of those
phantom blue things for the rest of my life. Never again.”

“Never again.” she vowed, squeezing his fingers with all the small strength she had left. He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss on her knuckles.

“Okay.” he said. “Your turn now, Princess. Yell at me.”

“What for?” she frowned.

“Screwing up so bad you ended up tortured to an inch of your life?” he suggested bitterly.

Her blue eyes were too knowing for his tastes. “That wasn’t your fault, Haymitch. If anything it was Plutarch’s. He already apologized and explained. And, truthfully, I am still too tired to be angry.” A teasing smile played on her lips. “Besides, there is no use being angry with you, fate wants us together.”

“I don’t believe in fate, sweetheart.” he scowled, pressing another kiss against her hand, relieved there wouldn’t be any shouting match.

“You should start to because it keeps leading me to you.” she hummed. Her eyes fluttered close but she was clearly fighting off sleep. “Will you stay?”

“Always.” he snorted. “You’re stuck with me.”

“Because I am your soulmate.” she argued.

“Because I chose you.” he retorted.

He brushed her hair away from her face, hoping she was still awake enough to understand what he was trying to say.

He didn’t care that she was his soulmate.

He would have picked her anyway.

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