Stars Look Down

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Summary

The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

CHAPTER EIGHT EDITED (21/04/2016)
CHAPTER SIXTEEN EDITED (08/09/2016)
Chapter One

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WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter One

It was hot, almost unbearably hot, and yet not a single person shifted from where they were stood exposed in the centre of the main square watching the big screens which had been erected as per usual to broadcast the annual Hunger Games.

Despite the fact that viewing was compulsory it was unusual for the square to be so crowded at such a late stage in the Games, for people to be packed shoulder to shoulder, their eyes straining to see each and every detail on the large screens, their hands surreptitiously interlocking at their sides in a silent display of comfort and solidarity.

Usually their Tributes were lost during the first few days, either killed during the initial bloodbath or unable to survive in whatever landscape the Gamemakers threw them into.

Growing up in such an urban environment had only ever been helpful twice in the history of the Games; during the 16th Hunger Games when a fifteen year old Woof had been able to navigate the maze that was the abandoned city with such speed and agility that his enemies just hadn’t been able to keep up and then during the 59th Hunger Games when eighteen year old Cecelia had outwitted her opponents after they’d found themselves locked in the ruins of a train station, using her knowledge of an urban environment to keep herself one step ahead until she only had to take out one Tribute in combat.

In terms of survival odds District Eight was ranked right down at the bottom, only just above District Twelve who had only ever had a single winner of the Games.

And yet this year the “usual way of things” had been turned on its head. Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, the Tributes of District Twelve were the joint favourites to win even after they’d both suffered horrific injuries at the hands of the Career Tributes and the Gamemakers and Adya Kaminski, who as a “crippled” Tribute should have been picked off during the initial bloodbath, was still alive on this, the eighth day of the 74th Hunger Games, something no other Tribute from District Eight had managed in years.

Up on the screens the images suddenly changed, the central screen following what was obviously the Careers Tributes latest hunt while the two smaller screens on either side showed Adya, standing with his arms outstretched and obviously singing despite the lack of sound and Katniss
“Looks like it’s time for Bruno to leave the Games, Caesar,” Claudius Templesmith announced gleefully as the audience were forced to watch the boy from District Ten stumbling through the trees, his unsteady gate painfully obvious. “And I think it’s safe to say that whatever he did to get a training score of nine it didn't include running.”

“You might be right there, Claudius,” Caesar’s sickeningly sweet voice echoed throughout the large square, making more than one of the large audience flinch or shudder.

On the screen Bruno, his eyes wide with fear and his chest heaving, came to a sudden stop at the base of a large tree and the camera switched to show the three Careers pursuing him briefly before focusing on his face as he obviously tried to think of a way out.

“What are you thinking, dear boy?” Caesar murmured thoughtfully before gasping dramatically when Bruno threw himself towards the tree, desperately grabbing hold of the available handholds as he began climbing. “Apparently tree climbing is popular this year!”

His progress was painfully slow, his withered right leg no help to him at all and all too soon the Careers were stood at the base of the tree laughing up at him.

“Where are you going to go, Hop Along?” Clove’s voice was suddenly broadcast around the square as she took out one of her throwing knives and, with deadly accuracy, buried the blade in the branch that Bruno had just been about to take hold of.

A choked sob escaped the poor boy’s mouth as he hugged the thick trunk of the tree for a moment before attempting to continue his ascent, a single tear running down his cheek.

“Shame we don’t have that bow anymore,” Marvel muttered, tossing his deadly spear from one hand to another, his eyes never leaving the climbing figure for a moment. “Would have made this nice and easy…”

“What, like last time?” Cato scoffed loudly, crossing his arms across his chest. “I’m enough of a man to admit that my archery skills are somewhat lacking and I know full well that yours are even worse than mine. And let’s not mention Clove…”

The deadly female Career turned to growl at her District partner before throwing another blade up at their target, this time hitting the main trunk beside his withered leg.

“I though your aim was meant to be good…” Marvel muttered, obviously unimpressed.

“My aim is perfect, asshole,” Clove snapped, elbowing him in the stomach. “It’s called prolonging the inevitable, not that you’d know anything about that.”

“Knock it off, Clove,” Cato ordered sharply, cutting off Marvel’s angry response. “Just hurry up and bring him down. We’ve got more important prey to find.”

In the end she didn’t need to. The gathered crowd sucked in a horrified breath when Bruno’s withered leg gave out from underneath him as he was trying to reach the next available branch, unbalancing him and sending him plummeting towards the ground with a terrified scream.

Almost as one they averted their gaze, looking at their feet or the sky or even burying their faces in someone else’s shoulder rather than watch his body strike the ground, the sound of it happening bad enough as his screams were cut off by a sickening thud.
The next sound they heard was the familiar echo of the cannon, followed by the equally familiar sound of Marvels booming laughter and when they looked back at the screen they found the Career Tribute stood oven the mangled body with a bright grin on his face.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, brings us down to the final ten Tributes,” Claudius’s voice informed them, the audio from the Arena cutting off with an audible click. “What an unusual year we’re having, Caesar, full of so many surprises.”

“I know what you mean, Claudius,” Caesar chuckled brightly as their heavily made up face replaced the gruesome image. “Shall we see how our Girl On Fire is reacting to the latest cannon? Or shall we listen to our little songbirds latest performance on a quick playback?”

“Oh, let's hear his latest song, Caesar,” Claudius agreed, turning to offer his co-host an obviously fake smile. “I’m dying to hear what he's come up with now.”

A murmur of disapproval spread through the crowd as the two of them descended into almost childish giggles at his choice of words, entirely inappropriate behaviour to anyone in the Districts but completely acceptable if not encouraged in the Capitol.

"Sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, Everything that's wonderful is what I feel when we’re together. Brighter than a lucky penny, When you're near the rain cloud just disappears, dear, And I feel so fine just to know that you are mine.”

Caesar and Claudius were cheering, clapping loudly in approval of the chirpy song which was so different to all the others they’d heard him perform thus far in the Games.

“His mother used to sing that one all the time,” Brandon murmured sadly, resting his hands on his daughter’s shoulders as he thought of his old friends. “She sang it to his father.”

Mikhail sighed, squeezing his mothers hand when she too seemed upset by the song.

He was a tall boy, one of the tallest in his year in fact, and he towered over his mother.

He’d inherited most of his looks from his father; dark brown hair which turned into a tight abundance of curls if he let it grow too long, light tanned skin covered in a healthy dusting of dark hair, particularly on his broad chest but definitely not enough to be considered “too hairy” by the girls in his year who flocked to gain his attention.

Not that he had any cause to care what they thought about him, devoted to his girlfriend as he was and had been since they’d got together when they were both fourteen.

His build was definitely something else he’d inherited from his father.

Strong, broad shoulders, trim, muscular torso, long, equally muscular legs and big feet.

For some reason this last fact had been a subject of much merriment amongst his female peers, including Juno, his girlfriend, and it wasn’t until he’d gone to his father for an explanation that he’d finally understood their giggling and suggestive remarks.

His blue eyes, however, had obviously been a gift from his mother.

Mikhail sighed, squeezing his mother’s hand when she too seemed upset by the song.

“My life is sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, That's how this refrain goes, so come on and join
“in everybody! Sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, Everything that's wonderful is sure to come your way, When your in love to stay.”

On Mikhail's other side his girlfriend leaned her head against his broad shoulder, hugging his arm tightly as she tried to hold back tears as she listened to her old friend sing.

Adya had always been prone to bursting into song even when they were little, somehow having a song for every occasion thanks to his mother and could turn even the most tedious day at school into a “spectacular extravaganza” much to their teachers annoyance.

He hated the fact that he hadn't thought to search for him after the fire, hadn't wondered why he'd stopped coming to school despite knowing that he had survived, hadn't questioned the fact that with his parents gone he would be all alone.

The guilt he felt was like a lead weight in his stomach and, combined with the guilt he felt about not ignoring Adya's logical protest and volunteering in his place, had left him unable to function for the last fifteen days, suffering from sleepless nights and a lack of appetite.

“Sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, Everything that's wonderful is what I feel when we’re together. Brighter than a lucky penny, When you’re near the rain cloud just disappears, dear, And I feel so fine just to know that you are mine.”

“…there's more?” the boy from District Three who Adya had befriended asked weakly, much to the annoyance of the two Capitol men now dancing on one of the other screens. “Ok, now I completely understand why you need to get that out of your head. That's just...annoyingly chipper and completely inappropriate for the Hunger Games.”

It seemed as though Adya's sightless eyes were actually fixed on the camera as he smirked, sucking in a sharp breath as he gasped out his response before continuing with the song, “I know, right? My life is sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, That's how this refrain goes, so come on and join in everybody! Sunshine, lollipops and rainbows, Everything that's wonderful is sure to come your way, ‘Cause you're in love! You're in love! And love is here to stay!”

Silence followed the end of the song in the square despite the vigorous applause coming from one of the smaller screens where Caesar and Claudius were returning to their seats.

“Oh, wasn't that just wonderful!” Caesar exclaimed happily, offering the camera one of his trademark smiles, showing off his impossibly white teeth. “I smell another hit song in the making! Did you know that Go The Distance is currently the most popular song in the Capitol? I adored his original performance but Valeria has done such a wonderful job.”

Mikhail shuddered.

They'd been raving about Adya's singing almost as much as they had been raving about the Girl On Fire and had even had an in depth conversation about what he could look forward to in terms of a music career should he “emerge victorious” from the Games.

“Looks like something going on with our Girl On Fire,” Caesar suddenly announced and the screens did another instantaneous switch so that Katniss's admittedly striking face filled the larger screen for a long moment before the camera pulled back to reveal the fact that she and her little friend were building what appeared to be a bonfire.

“This green stuff is gonna smoke like crazy, so as soon as you light it move on to the next
fire,” Katniss's clear voice announced from the screen as they both placed a collection of large green ferns on top of the wood they’d arranged in a small pyramid, her accent still a little strange to hear. “Light this one last and I’ll meet you back over there.”

“Right.”

Mikhail wasn't the only one to grimace when the little girl, Rue, nodded.

Even her voice sounded young.

Too young.

“And then I’ll destroy their stuff while they’re chasing us,” Katniss concluded simply, stepping back to admire their work and nodding to herself, obviously finding it satisfactory.

“Looks like we might get a little more action today, folks,” Caesar practically giggled as the two girls on the screen turned away from their bonfire, the screen splitting briefly to show four other fires made up just like the one they’d just been seen completing.

“We need a signal in case one of us gets held up,” Rue announced, looking nervously around them as she obviously struggled to remain as calm as possible.

Mikhail couldn't imagine what it would be like to be in the Games at twelve years old.

It was disgusting.

“Ok. Like what?”

A close up of Rue’s dark face showed her looking thoughtful for a moment before smiling.

“Here. Watch this,” she instructed her ally before looking up into the trees and singing a simple little melody, made up of no more than four notes, which was instantly picked up by dozens of birds and repeated over and over again, filling the air with her song.

“Mockingjays,” Katniss came to the same conclusion as her audience with a smile, her eyes filled with an innocent sort of wonder as the birds finally began to trail off. “That’s great.”

“Back home we use them to signal all the time,” Rue admitted softly. “You try.”

Either Katniss couldn't sing or she simply preferred not to as her melody was created in the form of a whistle, again it was simple but significantly more memorable than Rue's.

Instantly the birds picked it up and began singing it back at her.

Mikhail couldn't help but be a little entranced and he wasn't the only one, their urban District never having experienced Mockingjays as the birds preferred woodland areas.

“Ok, so if we hear that, it means we’re ok and we’ll be back real soon.”

All of them could hear the tremble which appeared in the young girl’s voice.

“We’re gonna be ok,” Katniss murmured, pulling her young friend into an almost motherly hug, pressing her face into the smaller girl's hair for a long moment before pulling back, holding onto Rue's shoulders for a moment longer. “Hey…I’ll see you for supper.”
“Ok.”

“Ok.”

The cameras stayed with Katniss as the two girls split up, following the older girl as she began making her way quietly through the trees heading for the Cornucopia.

“Finally!” Claudius cried happily, clapping his hands once. “A challenge!”

One of the other screens changed to show a close up view of the Careers mountain of supplies before pulling back to reveal the Adya and Cato sat close together, eating a tasty looking meal whilst chatting tightly with Clove, Marvel and Sam, the boy from three.

Juno gasped loudly.

“She’s going to destroy the supplies,” she muttered quickly, looking up at her much taller boyfriend with worry in her dark brown eyes. “Adya. Adya doesn't leave the camp…”

His stomach clenched, the lead weight seeming to sink even further as he realised just what she was implying, as he came to the same conclusion she had. Adya would be at the camp when Katniss attacked it.

“No…”

But there was nothing they could do.

They watched as Rue began lighting the first of the bonfires on one of the smaller screens, using another fern to fan the flames until thick grey smoke began to billow out.

It took only moments for Katniss’s plan to enter into effect, just as the girl in question arrived at the Cornucopia, ducking down just inside the tree line to watch the camp.

“Hey! What’s that?” “That would be smoke, Marvel,” Clove answered simply before her voice became sickly sweet as she continued derisively. “You know, that funny cloud that’s produced when you have a fire? I’m sure even you’ve seen it before.”

“You know, I might be able to feel a bit sorry for Cato or even Marvel but that girl is just too…evil,” his mother, Eliza, sighed. “How could her mother let her grow up like that?”

Sasha, Mikhail’s fourteen year old sister, reached out to take her mother’s hand.

“I know what smoke is,” Marvel growled. “I just meant we should probably check it out, find the idiot that started the fire. Might manage to get a proper kill this time.”

“Who do think it is?” Clove asked as the three Careers armed themselves ready for their second hunt of the day, concealing blades all over their bodies. “I can't imagine the Burning Bitch being that stupid which means it's probably one of the little ones.”

“The little ones…” Mikhail muttered. “She's one of the smallest ones in there.”

“You know that's not what she means,” Juno sighed sadly. “She means…”

“I know what she means,” Mikhail cut her off. “I just hope that someone treats her, a little one, the same way she intends to treat them before these Games are over.”
“Mikhail!” his mother hissed sharply, smacking the back of his hand. “I raised you better than that. We do not encourage or look forward to the deaths in the Games, you know that. The moment we start thinking like that we’re no better than them.”

She nodded towards the third screen which showed Caesar and Claudius, both of them perched on the edges of their seats, elbows lent on the desk as they eagerly awaited the “challenge” about to be made inside the Arena.

Mikhail huffed.

“But you said yourself that she's an evil little…”

“That's no excuse to start thinking like them,” Eliza announced firmly before turning her attention back to the screen, Mikhail copying her a moment later and finding himself gazing at an enormous image of his friend and Cato kissing almost sweetly.

Caesar and Claudius almost squealed in response.

“I'll see you when I get back,” Cato murmured when they finally separated. “Stay safe.”

It took Mikhail a moment to realise what Adya was doing, running his fingertips all over the taller boys face, but then he suddenly realised that he was trying to “see” him.

His guilt flared painfully.

Adya shouldn't be in that Arena.

None of them should be.

“You too,” Adya ordered softly before initiating another kiss, this one significantly more passionate with both boys seemingly content for it to last as long as possible. Clove was less patient, clearing her throat loudly which caused them to break apart.

“Little miss spoil sport…” Caesar muttered before laughing softly. “I was enjoying that.”

Mikhail couldn't hold back a shudder.

Enjoying that?

Two boys who shouldn't be possibly saying goodbye for the last time?

He had a horrible feeling that the people in the Capitol would be reacting the same way, not upset by the inevitable deaths that were soon to happen but upset that the “hot boy on boy action” had been interrupted, or rudely interrupted he imagined they'd say.

“You ok?” Sam’s soft voice brought his attention back to the centre screen just as Adya chuckled, just like he had back when they'd been in class one day and he'd successfully tied Ethan Walkers shoe laces together without the bully noticing, causing him to trip and fall in front of most of his victims when he tried to get up at the end of their class, actually breaking his nose.

Adya had always said that the black eye he'd received in response had been worth it.

It was a nice sound.

A reminder of the “good old days” as they said.
“D’you know, you ask me that question a lot?”

A close up of Katniss smiling dominated the third screen before she frowned, her excellent eyesight finally noticing the odd mounds of dirt surrounding the supplies.

“I want to see if she’s going to figure out this booby trap,” Caesar murmured, leaning forwards in anticipation on the second screen which seemed to be devoted to the two “officials” for the moment, the action taking place on the other two screens.

“Yes, it seems they’ve reburied their mines around that big pile of goodies,” Claudius explained as though they hadn’t all watched them doing it a couple of days previously.

Katniss prepared to step forwards.

And then there was the girl from District Five, a camera quickly shifting to follow her as she sprinted silently out of the tree line and over to the supply mountain.

They all seen her watching the Careers camp for the last few days.

They’d all seen hunger taking its toll on her.

They’d all seen her try this before only to back out at the last minute.

And now they watched as she began following the safe lather through the mines.

“She’s certainly figured it out, hasn’t she?”

Snatching up a medium sized back of supplies the girl didn't even hesitate before jumping off the mountain, around the last few mines, before sprinting towards the opposite tree line to the one she'd emerged from only moments before.

Her plan was obvious to them, simple but efficient, but it wasn’t until she was running away that the supposed guards of the camp seemed to notice something had happened.

“What was that?” Sam asked, turning his head from side to side as he tried to identify the source of the clunking noise made by her bounty as she fled the scene.

And that was when Mikhail saw the grin on Adya's face.

“He heard her coming…” he murmured, chuckling softly as Adya denied hearing anything.

“Do you know what, I think our little song bird heard her coming?” Caesar gasped loudly, obviously having come to the same conclusion. “I wonder why he didn't call her out?”

“Perhaps because he's a decent human being?” Juno muttered under her breath.

“I could have sworn I heard something…” Sam sighed deeply on the main screen before getting up from his seat, turning to face Adya as he continued somewhat awkwardly, “I...um...I need to answer a call of nature. I won't go far.”

“Ok.”

As ever when a Tribute had to “answer a call of nature” the cameras stayed away from them, this time staying with Adya in the camp site instead.

This wasn't to give the Tributes privacy.
No, it was so that the Capitol audience wasn’t forced to watch something so “disgusting.”

Killing was fine but defecating in public was just one step too far, apparently.

“Adya…” Juno gasped fearfully as the screens swapped so that an image of Katniss preparing to fire an arrow dominated the centre screen, a close up of the supply mountain appearing on the third screen. “I…I can't watch…”

His girlfriend wasn't the only one to turn her face away when Katniss let her arrow fly.

It didn’t hit Adya as most of them had expected it to.

Instead it had just caught the bottom of a bag of apples near the top of the supplies.

“What is she doing?” Caesar voiced the question they were all thinking.

Katniss prepared a second arrow, her deep breathing echoing loudly throughout the square for a long moment before she finally let the arrow fly.

It split open the bag of apples which immediately began bouncing towards the ground.

Towards the…

“Oh my…” Caesar muttered in obvious shock. “That's…”

“Brilliant!” Claudius finished for him, his voice little more than a squeak.

Just as the first explosion was triggered the screens switched once more, the largest screen now showing Adya in front of the supply mountain, a look of utter horror on his face.

“Sam!”

One small explosion turned into two, three and then the largest explosion any of them had ever seen, picking poor Adya up off of his feet and sending him flying through the air.

On the second screen Katniss herself was knocked down.

Debris continued to fall for a long moment, the camera eventually focusing on Adya where he lay on his front, his head turned to one side which blood trickling down his neck.

The back of his jacket had been ripped to shreds and they could easily see lumps of jagged shrapnel protruding from his skin, blood flowing sluggishly from the countless wounds.

Mikhail swallowed back bile as his stomach clenched.

“Cato…”

On the screen his eyes fluttered closed, the pain disappearing from his face and the people gathered in the square of his District waited…and waited…

But no cannon came.

“He's still alive…” Sasha whimpered tearfully. “He's…”

They’d all seen Tributes bleed to death in previous Games.
It was slow.

It was painful.

And the Capitol loved it.

They saw Katniss pulling herself to her feet on the smaller screen, shaking her head as though she was struggling to focus just as Sam reached his injured friend.

“Adya…”

More than one person lost the meagre contents of their stomachs when Adya let out a cry of pain in response to the younger boy rolling him over and taking him as gently as he could manage into his arms, his hands wiping away the blood flowing from the other boy’s mouth.

“I'm sorry…I'm so sorry…” Adya's sightless eyes flickered open, the glazed orbs somehow filled with pain. “Not…your fault…not…not anyone's…fault…just…”

Mikhail tightened his arms around his mother and girlfriend when they both moved to bury their faces in his chest as Adya's weak voice was cut off by his own coughs, blood flying from between his lips and covering both him and Sam in the red liquid.

“Adya…”

Sam’s tears were almost as bad as Adya's, the regret in his voice echoing the feeling of guilt that had been tearing him apart and would continue to tear him apart for years to come.

He should have volunteered.

At least he'd have stood a chance.

“Hurts…didn't…didn't think it'd be…like this…wanted it to…to…to…”

Surprisingly even Caesar and Claudius were silent although the third screen had shifted away from Katniss and now displayed the Careers returning to the Cornucopia as fast as their legs could take them, panic etched on their striking features.

“…to be…quick and…pain…painless…I don't…”

A brief image of Katniss stumbling back into the tree line preceded the Careers return to the Cornucopia, Cato letting out an almost hysterical scream as he sprinted towards the camp.

“Adya!”

Mikhail found himself feeling almost sorry for Career when he saw the look of abject horror spreading across his features when he was finally close enough to see the blood literally covering the boy he had fallen in love with during the 74th a Hunger Games.

“Adya!”

They all watched as poor Sam, whose entire body was trembling with fear, looked up at the distraught Career and struggled to force words out from behind his lips.

“I…”

That was as far as he got before Cato was upon him, a scream of fear escaping his lips as the
Career ripped him out from beneath the obviously fatally wounded Tribute and without further ado snapped his neck in a quick, clean motion.

Sam’s cannon came at the moment his body hit the floor and was unusually quiet.

“S-Sam…?”

Adya sounded both fearful and resigned, his head tilting towards Cato when the older boy dropped to his knees beside him and carefully pulled his body so that his head was pillowed on the Careers muscular thighs, his hands automatically attempting to wipe away the blood.

“What…what did…?”

“He's dead.”

Mikhail didn't think he'd ever heard a Career sound so hollow when discussing a kill.

A sound like a wounded animal tore itself out of Adya throat when the Career gently reached underneath him to assess the worst of his wounds, cutting off with a sharp groan as he pressed his face against Cato’s thigh as blood began to flow constantly from his mouth.

“Adya…”

“Quick? Sam…was it…?”

The fact that he was worried about his friends suffering instead of his own reminded Adya of the countless times Adya had stood up to a bully on behalf of someone else or had taken the blame for something he hadn't done just to spare someone else a punishment he didn't think they deserve, like the time he ended up in the town stocks for taking the blame for a theft of food that had actually been done by the youngest and frailest girl in their class.

“I broke his neck,” Cato responded on the screen. “He wouldn't have felt a thing.”

Mikhail wasn't the only one to gasp in shock when Adya suddenly froze, his sightless eyes going wide as his whole body tensed up for a long moment before finally going completely limp in the other boys arms, gasping desperately for air.

“Adya!”

He wouldn't survive much longer but why, why did he have to suffer so much?

“Hurts…”

A new, slightly unexpected voice entered the conversation and the camera pulled back to show all four Tributes gathered close together in the remains of their camp.

“Who did this?” Marvel demanded, his voice seemingly little more than a growl.

He seemed genuinely angry and upset by what had happened.

“…bow…” Adya somehow managed to choke out. “…shot at…”

Thankfully that was all the three Careers needed to hear to get their answer, sparing Adya from having to force any more pain filled words out between his fight to keep breathing.

“Find her!”
“Run, Katniss, run!” Claudius actually giggled, sparking a murmur of disapproval in the packed square at his apparent disrespect for the events taking place.

The image of Katniss stumbling unsteadily through the trees was replaced, briefly, with an image of Marvel and Clove running into the woods together before splitting up and going their separate ways, at which point the camera returned to Katniss.

“Adya, I'm sorry…”

“No...your fault…” Adya whimpered, seemingly repeating his earlier words. “No...not anyone's...fault...s'just the way it is...in the G-Games…”

His gentle words only seemed to make Cato's tears worse and he wasn't the only one.

Numerous people in the square were openly sobbing.

Mikhail feared it wouldn't be long before he joined them.

“I was going to win this for you...I was going to get you home…”

All of a sudden Cato seemed much younger than he really was, his striking blue eyes silently pleading for someone, anyone to help him save Adya's life.

Mikhail feared that, even if someone were to send help it would already be too late.

“I am going home…”

And that was it.

Mikhail's tears spilled out onto his cheeks, running silently down his face as his entire body trembled with an effort to contain his gut wrenching sobs.

“It hurts…”

The kiss they shared was one of the emotional kisses Mikhail ever seen.

Cato seemed determined to put his very soul into the action, heedless of the blood now covering his face from Adya's lips and uncontrollable coughing even as they kissed.

“I'm sorry…” he gasped against Adya's lips when they finally parted. “I'm sorry I wasn't here. I'm sorry I could stop her. I'm sorry I couldn't save you. I'm sorry I can't…”

“Shhh…” Adya murmured, pressing trembling fingers across Cato's lips. “It's ok…”

“It's not ok!” Mikhail never thought he'd find himself agreeing with a Career.

“Yes, it is…” Adya murmured, offering his boyfriend a sad smile as he gently began running his fingertips across Cato's quivering lips. “I knew the...the moment that my name...was...was called out that there was…”

He broke off, coughing sharply and uncontrollably.

“...that there was no way I was going to be coming home in...anything but a coffin…”
“It should have been me…” Mikhail found himself gasping even as Cato continued to speak up on the big screen. “I should never have let him go in there…”

“I was going to save you…”

How they got the camera angle Mikhail would never know but the next thing they knew they were being treated to a view of Adya smiling sadly up at his boyfriend, blood beginning to dry on his cheeks even as more blood trickled out of his mouth.

“You did. You did save me, Cato, and I…I have felt more…alive and at…at peace these past few days with you…than I have in…in the three years since…since I…”

Since he lost everything.

His sight.

His home.

His family.

His friends.

Juno reached out, her pale hand cupping his jaw and forcing his eyes to meet hers.

“Stop,” she ordered him firmly, her voice breaking with suppressed emotion. “He wouldn't…he wouldn't want you to feel like this. It's not your fault…”

“But we never checked up on him, Juno,” he gasped weakly, one of his own hands moving to mirror her action, cupping her pale jaw. “We just…forgot about him…”

“We didn't forget shout him,” Juno countered instantly. “We looked for him and the authorities told us he was being taken care of, remember? If anyone's to blame it's them. They're the ones who left him on his own after his wounds had healed.”

“But…”

“We had no way of knowing where he was,” Juno pressed on firmly. “You have to stop torturing yourself about things that you can't possibly change.”

“You made me feel human,” Cato’s voice echoed through the square, drawing his attention back to the screen just as they shared what could only be described as a tender kiss. “You made me feel loved and…and I'll never forget that. I just wish…”

“I want you to try and…win this thing…for yourself now…”

Juno stroked the stubble beginning to cover his cheeks.

“Adya was not and is not and will never be the type of person who would want you to torture yourself like you have been…” she finished softly, her thumb stroking across his lips.

“I want you to live and…remember me…”

“I could never forget you…”

All eyes were pulled away from the image of them sharing another loving kiss when a scream sounded from the other screen, an image appearing of Rue caught in a net trap which had sprung
shut around her, knocking her to the ground. Her screams were borderline hysterical as she pulled desperately at the netting, pressing up with her hands and feet, did anything she could to shift the net from where it was lying across her vulnerable body, pinning her to the ground.

“No…” his mother gasped, turning to look at the screen in horror. “Not her too.”

They couldn't take any more senseless deaths in one day.

They just couldn't.

“K-Katniss?”

Her voice was soft at first, weak, but then she began to scream in earnest.

“Katniss! Katniss, please, help me!”

The sound from her scream cut off suddenly although the horrific image of her struggling underneath the net was still there, the Gamemakers obviously deciding that listening to Adya's final moments were more appealing than her desperate screams.

“I love you, Adya…”

“…love you too…”

It sounded as though every word coming out of his mouth was causing him pain.

And to think they'd all thought that no death could be more horrific than that poor boys had been earlier when he'd fallen from the tree.

At least he hadn't lingered…

“C-Cato?”

“Yes, love?”

“It hurts…please…make it stop…”

A hush fell on the crowd.

They all knew exactly what he was asking for and not a single one of them could blame him.

“Adya…”

“Please…”

Cato clenched his eyes tightly shut for a long moment.

No one could blame him.

If he were in his place, if Juno was lying in his arms like that, begging him to put an end to her pain Mikhail honestly didn't know if he'd be strong enough to do it.

Killing a stranger in order to survive was one thing.

Killing someone you loved was completely different.
Eventually the Career Tribute opened his eyes, tears falling unheeded down his cheeks as he reached out and picked up his abandoned sword, pulling it towards him with the tip drawing a line through the scorched earth before he placed the deadly point against Adya's chest.

Right above his heart.

“At least he'll be able to make it quick,” Mikhail's father muttered. “A Career knows exactly where to place their blade when going for the kill so…”

“I love you, Adya,” Cato all but sobbed, leaning down to press their lips together in a demanding yet gentle kiss, lingering as long as possible. “I love you.”

Adya smiled sadly.

“I love you too, Cato.”

As the two fell silent so did the crowd watching them, not even the Peacekeepers making a single sound where they stood watching over the large crowd, rifles at the ready.

Cato moved between one breath and the next.

He drove his sword deep into Adya's chest, his face a mask of true horror as his latest victim tensed, sucking in a final lungful of air and then went completely limp.

Adya's sightless eyes seemed to be locked with Cato's, his mouth twisted into a gentle smile.

The all too familiar cannon sounded, followed by a horrific scream of pure rage and grief that left every member of the crowd truly shaken, watching with wide eyes as the sword was pulled free of Adya's body and flung away, watching as one of their own was gathered up into the arms of a truly hysterical Career who seemed incapable of doing anything but cry.

And that was it.

Just like that Adya was gone.

He barely registered the fact that his little sister had pulled herself free of their father's arms until she appeared on the stage, climbing up the steps in a move so reminiscent of a Tribute walking to their death that several people actually cried out.

“This is for Adya,” she announced as clearly as she could and Mikhail froze, eyeing the Peacekeepers altering their grips on their rifles as though expecting the worst. “He taught me this song a long time ago, when I was a little girl and I always thought I'd want it sung at my funeral. Now I'd like to sing it for him.”

She glanced nervously at the Peacekeepers before taking a deep breath and beginning.

His sister had never been a natural singer, not like Adya, but in that moment it didn't matter that her voice shook and she fell off of most of the notes.

It was the words that mattered.

“Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glint on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle, gentle autumn rain.
Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there, I do not sleep.
When you awake in the morning hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush,
Of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the soft, soft starlight, starlight at night.
Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there, I do not sleep.”

No one applauded.
It wasn't the type of song you applauded.

But even the Peacekeepers seemed to have been effected, their guns forgotten as they watched her make her way back to their father, all but throwing herself into his arms.

They heard rather than saw the screen change, Katniss whistling clearly and the birds responding instantly as she continued to move slowly through the trees.

Rue didn't respond.

Some people towards the back of the large group began making their way out of the square and no one did anything to stop them but most stayed to find out what happened to the little girl who had been caught in the Careers hunting trap.

“Do you want to leave?” Mikhail asked softly, looking down at his girlfriend who was weeping softly into his shirt. “We don't have to stay…”

“Yes, we do,” his mother announced firmly, nodding towards the screen. “For her.”

Up on the screen Rue was still fighting with the net whilst on the smaller screen Katniss had come across the unlit fire, a look of genuine concern marring her attractive features.

She tried the whistle again but only the birds responded.

“Katniss!”

It was strange seeing Rue scream on one screen but hearing her on another and it was made even worse when the third screen, which had been focused on Caesar and Claudius for so long, suddenly shifted to dhow marvel who was obviously only a little way behind Katniss when she took off in a desperate search for the source of the screams.

“Katniss! Katniss, help!”

Marvel smirked, shifting his grip on his spear as he followed the path trod by Katniss only moments before, the usually careful Tribute leaving obvious signs in her hurry.

“Katniss! Katniss! Help! Katniss!”
Katniss whimpered when she came around a large tree and finally spotted her friend caught up in the obvious trap, still desperately struggling in vain to free herself.

“Katniss?” Rue gasped, her hoarse voice suddenly filled with hope.

The screens changed once more, the largest one showing Katniss and Rue as the older girl began desperately sawing through the rope holding the net shut with her knife while the other two showed and excited Caesar and Claudius once more, both with their fingers pressed to their mouths as Marvel appeared on the last screen.

He was watching Katniss free Rue from the trap.

He was there with them and they had no idea.

“Not another one…” his mother gasped. “Please, not another one…”

“It’s ok,” Katniss gasped as she finally cut through the rope and pulled the net off of Rue, dragging the sobbing girl up into a tight hug. “You’re ok. You’re fine. See?”

Marvel stepped forwards, spear in position ready to be thrown at his chosen target.

Now they had two different angles of the same scene.

Rue's eyes went wide as she caught sight of Marvel, her body locking up even as Katniss turned to see what had spooked her young friend.

Katniss ducked when Marvel threw his spear, drawing an arrow and firing off a shot at him in the blink of an eye but sadly Rue was too frightened to move and the crowd could do nothing but gasp as they saw the deadly tip of the spear enter her chest.

A cannon sounded.

Marvel was dead, killed almost instantly by Katniss's deadly accurate shot.

She blinked down at the spear as though she couldn't feel it, her hand reaching down to pull it from her chest just as Katniss turned to check on her.

“God!” Katniss gasped in horror as she caught sight of what had happened, her arms automatically moving to catch the younger girl when her legs gave way beneath her.

Unzipping Rue's black jacket Katniss revealed a rapidly growing stain in the centre of her chest, right above her heart and everyone knew that the little girl didn't stand a chance.

“At least she won't linger as long as…” someone muttered under their breath before trailing off, obviously feeling like everyone else that it was too soon to be comparing their most successful Tribute in years death to someone else's or vice versa.

Katniss sucked in a sharp breath, obviously struggling to maintain her composure as she fixed Rues jacket, hiding the blood from view thanks to the dark fabric.

“It’s ok. You’re ok,” she murmured softly, cradling Rue in her arms in a move reminiscent of how Cato had cradled Adya only minutes earlier. “You’re ok. You’re ok.”

Rue blinked up at her for moment before asking softly,

“Did you blow up the food?”
She must have heard the explosion, such drastic measures having not been part of their original plan or at least they hadn't been part of the bit they'd heard them discussing.

“Every bit of it,” Katniss answered her with a sad smile and a nod of her head.

“Good,” Rue managed to choke out, the sound causing his mother to whimper softly, her hand flashing out to grab hold of Sasha’s. “You have to win.”

Katniss looked away from her piercing gaze, her eyes finally taking the crumpled body that moments ago had been trying to kill her, her skin going slightly ashen.

He didn't understand why.

It wasn't like this was her first kill inside the Arena...although, he supposed, it was the first one that she had killed on purpose, with a weapon at her than as a “side effect.”

“Can you sing?” Rue asked suddenly, tears leaking silently down her cheeks.

“Ok,” Katniss agreed instantly, turning her attention back to the girl dying in her arms.

Claudius laughed loudly.

“More singing!” he explained, ignorant of the angry mutter that spread through the large group as he once again disrespected a Tribute so close to death.

“Perhaps we should rename it the Singing Games this year?” Caesar chuckled but hushed his co-host when Katniss begun singing softly, her voice thick with emotion and unsteady, each word somewhat mumbled but still recognisable.

"Deep in the meadow, under the willow.
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow.
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes.
And when again they open, the sun will rise.
Here it's safe, and here it's warm.
Here the daisies guard you from every harm.
Here your dreams are sweet, and tomorrow brings them true.
Here is the place where I love you.
Deep in the meadow, hidden far away.
A cloak of leaves, a moon beam ray.
Forget your woes, and let your troubles lay.
And when again it's morning, they'll wash away.
Here it's safe, and here it's warm."
Here the daisies guard you from every harm.

Here your dreams are sweet, and tomorrow brings them true.

Here is the place where I love you.”

A cannon sounded as Katniss's voice trailed off, confirming what they already knew.

Rue was dead.

“I'm sorry…”

Katniss sobbed weakly as she closed the dead girl’s eyes and lay her down gently on the ground, leaning down to press an almost motherly kiss on her forehead.

The camera cut away suddenly as she let out a scream of pure rage and threw Marvels bloodied spear back towards his body, the image of Caesar and Claudius in their studio showing on all three screens for the first time that day.

Caesar let out a deep breath.

“Well wasn’t that an unexpected turn of events?” he asked with a deep chuckle, leaning back in his chair and spreading his hands wide.

“Indeed it was, Caesar, indeed it was,” Claudius agreed, turning his seat to face the blue haired host of the Hunger Games. “We’re down to, what the final…the final…?”

“Six,” Caesar gasped dramatically after checking with something behind the cameras that were filming them. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now down to our final six Tributes.”

“Amazing…” Claudius muttered, settling back in his chair as images of the final six Tributes appeared on the screen behind them, Caesar introducing each one with practised ease. “Katniss and Peeta, our star crossed lovers of District 12. Cato and Clove, the formidable pair from District 2. Finch, the clever little girl from District 5. And the mysterious Thresh from District 11, Rue’s partner who we haven’t seen much of thus far.”

“Who could have predicted a surprise like this so late in the Games?” Claudius chuckled.

“Not me, that’s for sure!” Caesar guffawed before the two smaller screens finally switched back to showing footage from inside the Arena, the one on the left show Cato still cradling Adya's body in his arms but no longer sobbing hysterically while the screen on the right showed Katniss gathering wild flowers, using her knife to cut through the stems.

They didn't have any wild flowers in District Eight.

There was nowhere suitable for them to grow.

The only trees they had in District Eight were beyond the electric fence which surrounded the large industrial area, separating them from the supposed “dangers” out there.

“What is she doing?” Mikhail couldn't stop himself from asking softly as they watched Katniss return to Rue's body where she began laying out the flowers.

Some she gathered into a bouquet which she slipped into the little girls hands, resting upon her chest, whilst most of them were placed on the ground around her body, a mixture of delicate
looking white flowers that reminded him of the lace they made in one of the oldest factories and long blue flowers that were the same colour as the headscarf his mother wore.

It took her some time to complete her task and by the time she was finished the light was fading around them, their bellies rumbling with hunger and Rue looked like a sleeping princess from one of the old “fairy tales” some of the oldest workers knew.

Gathering up her things Katniss paused to press one final kiss to Rue's foreheads before turning and walking away from the memorable body…only to stop suddenly and turn towards a camera she could obviously see high up in one of the trees.

Moving slowly she brought her right hand to her mouth, her thumb holding her little finger to her palm, and kissed the tips of her fingers before raising it towards the camera.

Mikhail frowned.

He remembered the people of her District doing this when she volunteered instead of applauding and no one knowing quite what to make of it.

And then, at the front of the crowd, someone mimicked her salute back at the screen.

And then another hand was lifted into the air.

And another.

And another until everyone bar Mikhail had kissed three of their fingers on their right hand and saluted the girl for her compassion and loyalty to her friend, even though her actions earlier that day had effectively ended the life of one of their own Tributes.

Never let it be said that the people of District aright weren't an understanding bunch.

Finally he moved, copying her movements exactly and joined the others in a silent show of solidarity, the Peacekeepers obviously flustered, unsure what to do.

“Goodbye Adya,” he found himself whispering as he stood there with his hand raised. “I won't forget you. None of us will. I promise you that. You will be remembered.”

~*~*~

A/N - I'd originally intended for this to be a Prologue but then it kept getting longer…and longer…and then hey presto, twenty odd pages later we have a complete chapter. And it was even worse writing Adya's death scene a second time than it was the first time! You may also have noticed that this isn't the “fluffy and light” project I intended to do to recover from ‘No One Knows Who I Am’ and this is simply because of the awesome response I got from you guys who, understandably, were quite upset with me and demanding more. Well, here you go! As you can tell it's going to be slightly different but I hope you'll still like it. Also if you're interested which actors I've based my many…many…OC’s on I will post a list at some point but probably not until I've actually introduced them all. Don't want to ruin the surprise. I'm going to stop talking now as this looks more like an essay than an author’s note. Comments and Suggestions are most definitely welcome! X
Chapter Two

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Two

There was nothing all that unusual about the building in front of him and yet, once he stepped inside, he knew that his life would be forever changed.

The Dyeing Factory, often misspelled The Dying Factory by those who worked there, was one of the oldest factories in the District having been built long before the Dark Days and was also one of the smallest factories, only boasting three floors when some of the factories built by the Capitol in the days following the rebellion measured sixteen stories high.

However this didn't stop it bring one of the most successful factories of the entire District as it catered specifically for the high end fashion designers in the Capitol, using a combination of dying techniques to create the colours required no matter what the fabric was.

The current owner of The Dyeing Factory was a retired designer who lived in the Capitol and had never once visited his “biggest investment” in all the years he'd owned it, preferring to leave the actual running of the factory to the District born manager who had a bit of a reputation for treating his workforce poorly but paying them almost double the normal rate.

This last fact was the reason Mikhail was stood hesitating outside the main entrance.

Until now there had been no reason for him or his sister to look for work, their father earning a decent amount operating the heavy machinery required to load the goods onto the trains and their mother working as a seamstress in one of the largest factories.

They'd been lucky, some of his school friends even teasing him for being so well off but that had all changed with the rising prices of food the District had been experiencing lately.

Because of their urban lifestyle no food was actually produced inside District Eight and so they were forced to rely entirely on shipments from other Districts and the Capitol.

Normally this wasn't a problem.

Just recently, however, the constantly fluctuating prices of food and rent had seemed to be going up and up without an end in sight, almost everything doubling in price overnight.
His parents had started working double shifts and, naively, Mikhail had thought that would be enough to keep them afloat in these troubled times.

He'd been wrong.

“It's not enough…” he’d heard his mother sobbing the night before. “The rent man came today and took…took almost everything and I just don't have enough to feed us all for the rest of the week. I can’t…I can't make it stretch any further. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

His father had gathered her into his arms, promising to sign on for even more shirts as soon as he got to work the following morning but Mikhail had been able to hear how exhausted he already was just pulled the double shifts, how much he wished there was another way.

And yet neither of them had even considered asking him to do what he was about to do.

Squaring his shoulders he tugged on the bottom of his slightly too tight shirt, something else they’d been unable to replace despite the growth spurt he was still going through, to get rid of any creases which had appeared and took a step towards the main entrance.

“Attention! Attention! All citizens report to the mandatory viewing stations! Attention! Attention! All citizens report to the mandatory viewing stations!”

That could only mean one thing.

The finale of the 74th Hunger Games was about to begin.

Stepping back just in time he avoided the stream of sweaty workers making their way out of The Dyeing Factory, their skin, clothes and even hair covered with the bright colours they’d been working with and followed them to the nearest “mandatory viewing station” which turned out to be an enormous screen mounted on the exterior wall of Factory Seven.

Because of the almost unbelievable size of the screen it didn’t matter that the screen was split up into three columns to show each part of the broadcast, each one still showed a complete image like a normal individual screen would and Mikhail, standing towards the back of the equally enormous crowd suspected that the screen could be seen for miles.

Katniss and Peeta, reunited after spending most the Games apart and healed of their wounds by the medicine she’d won them by braving the feast the day before were shown in the central column of the screen, walking together through a shallow stream.

“We know Thresh took off,” Peeta announced even as he obviously struggled to keep up with his much more agile District partner. “Cato’s gonna be by the Cornucopia. He’s not gonna go someplace he doesn’t know. Foxface, well, she could be anywhere.”

Foxface was the name Katniss had given to the girl from District Five when they realised that neither of them could remember her real name, the girl having succeeded in being so unmemorable that even her competitors had forgotten all about her most of the time.

The right column of the screen showed the audience exactly where Foxface was and that was less than ten paces behind the couple from District Twelve, following them almost silently as they made their way out of the stream and up into the woods once more. Katniss stopped suddenly, unstinting her bow from her shoulder.

“We should probably hunt around here,” she announced. “We don’t have any food left.”
“Ok…” Peeta agreed with what everyone had come to realise was his usual carefree manner.

The blonde boy glanced down at the bow and somehow managed to keep his voice deadly serious as he made his next comment,

“I’ll take the bow."

Someone behind snorted loudly as Katniss shot him a startled look, one that spoke of her instant disapproval of his suggestion but a hesitancy to just refuse without explanation.

Peeta chuckled, shaking his head at her.

“I’m just kidding. I’ll go pick some stuff.”

Mikhail was pretty sure he wasn't the only one who had decided that this year seemed to be even worse than usual because most of the Tributes seemed so genuinely nice.

The camera zoomed in to capture the smile Katniss wore as she watched him disappear into the surrounding bushes, no doubt so that the audience could “see her love for him” or something as stupid as that given what the people in the Capitol were into.

Cato's emotionless face appeared in the left column of the screen, the camera pulling back slowly to reveal the fact that he was obviously stalking one of the other Tributes.

On the other side of the screen Foxface had obviously chosen to follow Peeta and the reason became quickly apparent when, no sooner had he turned away after placing his first pile of gathered berries on top of his jacket which he’d laid on the ground, she darted out of her hiding place to grab a handful of the juicy looking berries before taking off.

She had only gone about ten paces when she stopped, her shoulders slumping as she opened up her hand so that she could inspect the berries she’d stolen closely.

A single tear fell from her eye which she quickly wiped away before looking up at the sky.

“I'm sorry, mum, but I won't die by the sword and there's no way I can win this,” she spoke softly, her eyes filled with fear as she stared up at the sky. “I love you.”

Lifting the handful of berries to her mouth she allowed half of them to slip between her lips, visibly struggling to swallow them all and then, only moments later as she was trying to get a second mouthful of them, she let out a loud gasp.

Her body went rigid, her eyes going impossibly wide and then she just seemed to crumple.

A cannon sounded.

A murmur of unease spread through the large crowd.

Suicide was surprisingly rare inside the Arena and was never taken lightly.

On the central screen Katniss, preparing to take down a bird, gasped loudly in response to the cannon and turned to look back towards the direction she had come from.

“Peeta?” she called out as she began hurrying back towards him, coming across his jacket lying on the ground and the way her eyes went wide at the sight of the berries told everyone that she knew exactly what they were. “Peeta? Peeta!”
There was no denying that the fear and panic in her voice was completely genuine.

“Peeta!” she screamed hysterically, bursting through a bush just as Peeta, having heard her frantic voice, hurried back from the other side which caused them to crash into each other.

“Are you ok?” Peeta asked upon seeing her distraught face, his hands filled with more of the deadly berries he’d seemingly unknowingly collected.

He wouldn't be the first Tribute to do that.

“I heard the cannon. I thought…” Katniss responded, her voice trembling badly.

“No,” Peeta interrupted her quickly, trying to reassure her.

That was when she saw the berries.

“That’s Nightlock!” she all but screamed, her voice breaking as she knocked the berries out of his hand with a violent smack. “You’d be dead in a minute!”

Peeta seemed completely stunned by this piece of information.

“I didn’t know,” he mumbled, staring down at the juice staining his hands.

“You scared me to death,” Katniss whimpered, throwing herself into his arms and hugging him tightly, her face pressed against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry.”

Peeta gasped, pressing his own face into her hair.

“I’m sorry.”

It didn't take them long to find the dead girls body, coming across it easily and just standing there looking down at her for a long moment, the camera somehow managing to look over their shoulder so that the audience could see what they saw.

Fox face had fallen on her back with her ankles crossed, her right arm up by her head, her left arm outstretched as though offering them the berries she still held and her lifeless eyes, still impossibly wide, seemed to fixed on a point somewhere high in the sky.

And yet somehow she looked like she was at peace.

“I never even knew she was following me,” Peeta eventually murmured, stepping forwards to crouch over the dead girls shoulder so that he could reach down and close her eyes.

“She’s clever.”

“Too clever…” Peeta sighed sadly and Mikhail realised that they had no idea her death had been suicide, that they thought she’d eaten the berries by mistake.

Katniss moved to kneel beside the girl’s body, carefully gathering up the berries from her hand and placing them in one of her many pockets.

Peeta frowned.
“What are you doing?”

“Maybe Cato likes berries too,” Katniss responded, almost smirking across at him before rising to her feet and walking away from the dead body, leaving him no option but to follow.

Mikhail genuinely didn't think he'd ever have the courage to do something like that.

He would much rather go out suddenly, preferably fighting for a good cause.

“What time is it?”

Peeta's question a few minutes later came as something of a surprise until they noticed the way the screens seemed to be darkening, as though it were much later in the day than it actually was, the midday sun still beating down upon their backs.

“A little after noon,” Katniss responded softly, obviously confused herself.

“Why is it getting so dark?” Peeta asked the question they were all thinking.

Katniss sighed deeply.

“They must be in a hurry to end it.”

Mikhail frowned as the central image was suddenly replaced with the standard image of Caesar Flickerman and Claudius Templesmith seated behind a desk, the image of Katniss and Peeta replacing the image of Foxface which had remained for a little too long.

“Oh! This is just so exciting!” Caesar all but squealed, grabbing onto Claudius arm as he bounced up and down in his chair. “What have they got in store for us this year?”

“I wonder if it'll be anything like last year?” Claudius murmured, apparently genuinely excited by the prospect of the traditional “finale twist” which the Gamemakers liked to throw in each year. “Do you remember, Caesar? They had all those little earthquakes that finally managed to drive the final three Tributes together? Absolutely brilliant!”

“Or perhaps it'll be something like the 67th Games?” Caesar suggested, equally as excited. “That was the year they flooded the Arena with all those horrible insects. Or the 70th when they actually flooded the arena by bursting that big old damn?”

“You have to wonder what they've got planned to top all of those,” Claudius murmured thoughtfully. “Whatever it is it’s obviously something to do with the dark…”

“Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering…peering…doubting…” Caesar responded dramatically, pitching his voice lower than usual and focusing directly on the camera. “Dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before…”

Claudius paused before exclaiming loudly,

“Oh, that was good!”

“Why, thank you,” Caesar responded, offering his co-host a smile before gasping suddenly and sitting up straight in his chair. “Looks like Cato’s finally going to make his move.”

In a blink and you’ll miss it move the central column was suddenly dominated with the image of
Cato hurrying up behind the boy from District Eleven, the point of his sword aimed at the centre of the much larger boys back…but at the last moment Thresh moved aside.

He must have heard Cato coming somehow.

Spinning around to face his attacker Thresh unclipped his packs, throwing them aside as he tried to draw the sickle he had managed to arm with in time to defend himself.

Cato stumbled, his momentum thrown off by his target dodging his attack.

Recovering himself he turned to attack once more, bringing his sword down towards Thresh’s head only to receive a foot to the chest, the force put behind the kicked sending him flying backwards into a tree with a loud grunt of pain.

Mikhail winced.

He’d been kicked in the chest once but not by someone who looked like that.

That had to hurt.

Thresh, now armed with his sickle, charged at Cato who had somehow managed to hold onto his sword, bringing it up just in time to deflect the other Tributes curved blade.

The clashing of steel almost drowned out the animalistic growling.

Almost.

“Did you hear that?” Peeta asked in the right hand column of the screen, both him and Katniss reacting to the animal noises they could obviously hear wherever they were.

Cato had ended up pinned to the tree, his arms visibly shaking as he struggled to hold off Thresh’s blade with his own until suddenly he ducked, dropping down to one knee and allowing the other boys momentum to drive the sickle deep into the bark of the tree.

Pulling a knife from his boot Cato plunged it once into the larger boys stomach before he had time to pull away, causing him to cry out in pain, before using his sword to slash open the backs of Thresh’s thighs, sending him crumpling to the forest floor.

And that was when the beast appeared.

“What the…?”

A ripple of fear and horror spread through the crowd as they took in the image of the creature advancing slowly, menacingly towards the two Tributes.

Mikhail felt bile rising in the back of his throat.

The creature had the basic shape of a wolf or large dog but that was where the resemblance ended as instead of a thick coat of fur it was covered in what looked like human skin with little tufts of fur appearing every now and then, particularly on the top of its head.

As the creature moved closer and closer to them it rose up onto its hind legs, revealing a thick metal collar around its throat with ‘2F’ embossed all around it and, with the image zoomed in suddenly to focus on the beasts face, a pair of all too human eyes.

A pair of all too familiar human eyes.
“C-Clove?” Cato gasped, stumbling backwards as the creatures continued to walk forwards on its hind legs, it's four inch long claws clicking menacingly as it reached out for them.

Thresh struggled to pull himself up but Cato's blade had sliced through the tendons and muscles in his legs, leaving them completely useless and at the creature’s mercy.

Mikhail doubted anything created by the Capitol would be capable of anything so human.

A second creature appeared out of the bush behind the first and this time they kept a camera on it from the moment it stepped into the moonlight, the camera angle allowing everyone to see the ‘8M’ embossed on its collar and the cloudy pair of eyes.

“Adya…” Cato gasped, his tone echoing the horror currently being felt by Mikhail and everyone around him. “No…you…they…why…”

Seconds later the beasts attacked, Clove descending on the now screaming Thresh with razor sharp claws and deadly teeth as Adya rushed towards the horrified Career Tribute.

Cato brought his sword up at the last second, slashing wildly at the creature’s face, before turning and sprinting through the trees without looking over his shoulder.

The wounded muttation followed him.

“What was that?” Peeta gasped fearfully, his eyes frantically searching the darkness surrounding the two of them on their own side of the large screen.

He was right to be afraid.

“That’s the finale.”

Caesar and Claudius were quickly replaced with an image of Thresh struggling to fight off the creature attacking him with his bare hands, screaming from the pain all the while until a well-placed swipe of those deadly claws ripped his head clean from his shoulders. His cannon boomed not even a second later.

Cato paid it no attention, still running for his life and had just reached the Cornucopia and was struggling to pull himself up its smooth sides when Thresh's image was projected into the sky above the darkened Arena, allowing them all to know who had died.

Mikhail wasn't the only one to lose control of his stomach, bending double and dirtying the ground beneath his feet as the left portion of the screen stayed with the image of the muttation continuing to tear at Thresh's body, ripping it limb from limb for no reason.

“Let’s go,” Katniss ordered on their screen just as Cato finally managed to pull himself to safety, only second before the muttation created to look like their Tribute, his boyfriend, reached him and began clawing at the smooth metal sides of the structure.

Safe for the moment the Career did something entirely unexpected.

He collapsed to his knees, sword held loosely in his hand, and began sobbing loudly.

Or perhaps it wasn't so unexpected given how he'd reacted to Adya's death.

Finally they replaced the image of Thresh's mutilated body with Caesar and Claudius once more who looked far too excited for people watching the same things as they were.
“I had my doubts they could top the last few years,” Caesar murmured softly, as though he didn't want to disturb the action taking place. “But I'm thrilled to say it was wrong.”

With Cato safe for the moment everyone's attention returned to the right hand column of the screen where Katniss, an arrow drawn in her bow, was advancing slowly towards something she could hear in the trees surrounding them whilst Peeta, armed with nothing more than a sharpened stick, advanced slowly on a bush.

“Stay away from the bush, boy…” someone muttered gruffly, voicing what they were all thinking having seen the creature’s penchant for hiding within bushes. “Don't be an idiot…”

It wasn't a surprise to figure out that most people were hoping that Peeta would win.

Of the final three competitors he was the one with the gentlest soul, given that he technically only had one kill to his name so far and that had actually been an act of suicide whilst the other two were proven killers, each as deadly as the other.

It would be nice for someone who wasn't either a killer or a lunatic to win the Games.

Katniss lowered her bow.

Caesar gasped loudly.

And Peeta just kept on moving towards that bush, each and every step making it less and less likely that people of the Districts would get their preferred Victor.

A hush fell, both on the screen and in the crowd, before it was suddenly and predictably broken by another one of those beasts leaping out of the bush, knocking Peeta to the ground as it landed on top of him with its deadly claws dangerously close to his neck.

Katniss cried out sharply, firing an arrow into the back of its neck which thankfully distracted the creature long enough for Peeta to free himself from its clutches.

“Run!”

Katniss gasped sharply, pulling on the obviously shocked boy's arm in order to get him moving and then the two of them were sprinting through the trees as quickly as their legs could carry them, the beast quickly hot on their trail.

“Peeta!”

His leg was obviously giving him trouble, the lingering after effects of his wound hindering his ability to run as smoothly as she could, forcing him to drop back ever so slightly.

“Keep going!” Peeta shouted at her, gritting his teeth against the obvious pain as he forced himself to keep up with her long strides. “Don't look back! Just keep going!”

Don't look back was pretty good advice just at that moment because if they had they'd have seen the two other mutts appear out of nowhere in order to join in the hunt.

Emerging from the trees into the clearing which surrounded the Cornucopia Peeta somehow managed to put on a burst of speed, overtaking Katniss so that he reached the horn first.

Cato, crouched on top, remained perfectly still and silent.

He was waiting for them to come to him.
“Here!”

Peeta called out, crouching in such a way that she was able to use his good leg as a step to help her up onto the top of the metal structure, the archer forced to throw her bow ahead of her so that she could grab hold of the edge properly leaving her unarmed.

Cato held back.

Waiting.

“This isn't going to end well…” a heavily pregnant woman murmured, wiping the sweat from the back of her neck with her headscarf. “It never does when they force them together.”

On the screen Katniss was now crouched over the side of the horn, pulling Peeta up by one of his hands as the beasts snapped and clawed at his legs, cutting deep and sending blood flooding down his already injured leg as he let out a pain filled scream.

Katniss was obviously stronger than she looked as she was finally able to pull her screaming partner up to safety, her hands immediately going to the fresh wounds covering his leg.

“Peeta! Hold still! I need to…”

Cato made his move.

Grabbing hold of her quiver he pulled her away from Peeta, literally throwing her away from the other boy and sending her crashing down onto the metal roof of the horn with a cry of pain, her head bouncing painfully and dazing her for a moment.

Next the Career went after Peeta, punching the already wounded boy in the jaw with enough force to send him crumpling in the opposite direction to Katniss.

Now that a fight had begun the three columns on the large screen were dedicated to each of the combatants – Cato on the left, Katniss in the middle and Peeta on the right.

Satisfied that Peeta was dealt with for the moment Cato turned to face Katniss once more, advancing on the obviously dazed girl with his sword aimed at her heart.

He was just about to plunge the pointed tip into her chest when Peeta tackled him in the side, smacking the Career down onto the top of the metal structure with a loud bang, his sword flying out of his hand and over the edge of the horn.

Below them the mutts howled as they continued to climb the sides.

It was difficult to follow what happened next, all three of the cameras moving somewhat unpredictably as the two boys wrestled desperately with each other, punching, biting and kicking until Katniss recovered enough to enter into the fray.

Stumbling across the structure she grabbed hold of Cato's arm only to find herself knocked down by her partner’s body when the Career literally threw the other boy towards her.

Mikhail and the crowd around him held themselves perfectly still, not a sound emerging from them as they watched Cato grab hold of Peeta once more and throw him dangerously close to the edge, the mutts howling eagerly as they caught sight of the struggling Tribute.

Drawing another knife from his other boot, this one much longer than the one he'd used on
Thresh, Cato advanced on Katniss but once again Peeta was there to block his path, earning himself another punch to the face which, once again, sent him flying.

Mikhail flinched as the Career swung the sharp blade at his target, Katniss only just managing to move out of the way in time before trying to attack him.

Anyone could see that wasn't going to end well.

Yes, she was stronger than she looked but he was a Career.

He had been trained to kill.

Slashing at the back of her arm with his knife he wrapped his empty hand around her vulnerable throat, lifting her up off her feet and slamming her back down onto the metal beneath their feet with enough force to drive the air from her lungs.

Katniss landed with her head and shoulders hanging over the edge of the structure, much to the excitement of the mutts who immediately started trying to reach her with their claws even as Cato tightened his grip on her throat, his other hand fumbling with the knife.

She pushed at his chest, desperately trying to get him to let go.

This could be it.

This could be the end of the Capitol favourite this year.

Peeta appeared behind Cato, his body unsteady but his grip strong as he pulled the Career off of her, throwing him across the structure before following, trying desperately to get the upper hand this time as Katniss struggled to get her breath back.

It didn't take long for Cato to overpower the injured Tribute and just as he got him into a headlock, one arm around his throat, Peeta's back pressed against his front and his other hand pressed against the side of Peeta's head so that he could snap his neck Katniss finally got her hands on her bow and in the blink of an eye had an arrow drawn, nocked and aimed.

For a moment nothing else happened.

Katniss's eyes flickered back and forth between Peeta's pain filled expression and Cato's almost desperate one, blood dripping from his mouth as well as a wound to his temple.

And then, finally, one of them spoke.

"Go on. Shoot. Then we'd both go down and you'd win," Cato taunted her, his voice twisted with emotion. "Go on. I'm dead anyway. I always was, right?"

His gaze flickered away from her, fixating on a point somewhere behind her head for a long moment before he seemed to force his attention back to her.

His eyes were filled with tears.

"I didn’t know that until now."

A gasping sob seemed to punch itself out of his lungs, his tears flooding down his cheeks.

"I loved him. I loved him and you took him away from me," he announced loudly and they all knew exactly who he meant, even Katniss who had heard about their relationship from Peeta.
“The one thing that was good and pure and kind in my life and you killed him.”

His tearful gaze hardened.

“You didn’t even have the decency to make it clean!” he spat across at her, his grip tightening on Peeta’s throat, causing him to gasp softly. “You left him to suffer!”

Katniss at least had the decency to look guilty but that wasn't enough for Cato.

If he was honest it wasn’t really enough for Mikhail, either, who had had a couple of days since his friends death to consider how things could have gone differently.

All she had to do was wait a little bit longer between her shots, give Adya enough time to call for Sam to help him away from the supply mountain and she could have blown it up without hurting anyone, without causing anyone to suffer such unimaginable agony.

“Why shouldn’t I show you what it feels like to have your heart ripped out of your chest?” Cato demanded. “Why shouldn’t I be the one to take away something that you love?”

Suddenly the distraught Career look away from her, his angry gaze unwittingly locking with the camera focused on capturing his part in the finale of the 74th Hunger Games.

“How is that?” he called out to the sky. “Is that what they want? Huh?”

Returning his attention to his potential victim he shook the wounded Tribute, drawing forth a sharp gasp of pain even as his airway was almost completely cut off by Cato’s arm.

“I could still do this…” Cato muttered, almost to himself as he changed his grip ever so slightly, obviously preparing to snap Peeta’s neck. “I could still do this. One more kill.”

Somehow Peeta still seemed to be in control of his senses, something Mikhail was pretty sure not many people would be able to do in a situation like that, and as Cato continued to speak he very slowly and very carefully used his own blood to draw an ‘X’ on the back of the hand connected to the arm wrapped tightly around his throat.

He’d just given her a target to aim for.

The question would she risk his life to take it.

“It’s the only thing I know how to do. Bring pride to my District. Not that it matters,” Cato trailed off, fixing his attention back on Katniss. “I was going to let him win, you know? The boy I loved? The boy you killed. I was going to send him home…”

Katniss fired.

Her arrow struck Cato’s hand with a sickening thud, causing the Career to cry out in pain and release is hold on Peeta, allowing the smaller boy to pull away from him just enough to drive his knee into Cato’s stomach which unbalanced him enough to send him over the edge.

The muttations were on him in a matter of seconds. Mikhail could feel his stomach clenching again as they were forced to watch a Tribute getting eaten alive by those monster for the second time, the fact that it was also the Tribute who had loved and protected his friend during the a Games making it even worse.

Thankfully Katniss had enough of a conscience to make it quick for him, firing an arrow down
into the chaos which, with her perfect sim, sunk deep into the Careers heart.

His cannon boomed seconds later.

Deprived of their fun the mutts growled up at Katniss and Peeta ego shifted uneasily despite being perfectly safe now before disappearing into the woods with a collection of terrifying howls that Mikhail was pretty sure he’d be dreaming of for weeks to come.

Alone and with no immediate threats apparent Peeta pulled Katniss into his arms, hugging her tightly and accepting the support she offered him when his leg gave out.

Daylight returned to the Arena as though someone had flipped a light switch.

“We should probably get down,” Peeta murmured softly just as the image of Cato’s body was replaced by the smiling faces of Caesar and Claudius. “I might need a hand, though…”

Katniss nodded, pulling away from him so that she could drop down over the nearest side, using it as a slide of sorts before turning round to catch Peeta when he followed her.

It was strange.

Normally by now they would have announced the winner of the Games and, given the change in the rules, that was obviously both of them as they were the only surviving team.

Katniss and Peeta obviously thought so too if their expressions were any indication.

Claudius shared an excited look to Caesar before leaning forwards and speaking, his voice echoing around the Arena as it always did when he made his official announcements.

“Attention, Tributes. There has been a slight rule change.”

“No…” Mikhail found himself gasping along with everyone else. “They wouldn't…”

“It’s the Capitol, boy,” someone muttered gruffly beside him. “Of course they would.”

Up on the screen Katniss had let go of Peeta in favour of readying another arrow.

“The previous revision allowing two victors from the same District has been…revoked. Only one victor may be crowned. Good luck. And may the odds be ever in your favour.”

Katniss looked every bit as horrified as the crowd felt.

Peeta on the other hand simply looked resigned, as though he had expected something like this to happen at the last minute, as though he had already imagined this outcome.

Slowly they turned to face each other and now the screens were split up with a picture of his fact on the left screen, her face on the right and a shot of both of them in the centre.

“Go ahead…” Peeta murmured softly, spreading his arms and offering her his chest as a target. “One of us should go home. One of us has to die. They have to have their victor.”

Mikhail genuinely expected Katniss, the cold blooded killer that she was, to shoot him.

Instead she shook her head, throwing her bow down at her feet.

“No. They don’t,” she announced firmly, stepping closer to him. “Why should they?”
A ripple of surprise spread through the large crowd as she pulled out the handful of berries she'd taken from Foxface's body earlier that day, Peeta reacting similarly as he tried to knock them out of her hand with a startled cry only for her to stop him.

“No!”

“Trust me,” Katniss muttered, looking deep into his eyes. “Trust me.”

She tipped half of the berries into his shaking hand as they stand close together.

“Together?” Peeta asked softly, staring at the deadly berries he now held.

“Together.”

Inexplicably Mikhail found himself holding his breath.

Were they really going to do something so bold?

Something so dangerous as to deprive the blood thirsty Capitol of their Victor?

“Ok…” Peeta sighed, his gaze rising to rest on the face of the girl he loved. “One…”

Katniss looked away from him, gazing out into the trees as she spoke softly,

“Two…”

Almost absentmindedly Peeta reached out to play with the end of her hair braid, drawing her attention back to him as he spoke what could possibly his last words.

“Three.”

Mikhail couldn't believe it as he watched them raise the berries to their mouths.

Was the Capitol really going to let it end with a double suicide?

“Stop!” Claudius voice echoed around the Arena and out of the screen. “Stop!”

Apparently not.

An audible sigh of relief spread through the crowd as Katniss and Peeta lowered their hands, their eyes locked with each other as Claudius continued to speak, obviously shaken,

“Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present the winners of the 74th Annual Hunger Games.”

It was Katniss who initiated the hug this time, seeming to melt into Peeta's embrace before remembering that he was wounded and instantly changing her grip to support him.

Both of them looked shocked.

Confused.

And then all three screens went black.

The 74th Hunger Games had officially come to an end.

“There'll be trouble,” an old timer muttered loudly, angrily. “Rebellious act like that? Trouble.
You mark my words there'll be no end of trouble because of those two."

“Attention! Attention! All citizens return to their daily schedules immediately! Attention! Attention! All citizens return to their daily schedules immediately!”

People began moving almost at once, no one wanting to run the risk of getting caught by any of the Peacekeepers disobeying an official order and Mikhail once again found himself following the flow of people heading back towards The Dyeing Factory.

He allowed himself to be carried inside by the flow of people and was almost overwhelmed by the instant bombardment of strange smells and an almost unbelievable temperature.

“Hey! What do you think you're doing here?” the factory foreman, Jedediah Gilbert, who had a reputation all of his own for being brutal with the people under him shouted down at him from the high walkway, pointing his steel tipped cane at his head. “Clear off!”

Before his common sense could talk him out of it Mikhail turned to face the heavyset man who, even though he was yelling down at Mikhail had his other hand on a young woman's bottom as she tried to get on with her work and announced plainly,

“I've come to see if there's any work going. I'm looking to be taken on.”

Jedediah frowned down at him before huffing loudly, smacking the poor girl's bottom before stalking for the open metal staircase until he was stood directly in front of Mikhail.

“Name? Age?” he demanded sharply.

“Mikhail Warrington. Seventeen.”

Jedediah let out a harsh bark of laughter.

“I know your father, boy,” he spat at Mikhail. “We went to school together. Tell me, why don't you go looking for a job with him if you want one so bad?”

“No jobs going at the loading bay,” Mikhail answered simply. “I've already checked.”

“You must really need the money to willingly come here,” Jedediah chuckled, using his cane to poke another young woman's breast. “Just like all my poor little lambs.”

Mikhail barely contained a grimace.

This man was disgusting.

Unfortunately he was right – they really did need the money.

“Lucky for you I'm feeling generous,” Jedediah continued, using the cane to poke at Mikhail's arm muscles before laying it across his chest. “And we need big, strong lads like you up in the hand dyeing room. Hard work, that is. Very unpleasant.”

“Thank you…” Mikhail muttered.

“Don't thank me yet, boy,” Jedediah cackled, turning away and walking across the busy factory floor where men and women were working large dyeing machines with practised ease. “You can start tomorrow. Don't be late. Use the back stairs to get up to the top floor and ask for Annoushka. She's in charge up there. You'll be paid once a month. Questions?”
“None.”

“Then get out of here before I come to my senses and change my mind!”

Mikhail didn't hesitate to slip out of the building, breathing in a deep lungful of air.

He'd done it.

Shit.

He'd actually done it.

Now he just had to figure out the best way to tell his parents.

~*~*~

A/N - I'd just like start by saying that I've never worked in a factory in my life, nor have I ever dyed clothes so please allow for a little bit of artistic licence in regards to that area. This chapter ended up having a life of its own as well (and by that I mean it sort of deviated from the original plan but got back there eventually) so I hope you like it. Comments/Suggestions as welcome as always. X
“Every piece of fabric that is dyed in this factory is first washed thoroughly to remove any stains or marks that could interfere with the dyeing process by the team down on the walkway in the main factory,” Annoushka, his new supervisor at work, explained calmly as they stood together by the door of the third floor. “Once clean the fabric is either sent down to the dying machines on the ground floor or is brought up to use to be hand dyed.”

She had surprised Mikhail when he had arrived with all the other workers that morning, climbing up the exterior stairs at the back of the factory which were the only point of access to the narrow third floor of the factory where he would be working.

If he had passed her in the street he would never have guessed that the petite black woman dressed in a dirty pair of bib-and-brace overalls over the top of a relatively clean blouse with her hair completely hidden from view by a purple cloth turban could exude such a natural air of authority, apparently without even trying, which had everyone hurrying to obey her.

“Up here we are separated into two groups,” Annoushka continued with her explanation of what his job would entail. “We have twelve dyeing tubs on the go at all times, operating on an alternating schedule so that as one is finishing a cycle another is set to begin.”

“Ok…”

“Group One are in charge of preparing the dye baths,” Annoushka explained, gesturing to a young woman who was carefully mixing a couple of different dyes inside one of the tubs. “After assessing the amount of fabric we need to dye we fill the tub with just enough water to completely submerge the fabric. This water is then brought to a simmer, never to the boil, using the wood-burning stoves built into the base of each tub.”

“I’m guessing that’s the tubs are metal rather than wooden like the ones I saw downstairs?” Mikhail couldn’t stop himself from asking, earning himself a sharply raised eyebrow in response to his interruption. “Sorry, I just…wondered…”

“The wooden ones downstairs are used to wash the fabric both before and after dying,” his new supervisor answered quickly. “They don’t need to be heated as frequently as these ones so only need to be lined with metal. Can I continue now?”
“Yes,” Mikhail answered quickly, feeling unusually small under the woman’s glare. “Sorry.”

“Once the water temperature is correct we create the colours required by the Capitol using the numerous dyes we have on hand, mixing them when necessary. We then add salt and before you ask it’s a fixing agent that helps the fabric hold on to the colour of the dye,” Annoushka explained quickly before he could interrupt once more. “The last job of the people responsible for preparing the tubs is to test the colour of the dye with a scrap piece of fabric and adjust the colour if needed. This is where you come in.”

At this point she led him over to one of the young men bent over a steaming tub of vivid blue liquid, his bare arms almost completely submerged as he worked with the fabric, twisting it about in his hands despite the fact that the dye was obviously staining his skin.

“We make sure that the fabric is still damp when we place it into the dye mixture as this, along with the fabric being cleaned, helps it absorb the dye better,” Annoushka explained, sharing a nod with the young man. “Your job as part of Group Two is to then keep the fabric submerged in the dye mixture for the required amount of time, constantly moving the fabric to ensure full coverage. Air bubbles might create pretty patterns on the dyed fabric but they’re not what we want and they’ll be deducted from your weekly pay. Understood?”

“Air bubbles means less money,” Mikhail simplified her warning in response. “Got it.”

Annoushka paused, frowning up at him as she obviously tried to figure out whether or not his comment had been designed to mock her or not, prompting him to offer her a nervous but genuinely apologetic smile which thankfully seemed to convince her otherwise.

“Every piece of fabric requires at least thirty minutes of submersion however some of the colours will require longer so listen carefully to whatever the person who prepares your tub tells you. If they say forty-five minutes they mean forty-five minutes. Not forty-four or forty-six. Forty-five,” Annoushka punctuated this information with a sharp jab to the chest with a surprisingly sharp fingernail. “If you make a mistake and the colour produced is incorrect this will be deducted from your weekly pay. Understood?”

“Wrong colour means less money,” Mikhail simplified her warning once again. “Got it.”

“You nearly done, Donovan?” Annoushka asked the young man they’d been watching who glanced at the large clock mounted on the wall at the far end of the room before nodding. “Great. Once you’ve reached the required time for the fabric you are dyeing you remove it from the tub, twisting it and wringing out any excess dye before placing it in the bucket of water being kept warm by the wood-burning stove.”

Mikhail watched as Donovan expertly gathered up the large piece of fabric, wringing it out so tightly that his arm muscles actually bulged for a moment before dropping the fabric carefully into the bucket of steaming water at his feet, instantly turning the water cloudy.

“The bucket is then handed over to one of the runners who take it downstairs to be carefully rinsed in both hot and cold water, hung out to dry and then carefully washed once more,” Annoushka explained, pointing to the small woman who had hurried forwards to take the heavy bucket from Donovan before rushing out the door and down the exterior stairs. “At the bottom of each tub there is a wooden bung. Removing this allows the excess dye mixture to run into that grating there which leads into a complicated drain system, taking the liquid right out to the river with the rest of the waste.”

Mikhail jumped back as the bung was pulled out and the blue liquid began gushing out.
From his position by the tub, the bottoms of his trousers soaking up the dye as it splashed off of the metal grating, Donovan snorted loudly before wiping his nose on his shoulder.

“T’d give up trying to keep those pretty clothes of your clean right now if I were you, new boy,” he suggested brightly, nodding towards the pristine clothes his mother had laid out for him that morning – a tight black t-shirt, an old plaid work shirt of his fathers and a pair of faded blue denim trousers all of which she had planned to give him for his birthday.

His boots, which had had to be padded out with an extra pair of socks, were from his father.

Speaking of which…

“I’d appreciate it if you didn't call me boy, if it's all the same to you,” he muttered, looking down at the other boy who couldn’t be much older than he himself was as he remembered seeing him at school not too long ago. “The only person who gets to call me boy is my daddy and he only does that when I'm in trouble for something. My name is Mikhail. It's quite a common name so it shouldn't be too difficult to remember.”

He finished by offering the other boy a somewhat cheeky smirk, prompting Donovan to let out a booming chuckle before offering his bright blue hand to him with a smirk of his own which morphed into a broad grin when Mikhail shook his hand without hesitation.

“Donovan Chase. Welcome to the Third Floor Sweat Shop.”

“Mikhail Warrington. And…thanks? I think…”

“Don't worry, that's a literal nickname not a figurative one,” Donovan chuckled as they separated, Mikhail discretely studying the odd blue handprint which had been left behind on his skin. “It gets real hot up here, especially in the summer, what with the stoves and all.”

“Ah,” Mikhail muttered, nodding to show he understood as he looked at the finger marks curling round the edge of his palm and over onto the back of his hand. “How long have…”

His question was interrupted by Annoushka clearing her throat loudly.

“If I might continue, gentlemen?” she asked, folding her arms across her chest as she fixed both of them with a terrifyingly piercing stare. “Don't you have work to be getting on with?"

Donovan chuckled softly before hurrying over to an elderly man who was half obscured by the open door which lead outside, accepting a bucket of water from him along with two scrubbing brushes and what appeared to be some sort of wooden ladle.

“Each tub must be thoroughly cleaned before the next job can begin otherwise the colours will blend and I’m sure by now you can guess how that would be less than ideal for you.”

“Wrong colour means less money,” he repeated his phrase from earlier. “I remember.”

“Good,” Annoushka responded shortly. “See that you don’t forget. You can spend today learning the ropes with Donovan but tomorrow you’re on your own.”

With that said she left him standing by the tub, pausing to murmur something in Donavon’s ear as they passed in the centre of the room before continuing across the room to where a flustered you woman was obviously struggling yo get her dye colour right.

“You might want to roll those sleeves up or loose that pretty shirt entirely unless you want to end up looking like a Capitol cast off by the end of the day,” Donovan advised him, gesturing down to
his own sleeveless shirt which was as multi-coloured as his trousers. “Never wear nice clothes to work. Get some scraps like the rest of us.”

“This is actually one of my dad's old work shirts so I don't think it'll matter if it gets dirty,” he responded with a shrug, taking the advice to roll the sleeves up so that the damage would at least be minimal. “And the jeans, whilst new for me, are not new and were intended to be worn at work so again it doesn't matter if they get a bit dirty.”

Donovan shirted, passing him a scrubbing brush before taking up his own and dipping it in the bucket of water to wet the stiff bristles before getting to work inside the tub.

“Be careful not to touch the tub with your bare skin unless you want to get burnt,” he grunted softly as Mikhail copied him, steam rising from his scrubbing brush as the cold water reacted with the still heated sides of the tub. “It'll happen at some point, does to us all, but as long as you're careful it shouldn't be that bad.”

Mikhail nodded, taking his suggestion on board as he got to work scrubbing his side of the tub clean, frowning as the dye seemed to bubble rather than disappear.

“Just keep working at it,” Donovan advised him. “We use the ladle to wash the bubbles away and usually if there's plenty of bubbles that means there less still on the tub.”

“Good to know.”

With two of them scrubbing away it didn't take long before the inside of the tub was the same metallic grey as the outside, not a drop of blue dye in sight, and already Mikhail's back and arms were protesting, unused to this sort of physical labour.

“At the moment we've got three people in Group One compared to the twelve people in Group Two and yes, that number will include you as you're replacing Genevieve over there who is retiring from the tubs and going to work as a seamstress in Factory Seven,” Donovan explained as he replaced the wooden bung in the bottom of the tub after giving it a quick scrub. “Freya takes care of tubs one through four and just lately that's meant a lot of complicated colour combinations, hence why Annoushka is helping her out. Topaz looks after tubs five through eight which are ever so slightly bigger so they can do larger amounts of fabric at once. And this leaves us, the works of tubs nine through twelve, under the somewhat dubious care of Misha, our fearless leader's only child and…”

Whatever else Donovan was about to say was cut off by the young man in question arriving at the tub and silencing him with a rather brutal kiss, his hand gripping the back of Donovan’s neck so that he could pull his head back for the duration of the kiss.

“Dubious care, huh?” Misha asked once their lips had separated, pushing the grinning Donovan off of him with enough force to make him stumble a couple of paces backwards in order to gain his bearings. “That's not what you called it last night…”

“You're Annoushka's son?” Mikhail found himself asking softly, noting the obvious family resemblance between the handsome young man and the commanding woman.

“Yup.”

“You're walking out with your supervisor's son?”

This question was asked of Donovan who burst out laughing, gathering up the cleaning supplies quickly as he struggled to regain his composure.
“If by walking out you mean have we been lovers since we discovered that masturbating is way more fun when someone else does it back when we were fifteen then yes, we're walking out together,” he answered calmly, not even bothering to lower his voice despite the somewhat sensitive subject. “This going to be a problem?”


The two young men in question shared a look before bursting out laughing.

“Given that the number of times she's walked in on us over the last three years has probably hit triple digits by now there is no way she doesn't know what's going on,” Donovan eventually confirmed, patting Misha on the bottom before gathering up the cleaning supplies and heading back across tot the old man, trading the empty for a full one.

“And she approves?” Mikhail asked, watching as Misha opened up the file he had brought over with him to check the colour swatch that they had to match while Donovan poured the water into the tub. “Of the two of you, it means? Juno’s mum has no idea what we've gotten up to in the privacy of our bedrooms but she still hates my guts all the same. I think she'd have killed me if she'd ever walked in on us actually doing anything.”

“Annoushka considers me to be the lesser of two evils,” Donovan responded as he poured the clear water into the tub. “At least we’re the same unlike Luther…”

Misha smirked.

“Nothing wrong with a few extra years, if you ask me,” he announced as he opening up the little box he'd brought over with him and started bringing out the vials of dye mixture. “A lot of my tricks that you love so well were learned thanks to his extra years of practise.”

“Is everyone here so open about their private lives?” Mikhail snorted loudly.

“Pretty much,” Misha confirmed with a shrug. “Just wait until you meet Felyx. He goes into so much detail it'll make your hair stand on end and leave you ready for–”

“Ready for what?” Annoushka interrupted him sharply as she approached her son from behind, her sharp gaze noting the lack of water in the tub. “Misha? Care to share?”

“I was just saying that I hoped Mikhail was ready for a tough first day as they're always the worst,“ Misha lied seemingly effortlessly. “Isn't that what you always say? Now I was thinking of mixing these two colour to achieve this but what do you think?”

Donovan, smothering a chuckle, pulled Mikhail across the room to grab a bucket of water.

“She might know about it but she doesn't want to hear about it,” he explained softly. “Ridge, this is Mikhail. He's taking over from Genevieve. Mikhail, this Ridge. He mans the tap. You need water, you come to Ridge and he'll sort you out.”

“Ok…” he murmured, accepting the heavy bucket of water.

“It usually takes about ten buckets of water to fill a tub and there's no dawdling allowed so let's get moving,” Donovan instructed, taking a second bucket from Ridge and hurrying back across to the tub where Misha now stood alone. “Everything all right?”

“Just peachy,” Misha responded, taking the second bucket and tipping its contents into the tub. “Might need an extra bucket this time. We're doing a soft colour on quite a lot of fabric for a tub this size so I don't want the dye to be too heavy.”
It didn't take long for the two of them to fill the tub to the required level, after which Donovan showed Mikhail where the logs were kept and how to feed the wood burning stove without burning himself and then there was nothing to do for a moment as they waited for the water to reach the correct temperature.

“So, this Juno of yours whose mother disapproves. Boy or girl? Older or younger?” Misha asked as he checked the temperature of the water with his hand. “If you’re going to be our friend you’ve got give us some details…”

Mikhail chuckled.

“Juno is a girl and she's a couple of months younger than me, if you must know.”

“Oh, we must,” Misha murmured. “So you’re both, what, nineteen? Twenty?”

“Seventeen,” Mikhail corrected him with a shake of his head. “My family needed the money my wages from here will bring in so I dropped out of school early. Unfortunately we've both still got two more Reaping’s to survive before we're free.”

“Really?” Donovan murmured, obviously surprised by this piece of information. “Huh. I definitely thought you were older. Must be the height. Or possibly the muscles.”

Misha hummed in agreement.

“Donovan’s in the clear, Reaping wise, as he'll be nineteen this winter but I've still got one more to go,” he announced as he tested the water once again. “They'll do.”

“Any siblings?” Donovan enquired as they watch Misha begin mixing in the dye, using a long wooden stick to swirl it round until it had mixed with the water, turning the clear liquid a pale green. “I'm guessing younger. Maybe a…sister?”

“Sasha,” Mikhail confirmed with a nod. “She's fourteen.”

“Then she probably knows my sister Irina,” Misha murmured as he poured in the salt, still stirring the stick through the dye mixture. “Maybe even my brother, Vanya.”

“Vanya? Vanya Hall?”

Misha nodded.

“Yeah, she knows him,” he confirmed with a deep chuckle. “In fact she’s done nothing but moan about his, and I quote, *skank of a girlfriend*, since they got together due to her slightly obsessive crush on your little brother. Talk about a small world.”

Misha let out a booming laugh as he withdrew his stirring stick, wiping the dye off of it with a cloth before becoming one of the girls hovering near the door over, accepting the bundle of damp fabric from her and dropping it into the dye mixture.

“Just twenty minutes for this one because of the light colour,” he instructed them, glancing over his shoulder to make sure his mother was occupied before kissing Donovan soundly on the lips. “Try not to scare him off. I think he could be a good addition to our group.”

Mikhail frowned.

“Your group?” he asked once the two of them were alone, watching as Donovan stuck his hands straight into the bubbling mixture and began moving the fabric around under the surface, not even
reacting to the obvious heat. “What does he mean?”

“We’re all friends up here, have to be what with the way we’re pretty much cut off from the rest of the factory, but there’s a group of us who hang out together outside of work,” Donovan explained, reaching out with one hand to grab hold of Mikhail’s wrist and pull his hand into the dye mixture. “Best to get it over and done with,” he murmured when Mikhail gasped in surprise, the hot liquid making his skin tingle. “Just move the fabric around. Making sure all the folds get smoothed out a couple of times a minute. Rub it between your fingers to spread the dye into the fabric and if you find an air bubble get rid of it quickly.”

Mikhail nodded, slipping his other hand under the water as he slowly got used to the odd sensation of the thick liquid against his skin combined with the heat and searched out the fabric is with this finger tips, watching Donovan closely and copying his movements.

“Does Jedidiah come up here often?”

Donovan sighed.

“Only when he’s run out of people to pick on downstairs but like I said we’re all friends up here, we look out for each other and he knows it,” Donovan explained. “Downstairs it’s a bit like every man, woman and child for themselves in regards to keeping out Jedidiah’s way.”

Mikhail nodded.

He could definitely understand that given the stories he’d heard and the way that the foreman had behaved in the few minutes they’d spent together when he’d signed on.

“What about Alexei, the manager? What’s he like?”

“Not much better than Jedidiah,” Donovan answered simply, dropping the fabric into the liquid and pulling his hands out. “Keep going. Need to see how you'll do on your own.”

“Does he visit often?” Mikhail asked, finding himself frowning softly as he was forced to deal with all of the fabric for the first time. “I know the owner doesn't but what about Alexei?”

“He only visits when something gone seriously wrong,” the older boy explained, leaning over Mikhail's shoulder to watch his hands. “Give the fabric a couple of twists under the surface and then smooth it out. Less effort for equal amount of coverage in comparison to your current method.” Obediently Mikhail adjusted his technique. “That's better.”

“How often does something go seriously wrong?”

“Up here it's not very often, usually to do with incorrect colours or damaged fabric but downstairs they've had people fall into the machinery or loose a hand,” Donovan explained softly, leaning his back against the side of the tub. “Nothing recently, though.”

Unfortunately accidents with machinery weren't uncommon in District Eight, almost everyone knowing someone who had been in an accident of some sort.

His mother’s best friend had lost her hand after it had become trapped in her automated loom and his father’s brother, his Uncle Benjen, had broken both of his legs after one of the cranes down at the loading bay had malfunctioned and had dropped a crate on top of him.

“So, this is the new recruit!” a booming voice cried out moments before a powerful hand smacked him between the shoulder blades, no doubt leaving behind a noticeable stain on the previously clean fabric. “You poor thing, getting paired up with Donovan for training. He's no fun at all.
What is it they say about all work and no play?”

“Oh, I play, Felyx,” Donovan snorted. “Just not with you.”

Felyx came into view, pressing his hand against his chest as though he were in pain, pouting melodramatically as he leaned into Donovan’s personal space.

“But I thought you loved me, Donnie!” Felyx whimpered loudly, imitating the grating voice of a citizen of the Capitol as he forced his lower lip to tremble. “You're nothing but a scoundrel and a tease, Donovan Chase, leading me on like this before casting me aside for what. For what?! What can he give you that I can't?”

No one seemed to be paying any attention to them even as Felyx’s voice got louder and louder, his hands actually moving to clutch at a grinning Donovan’s shirt and Mikhail got the feeling that dramatics such as this were fairly commonplace where Felyx was concerned.

“Loyalty.”

Felyx hissed, jerking back with a grin of his own.

“Fair point,” he conceded, chuckling softly as he released Donovan’s shirt, brushing out the wrinkles before taking a step back. “But it'd be damn good fun and you know it. By the way that offer for a threesome is still available, should you ever change your mind.”

Donovan couldn't contain his bark of laughter.

“Mikhail, this is Felyx,” he eventually announced, gesturing to the attractive young man who had the darkest skin tone Mikhail had ever seen. “Felyx, this is Mikhail.”

“So how about it, Mikhail?” Felyx all but purred across at him. “Why don't you come over to my tub and let me teach you the ropes. I promise to be more…entertaining that this guy…”

Could he be any more suggestive?

Donovan snorted.

“Don't bother, Felyx,” he muttered firmly with a shake of his head. “He's got a girlfriend.”

“Hasn't stopped me before…”

Mikhail found his gaze locked with the chocolate brown orbs of the ever so slightly taller boy and, strangely, found that it took quite a lot of willpower to look away.

There was something strangely hypnotic about Felyx…

“But I expect it might stop him,” Donovan’s voice interrupted his confused thoughts, his hands plunging into the dye mixture suddenly. “You've got to keep the fabric moving at all times, Mikhail, even when this flirt is trying to get in your pants.”

“Sorry…” he muttered, his cheeks flushing red as he found himself strangely flustered. “And it does. She does. Stop me, I mean…from being interest in…yeah…”

Felyx shrugged his powerful shoulders calmly.

“Felyx has a slightly different moral compass to the rest of us,” Donovan explained without being prompted to as he helped Mikhail with the fabric for the last few minutes it needed. “And his verbal filter is non-existent. Other than that he's completely harmless.”
I'm right here, you know,” Felyx piped up, pretending to be insulted before turning his attention to Mikhail. “You're not a prude, are you? No sex before marriage and all that?”

“Not a prude,” Mikhail chuckled. “Not a virgin either. Just a one girl kind of guy.”

“How dull…”

“Not if it’s the right girl,” Mikhail responded with a suggestive smirk. “Why look elsewhere and ruin what you've got when the person you’re with is so…adventurous?”

Felyx literally cackled in response.

“Oh, I think you're going to fit in perfectly fine here,” he announced confidently, patting Mikhail’s cheek with his thankfully dry hand. “Threesome offer is on the table for you and your girlfriend, same as it is for Donnie here and his better half. Speaking of…is my tub ready, oh shining star with a glorious backside that I will get to play with one day?”

Misha’s response came with an obviously well practised glare.

“And that, in a nutshell, is Felyx,” Donovan chuckled as the flirtation boy hurried back to his tub. “He’s a flirt. He'll sleep with anyone who's willing. I've lost count over the years how many people he's charmed into his bed but he will respect your wishes to remain loyal to your girl although he'll never stop offering that threesome. Trust me.”

“Yeah, I kind of got the feeling that might be the case,” Mikhail chuckled, glancing over at the clock before asking softly, “is it time to take it out yet?”

Donovan glanced over at the clock.

“Well done. Most rookies either forget to check the clock when they start or lose track of time,” Donovan murmured, pulling the fabric up out if the liquid and silently showing Mikhail how to squeeze out the excess dye. “Good thing you've already got strong arms…”

“Yeah, no kidding…” Mikhail muttered, feeling the muscles in his hands and arms straining against the unfamiliar actions as he set about copying the older boy’s movements. “And I've always been good with the time, especially keeping track of how long something's been going on. Made school lessons drag like you wouldn't believe.”

A tired looking young woman hurried over with a bucket of water when they'd finished ringing out the fabric and Donovan dropped it almost carelessly into the clear water.

“And that's it,” he announced as she hurried out the door. “The runners take the fabric downstairs and it's no longer our responsibility. Time to start all over again.”

With that the plug was pulled, the dye gushing out and splashing both of them this time, the cleaning supplies were collected and, as Donovan had said, they started all over again.

By the time the horn sounded announcing the end of the shift almost ten hours later Mikhail was absolutely exhausted, his back aching and his now multi-coloured arms felt like they'd been turned into the thick liquid he'd been working with all day.

He was also desperately hungry, none of them having had anything more than water all day as The Dyeing Factory was one of many that didn't offer its workers a lunch break.

“You did good today,” Donovan commented as the four of them descended the rusty metal stairs
at the back of the building, his arm tucked around Misha’s waist. “Most people who join Group Two, myself included, don't make it the whole way through their first day.”

“Really?” Mikhail asked weakly just as they reached the floor, the flow of workers leading him around the side of the building and out onto the busy street. “What happened?”

“He collapsed,” Misha answered simply. “And not just during his first shift. Every day for a week, wasn't it, before you were finally able to make it through the whole days?”

“Sounds about right,” Donovan agreed, clearly not ashamed of this fact. “It takes some people months to get used to it, doesn't it Felyx? And here you are still on your feet.”

“Not for much longer, I'd say,” Felyx chuckled, not reacting to the implication that he'd taken longer to adjust to the workload than Donovan had. “You going to be alright making it home? Wouldn't want you falling down in a gutter somewhere. It's not good for you.”

Mikhail was spared from actually answering by a wonderfully familiar voice calling his name, “Mikhail!”

Juno rushed across and threw her arms around his waist, hugging him tightly before pulling back with a frown and a cute little scrunched up nose as she picked up on how bad he smelt.

“You stink…” she muttered with a grimace before giggling softly. “I know some girls say they’re attracted to a bit of manly musk but just to be clear, I'm not one of them.”

“Got it…” Mikhail muttered, his words slurring together slightly, his arms still holding onto her as he found himself desperate for a bit of support. “Guys, this is my girlfriend, Juno.”

Juno turned to smile at the three young men stood slightly behind her boyfriend, her auburn hair catching in the light of the setting sun as she tucked it behind her ears and her remarkably straight teeth shining white thanks to the care she had always put into them.

“Oh, I completely understand,” Felyx announced, nodding in obvious approval as Mikhail chuckled softly, resting his forehead against the top of her head. “But my second offer is…”

“Still off the cards,” Mikhail responded with a chuckle. “Juno, this is Felyx who I have learnt today cannot help but flirt with everyone he meets. I'll tell you all shout it later.”

“…ok,” Juno responded slowly. “Nice to meet you.”

“And this is Donovan and Misha,” Mikhail introduced the couple who smiled across at her. “They’ve been responsible for me today and they’re not too bad, either.”

“Not too bad, huh?” Donovan repeated with a bright laugh. “See if I help you tomorrow.”

“Ignore him,” Misha advised, swatting his boyfriend’s stomach with the back of his hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Juno. We've heard quite a bit about you.”

“Nothing bad, I promise,” Mikhail mumbled into her hair, rubbing his cheek against the soft strange absentmindedly. “Just, you know, getting to know you talk.”

“Right…” Juno muttered, giggling softly as she realised just how tired her boyfriend actually was. So much for her plan of a quick rendezvous on the way home. He was barely able to stand up, apparently, so he definitely wasn't up for anything else. “Home time, I think.”
“You going to be all right getting him home on your own?” Misha asked seriously.

Juno smiled.

“I'll be fine, but thank you for theory offer,” she responded softly, shifting her grip on her boyfriend so that his oddly coloured arm was slung across her shoulders. “It's been nice meeting you. I'm sure we'll be seeing more of each other in the future.”

“Oh, I hope so,” Felyx muttered suggestively, chuckling as Juno responded by simply raising her eyebrow in a silent display of his unimpressed she apparently was by him. “Sorry.”

“See you tomorrow, Mikhail?” Donovan asked softly.

It wasn’t unheard of for people to quit after the first day.

Mikhail wasn't like that, however, and so he offered his new friends a tired smile and a nod.

“See you tomorrow.”

In the end it took Mikhail a little over a week to get to the point where he didn't collapse as soon as he got home from work and, as a celebration, he and the ground he now referred to as his “work friends” met up with the group he had been forced to call his “school friends” and hung out in the one place where they could all enjoy some of the black market booze they’d acquired for the special occasion – Felyx’s tiny apartment as he was the only one who didn't live with his family having moved out when he was fifteen.

“Why did you move out?” Ella Dawson, his sister’s best friend and therefore one of the youngest at their gathering asked from where she was curled up with her boyfriend, Leroy Garth, a bit of bad boy who was only there because of their relationship. “I mean, most parents I know hate it when their children move out because they lose their wages.”

“They politely asked me to leave after they caught me in a rather inappropriate situation with my mums best friend and her daughter who I knew from school,” Felyx answered calmly, sipping at his drink whilst admiring the colourful patterns on his forearms.

“You didn’t?!” Belle Morris, Juno’s best friend and closest confidante gasped loudly.

Felyx nodded, shrugging his shoulders casually.

“Didn't I tell you about Felyx’s well-earned reputation?” Mikhail chuckled from where he was sat with Juno in his lap, the two of them sharing a bottle of the clear alcohol.

Belle’s eyes twinkled mischievously, far too mischievously for a sixteen year old.

“You did,” she agreed. “I just wasn't sure how much you exaggerated the truth.”

“Trust me, in regards to Felyx and his exploits there is no need to exaggerate,” Donovan chuckled, his lips pressed again Misha’s neck as the other boy straddled him with practised ease, his own hands running up and down Donovan’s sides. “It's always true.”

Felyx smirked.

“Excellent,” Belle announced, rising from her spot on the floor and dropping down onto the twenty-one years olds lap. “Fancy helping me get my own back at some bitches from school? Oh, as well as teaching my overbearing parents a lesson?”
She flicked her dark brown hair over her shoulder, revealing a strip of honey coloured skin where her loose shirt was slipping down off of her shoulder.

“Belle!” Juno gasped.

“What's? Not all of us can find our own bad boys at school like you and Ella,” Bella responded calmly, smiling flirtatiously down at the older boy. “Some of us have to look elsewhere. Plus it's not like it's against the law. I'm above the age of consent, unlike some.”

Here she shot a pointed look across at Ella who, having just taken a sip of alcohol and was struggling not to gag uncontrollably, responded by finger much to everyone's amusement.

“I got kissed at school today.”

This unexpected statement came from the only member of their gathering who Mikhail didn't really know, Willard Garth, the younger brother of Ella’s boyfriend.

Everyone at school believed the story that he had been dropped on his head as a baby.

Despite having the outward appearance for a fifteen year old boy he definitely didn't have a mental age anywhere near that, hence why he had not been given any alcohol that evening.

It was the only thing that Leroy had done that Mikhail approved of, looking after his mush head of a brother as people called him after their parents refused to, wanting to send him to the District Home with all the orphans and other unwanted children.

Didn’t mean Leroy wasn't trouble though.

“Who kissed you?” Sasha asked, concern evident in her voice as her big heart went out to the poor boy like it always did when she encountered someone or something less fortunate than herself. This was how they had come to own Lex, their three legged dog and Finn, their blind cat.

“Willard? Who kissed you? And did they say why?”

“Yes,” Willard responded with a smile. “She said if she couldn't have the real thing she might as well have me and then she kissed me and made me put my hand down her trousers.”

Leroy sat up straight, a look of anger on his face.


“Miss Dempsie,” the simple minded boy answered without hesitation, playing with a loose thread on his shirt so much that the button it was attached to popped off. “Whoops.”

Miss Dempsie was one of the teachers who looked after the younger children.

“She kissed you?” Sasha gasped in shock, picking the button when Willard struggled to do so and holding it out for him. “And made you put your hand down her trousers.”

“Didn’t like that bit but the kissing was ok,” he answered, taking the button from her and putting it carefully in his pocket. “She couldn't remember my name though. I told her, its Willard, Miss Dempsie but she kept calling me Peeta.” He paused and turned his innocent eyes towards his brother. “Will you fix my button before mummy notices like last time?”

“Sure I will…” Leroy mumbled, obviously as shocked as everyone else. “Right after I find Miss Dempsie and have a few words with her about keeping her filthy hands off my brother.”
With that he jumped up to his feet, knocking his girlfriend off of him almost carefully and stormed out of the room, ignoring her as she hurried after him calling his name.

Willard blinked in shock.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” almost all of them said at once, Sasha continuing on alone, “No, you didn't do anything wrong. But as a teacher she shouldn't have made you do that. That was naughty.”

“Oh…” Willard mumbled. “I didn't know.”

“That's ok,” Sasha reassured him with a bright smile. “You do now. Now I know that the kissing was nice but you shouldn't do it unless you want to. You should never do it just to please someone else, ok? And you certainly shouldn't be putting your hand…there…”

“Oh, Sasha, I won't do it again,” Willard promised solemnly. “Can I play with your hair?”

Sasha smiled, nodding in response to his request and turned her back on him so that he could begin braiding the long brown strands into complicated braids which she knew would be an absolute nightmare to remove later on but at that moment she couldn't care less.

“You know, he does kind of look like Peeta Mellark,” Misha murmured softly, frowning across at Willard who was perfectly happy now. “If he was blond it would actually be a little bit creepy… doesn't excuse what that woman did, though. That's just…wrong.”

Everyone hummed in agreement.

“Have any of you heard the rumour that's going around at the moment?” Juno asked, her decision to change the subject well received by everyone. “About Katniss and Peeta?”

“No.” “What rumour?”

“One of the girls at school has been walking out with one of the younger Peacekeepers. I know, she's an idiot, but anyway there's a rumour going round that their relationship might have been nothing more than an act they put on in order to win the Games,” Juno repeated the rumour faithfully, playing absentmindedly with the flip top lid of the bottle she held. “There are even some people who believe that they did that thing with the berries on purpose, not to win the Games like they did but to humiliate the Capitol.”

“There's always rumours about the Victors each year,” Donovan pointed out, reaching over to still her hands and stop the clicking sound her fiddling had been causing. “Don't you remember what they said when Johanna Mason won? Or Annie Cresta?”

“But those were just rumours about them, not about their blatant opposition to the Capitol,” Juno pointed out, obviously reciting what she'd heard. “The Peacekeepers have been told to watch out for any signs of rebellion or uprising.”

“Wait, so the Peacekeepers really think that a handful of berries is going to cause us to down tools and turn on the Capitol after all these years,” Belle snorted loudly. “As if.”

Mikhail wondered if he was the only one who noticed the look which passed between Donovan, Misha and Felyx following her comment, all three of them frowning in obvious concern but there was something else as well, something almost…calculating.

As though they were truly considering it, or had been considering it for some time.
He decided not to bring it up again, allowing the conversation to drift onto much lighter topics until they split up for the evening but the possibility that his friends were considering participating in an act of open rebellion stayed with him for days until her finally couldn't take it anymore and he was forced to confront them after work one day.

“Guys? Can I…talk with you for a moment?” he requested softly after work one day, pulling the, under the metal stairs they had just finished descending before they could follow the crowd of people making their way along the side of the building. “About the other night…”

“Mikhail…” Donovan began softly, all three of them glancing about nervously.

“Was she right?” Mikhail plotted on, keeping his voice soft as people continued to make their way down the stairs over the tops of their heads. “I saw the way the three of you reacted when Juno mention the rumours surrounding the end of the Games. I saw the way you reacted when Belle discounted the possibility of an uprising against the Capitol.”

Misha stepped forwards suddenly, pressing his hand over the younger boy’s mouth.

“It's dangerous to talk about such things out in the open,” he hissed, keeping his hand in place over Mikhail’s mouth as Donovan and Felyx shifted nervously behind him, watching for any reactions from the last few people leaving the building. “Someone could get the wrong idea, report you for spreading dissent and we all know that that wouldn't end well.”

That wouldn't end well at all.

He'd seen people punished for “spreading dissent” and other such similar crimes.

They'd been flogged or, in the worst instances, hung by the neck until dead.

“However, that being said, were you to still be interested in an answer to your question you could meet us back here tonight, say at around nine o'clock, and join us for a drink with some of our friends,” Misha suggested softly as he slowly removed his hand from Mikhail's mouth, his voice still ridiculously soft. “You should know, though, that once you join us for a drink there's no going back. You're with us to the end of the line.”

Mikhail pressed his lips together as his mind processed what his friend was insinuating.

There were rumours about how the Games had come to a close.

There was talk of an uprising against the Capitol.

And he had just been invited to join a secret group which was probably involved in both.

Undoubtedly it would be dangerous but then again, were the uprising to actually happen it would be dangerous for everyone whether they were involved or not.

Wasn't it better to be involved and therefore informed than not?

To know what was going to happen?

To know when it was going to happen?

To be prepared?

“Nine o'clock?” he eventually murmured softly, rubbing at the back of his neck with a dye stained hand as Misha smiled across at him, nodding sharply. “Here? Or out front?”
“I think out front would probably be best, don't you?” Donovan murmured softly, slipping an arm around his boyfriend’s waist who seemed at that moment to be the one in charge. “It’ll look less conspicuous than meeting up back here only to move on again.”

Misha nodded in agreement.

“If you don't come we’ll assume you've changed your mind,” he announced calmly. “But if that's the case you don't talk about this ever again, you understands?”

“I'll be here.”

Misha smiled tightly.

“Ok. I guess we’ll see you later then.”

They parted ways and Mikhail hurried across town, an unusual feeling of paranoia forcing him to keep his head down and his trembling hands buried deep in his pockets out of fear that someone would be able to figure out everything that had just happened.

Crossing the narrow bridge that connected the two side of the river that split District a Eight into three segments due to its large ‘Y’ shape he nodded to the night shift workers hurrying in the other direction before ducking down into the equally narrow tunnel which led him underneath the raised railway line and emerged into the living sector of the District.

Due to the fact that there were over 120,000 “residents” in District Eight, almost 9000 of whom were children, living space was always a challenge to find and often resulted in multiple families sharing one small apartment in one of the run down apartment blocks.

Unlike with some of the other Districts who suffered from large populations it was impossible for District Eight to expand their living sector due to the “topographical challenges” that their District posed, or at least that was what the Capitol had always said.

The only thing they could do was build upwards, a dangerous practise given the age of some of the buildings and the state that they were in leading to numerous “accidents” including an entire floor of an apartment block collapsing, crushing those inside, and the fire which had wiped out not one but two apartment blocks and killed nearly 250 men, women and children including Adya's parents and injuring nearly 100 more, including Adya.

Adya…

It had taken nearly two years for them to replace the destroyed buildings with families applying to move in long before they'd been completed, obviously hoping that the new apartments would be either larger or of better quality than the ones they were replacing.

Unsurprisingly this hadn't been the case.

Mikhail's mother had applied for one of the new apartments, never believing that they would be given one but they had and upon moving in they'd found a sparse apartment with two tiny bedrooms, a kitchenette come dining room come living room and a communal bathroom shared with the other seven apartments on their floor and no life, just stairs.

Nodding to old Harry, a fixture of the front steps of their new apartment block, Mikhail slipped inside and started the long climb up to the seventeenth floor.

“You're late home, love,” his mother called out worriedly from the kitchenette when he finally slipped into the apartment ten minutes later, already stripping off his jacket.
“Got caught up chatting to the guys,” he responded truthfully, moving to the sink in the kitchen as had become his habit since starting work, using the little scrubbing brush and a bit of soap to try and get the worst of the ink stains from his skin. “Nothing important.”

He felt bad about lying to her but he didn't want her involved.

He spent the rest of his evening at home on tenterhooks, trying to act completely natural and in doing so making silly little mistakes which drew more and more attention to himself.

“What's up with you tonight?” Sasha hissed at him as they washed up after their meagre dinner of boiled potatoes, boiled cabbage and, yes, boiled carrots while their parents sat together on the small sofa in the living room. “You've been really weird all evening.”

Mikhail sighed.

“It's nothing.,” he tried to reassure her but, if the arched eyebrow was anything to go by, she wasn't convinced. “Fine. I was talking with the guys about what Juno said, about the rumours and everything and they’ve invited me to a meeting…”

“Are you insane?!” Sasha gasped, throwing down the tea towel and dragging Mikhail into their bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind them to keep their parents out of their conversation. “Mikhail! Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to get involved in anything like that? You've seen what they do to supposed insurgents! You could get killed!”

“I know!” Mikhail hissed, pressing his hand across her mouth to cut off her rising voice in a move similar to the one Misha had used on him earlier. “Don't you think I've considered how dangerous it could be? I've seen the executions, same as you! I know what they do to the supposed insurgents! But I also know that it's different this time.”

Sasha frowned.

“They openly defied the Capitol, Sasha,” he murmured, reaching down to pick up her hand and mimicking the motion that Katniss and Peeta had made when they’d shared the berries between them. “They changed the rules, Sasha. They did it, Sasha.”

“But that was just the Games, Mikhail, not the real world,” she protested as she pulled away from his hands, standing with her hands on her hips. “Things are different in the Games…”

“Haven't you realised by now that our lives are just another sort of Game to the Capitol?” Mikhail demanded, trying to keep his voice soft enough to go unnoticed outside their room. “Adya said it was a nightmare, that the idea that the real world was nothing more than a Game, but he was right! This is just another Arena! The Capitol controls everything about us and our lives just like they control everything about the Tributes and the Arena.”

Sasha paled dramatically.

“I'm sick of being a plaything for the Capitol, one way or another,” he continued firmly, pulling on his nicer jacket and doing the buttons up forcefully. “This needs to happen, Sasha, can't you see that's? We need to stand up for ourselves before they kill us all.”

He watched as his sisters eyes welled up with tears and didn't even hesitate before drawing her into his arms, holding her close as she wept softly as his words hit home.

“It's worth the risk,” he murmured into her hair, stroking his hands up and down her trembling back. “Freedom will always be worth the risk.”
“I…I didn't realise you felt so p-passionately about this…”

“Everyone has dreams of being free from the Capitol,” he responded softly, gently encouraging her to step away from him until they were facing each other once more. “Most of the time that's all they ever are. Dreams. But the time is right, Sasha, for us to try and make our dream a reality. For us to fight back. For us to be free. Don't you get that?”

“I do…” she whimpered softly. “I just…wish you weren't involved…”

Mikhail smiled sadly.

“And yet I'm glad that I am,” he responded. “I want to be a part of this, whatever happens. I want to stand up for the people who can't stand up for themselves.”

“Just…try and be careful…” she mumbled, gazing tearfully up at him even as he began to smile, taking her worlds as the reluctant blessing that they had obviously been intended as.

“I'm always careful,” he chuckled, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head. “I'll see you when I get back. If mum and dad ask tell them I'm meeting up with Juno.”

Sasha nodded.

Snatching up his nicest jacket, the one he didn't wear to work, he shrugged it on quickly before slipping out of the apartment without his parents noticing, both of them too engrossed in their depressingly regular conversation about how they were going to stretch out the three wages to cover food and rent for the rest of the month.

As ever it took significantly less time to jog down the countless flights of steps and all too soon he was sharing another nod with old Harry before hurrying off into the fading light, pulling up his hood in an effort to obscure his face as he hurried back across the District.

Avoiding the Peacekeeper patrols with practised ease, brought about from years of innocently sneaking around with his friends, he arrived at a The Dyeing Factory only a couple of minutes before his friends all of whom were dressed similarly to him, using either a hood or a hat in Felyx's case to conceal their faces.

Not a word was spoken between them as they turned sharply and made their way through the maze of streets which linked the factories together, eventually coming to a stop at the back entrance to one of the largest factories currently in operation.

Misha knocked on the door sharply.

A shaft of light illuminated their faces as the door opened a crack.

Suddenly the silhouette of a tall man stepped into view through the crack, cutting off the light as a deep voice demanded gruffly, “Password?”

“Seriously, Sergei?” Misha huffed loudly. “You can see that it’s us.”

“Yes. That I can. But I can't see who that is behind young,” the man behind the door, Sergei, responded calmly. “How do I know he hasn't got s gun to your back? How do I know you aren't bring coerced by the enemy into revealing our whereabouts? How do I…?”

“Pomegranate,” Misha interrupted him quickly. “This week’s password is Pomegranate.”
Sergei grunted loudly before stepping back and opening the door fully, allowing the four of them to slip inside before slamming it shut behind them, slamming the double bolts home.

“I think you're getting paranoid in your old age, Sergei,” Felyx chuckled as they began to move between the large pieces of machinery which Mikhail thought were used to cutting strips of cloth into patterns ready to be sewn together. “Make you should cut down on that herbal tea you talk about so much. Looks like it might have some side effects…”

“Better paranoid than dead, boy, and don't you forget it,” Sergei, who did appear to be well into his seventies, grumbled loudly before returning to his spot beside the door. “I can still remember the last lot, you know? My daddy were involved and he always said…”

“Keep your mouth shut and your ears open,” Misha, Donovan and Felyx recited together even as they led Mikhail further into the factory. “God gave us two ears and one mouth.”

Sergei grumbled loudly as the four of them made their way through the factory, weaving between the various bits of machinery until they reached the centre of the room where a crowd of about thirty or so people were gathered facing a hand-drawn map of the District which had been pinned to the flat side of an enormous machine.

Standing in front of the large map facing the crowd were two women, dressed similarly and stood with their arms folded across their chests as they glared across at the late arrivals.

One of the women was surprisingly familiar.

“Annoushka?” he mumbled, frowning across at Misha who offered him a simple shrug before making his way through the crowd to stand beside his mother, whispering something in her ear. “I never would have expected that she…”

“How do you think we got involved?” Donovan snorted loudly. “There's always talk and rumours and speculation but until someone organises it that's all it will ever be.”

“And who better to organise and lead an uprising than a couple of supervisors from different factories, women so unimportant in the eyes of the Capitol that by the time they realise what's happening it will be too late?” Felyx chuckled, blowing a kiss at the striking woman stood beside Annoushka. “Tamara, our delightful supervisor’s cousin, has a wickedly fast strategic mind and so was voted in as the strategic commander of the uprising. Annoushka is in charge of recruitment, retention and most importantly secrecy.”

“Mikhail!” Annoushka’s sharp voice interrupted whatever explanations were going to follow, his gaze snapping over to meet that of his supervisor. “Come up here.”

It wasn’t a request.

Felyx gave him a light shove between his shoulder blades to get him moving and as he stumbled through the crowd he could feel all eyes on him, trying to figure out who he was and whether or not he was a spy sent by the Capitol to infiltrate their group.

“Misha says you're interested in joining us,” Annoushka spoke clearly for all to hear when he finally stopped in front of the two women. “Is this true?”

Misha nodded reassuringly.

“If it wasn't I wouldn’t be here,” he responded as confidently as he could, pretending to be much more knowledgeable about the group and its activities than he actually was - for all he knew he
could be joining an anti-Capitol knitting circle. “I want to be part of this.”

Whatever this was…

“As I understand it your father holds a reasonably high position at the loading docks, Mikhail,” Tamara spoke up calmly, drawing his attention to the unfamiliar woman who definitely possessed an air of authority. “We are in need of eyes and ears in that area.”

He sucked in a sharp breath, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

“I don’t know if he’d be interested in…” he trailed off uncomfortably, rubbing at the back of his neck to remove that feeling. “He doesn't even know I'm interested…”

“But you could pass on anything you hear from him, couldn't you?” Tamara pressed, unfolding her arms as she squared her shoulders. “You could ask questions without him getting suspicious, couldn't you? We have plenty of teams spread throughout the factories, even in the school, but so far we have no one from the loading docks.”

Here she paused, stepping forwards as she locked her gaze with his.

“Information is a key factor in this coming together effectively,” she continued firmly and once again Mikhail could feel every eye in the room upon him. It wasn't a pleasant feeling. “Can you gather the information we require? Can you do this for the cause?”

This wasn't quite what he'd had in mind when he'd agreed to attend the meeting but it was an opportunity to do something worthwhile in regards to their fight for freedom.

It was a chance to do some good.

“Yes,” he eventually confirmed with a sharp nod. “Yes, I can.”

And that was it.

He was in.

At the end of the meeting, during which they discussed “possible areas of strategic importance” and effective ways to “cripple productivity” without drawing too much attention, Mikhail was sworn to secrecy and given the password for next week.

He was an insurgent.

A/N I'm getting the feeling that Mikhail is going to be a complicated character who is in way over his head…oh the possibilities…as ever comments and suggestions are welcome. X
They'd known it would happen eventually.

Other families they knew had been hit earlier in the year thanks to the unpredictable weather they had been put through over the course of the last twelve months.

It had begun with the low temperatures of last winter refusing to leave even as spring had arrived, creating a miserable couple of months where it had done nothing but rain almost constantly as the wind had reached genuinely dangerous levels.

This had been followed by an unbearably hot and humid summer, the highest temperature actually being recorded as 109°F on the day that the crowning ceremony took place when almost a dozen people had been struck down by the heat that day, resulting in nine deaths.

The tropical cyclone which had followed the unbearable heat was almost worse.

A combination of strong winds and perpetual rain had caused the river to burst its banks in numerous places despite the desperate work done to contain it, sending water rushing through the open streets of the District until almost all of it was flooded with over a foot of water, only the loading docks and other such areas of “high ground” being spared.

Dozens of people drowned during the flood and dozens more died of disease spread by the stagnant water before the machinery could be brought in to remove it, workers being forced to make their way through the stagnant water to get to their jobs after the Capitol made it very clear that should their output suffer their “rescue aid” would be delayed.

There was even one terrifying day when the cyclone spawned the creation of a tornado, the swirling vortex of air thankfully only striking the edge of the District leaving a path of destruction in its wake almost three metres wide but amazingly no one was killed.

The security fence surrounding the District was damaged, however, and unsurprisingly this was fixed long before the Capitol even responded to the results of the flooding.

And now the first freeze had hit the District a month early, the temperature plummeting almost overnight and poor Sasha had come home from school one day wracked with chills, her skin
burning hot to the touch and a nasty cough which shook her entire body.

“Pneumonia,” Dr Cossutius, the disgraced Capitol physician who had been sent to District Eights Medical Centre for his crimes, announced as soon as Mikhail had finished listing her symptoms after rushing their following his last shift, the unnaturally pale Doctor not even glancing up from his Capitol Couture magazine as he made his prognosis. “Recommended treatment would be antibiotics, the current price of which is thirty cubits for a full course of treatment which is guaranteed to cure your loved one of the disease.”

Mikhail felt his stomach drop like a stone.

Thirty cubits was more than both he and his mother made in a month and it certainly wasn't a sum of money that they could easily part with without being forced to sacrifice something else like food or heating, both of which Sasha would need to get well.

“What about a…a part-payment?” he asked, trying not to sound too desperate as he clenched his dye stained hands at his sides. “We can get the money together just…just not all at once. Could we pay some this months and the rest next month?”

Finally Dr Cossutius looked up at him, obviously assessing the sincerity of his words.

“Twenty cubits up front,” the doctor finally announced. “You can sign a form stating that you will pay the remaining balance of ten cubits after your next pay day.”

He'd been forced to wait until pay day for this very reason and didn't hesitated to pull out the handful of cubits he'd received from Annoushka at the end of his shift and dumped them down on the table between the two of them, counting them out quickly before pocketing the three cubits he had left over after paying the required sum.

“What do I sign?”

His mother was both shocked and relieved when he returned home with the little box of antibiotics, hugging him tightly after he explained how much they had cost whilst offering to be the one to go hungry so that they could still afford to pay their rent and heating bill.

“We’ll all go hungry,” she'd insisted firmly. “A trouble shared is a trouble halved.”

They began seeing improvements in Sasha’s condition almost immediately and by the time Mikhail left for his meeting, his parents still remarkably unaware, she was sitting up in bed for the first time in a week being spoon fed some soup by their tearful mother.

Mikhail had been attending the weekly meetings for almost five months now despite the challenging weather conditions and, with the information he had managed to gather from his father, they were almost ready to instigate their plan when the time was right.

In fact the adverse weather conditions, or rather the Capitols lack of interest in helping them recover from the deadly flooding, had actually helped them to recruit new members loyal to their cause increasing their number from just over thirty to nearly seventy.

The meetings could get quite crowded now but no one ever complained, not when it meant that everyone could be assigned a different position in the planned uprising without leaving them stretched too thin as had been one of their initial concerns.

Mikhail, as the one to supply most of the relevant information, had been assigned to the loading docks along with Misha, Donovan, Felyx and four others and had been tasked with securing the area when the time came and holding it for as long as possible.
Nothing was to come in or go out of their District whilst they were in charge of the area.

“We could do with a dry run,” Annoushka piped up suddenly one evening at their gathering, turning to face her cousin as the various conversations that had been going on came to a halt. “A rehearsal, as it were, to make sure that everything works the way it should do.”

A murmur of approval spread throughout the group.

“We’ll use the confusion of the Victory Tour to our advantage,” Tamara, or Commander Paylor as she was rapidly becoming known amongst the movement, announced calmly as she looked out over the ever growing number of people gathered in the factory. “Using the crowds gathered to greet our Glorious Victors as a cover I want everyone to make their way to their positions and wait, making a note of any unforeseen complications to be discussed that evening at our meeting. Think about how you would go about your assigned tasks. Consider every option. But do not, and I repeat, do not do anything to draw attention to yourselves. We are not ready to carry this thing through as of yet but we will be. Soon.”

Footage of the Victory Tour wasn’t considered to be mandatory viewing as the Hunger Games were but it was still “encouraged” for everyone to tune in to the recaps every day.

However Sasha, who was still too weak to attend school following her illness, was able to watch the live broadcasts and so knew everything that had happened before Mikhail and their parents and was most insistently about which recaps they really had to watch.

None more so than the very first one.

“You won’t believe what they did,” she insisted as they gathered around the projected. “I mean, they probably won’t show the bit at the end but I can tell you what you missed.”

On the screen an image of Celestine, Caesar’s protégée and future successor, appeared.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the first recap show of the 74th Victory Tour.”

“…has she got diamonds on her teeth?” Mikhail couldn't help but mumble as the Capitol presenter smiled at the camera, her teeth literally sparkling in the artificial light. “That’s…”

“Yeah…”

“I think firstly we must commend our Victors stylist for doing such an excellent job with their Victory Tour outfits. Katniss looked absolutely stunning in her sleek black and grey number, complete with an adorable fur to protect her from the cold despite her bare arms while Peeta looked strikingly handsome in his casual suit, also grey and black. On a side note the bracelet that Katniss can be seen sporting has almost sold out already…”

“I think we supplied that fabric,” Mikhail murmured in surprise as the image on the screen changed to one of the two young Victors. “I know we have a contract with the stylists and I remember the struggle we had getting the faux fur to take that particular shade of grey.”

“And now here is the recap of today's earlier events,” Celestine announced in her sickeningly sweet voice moments before the image changed to show the familiar front of a Justice a building, all of which looked exactly the same complete with the rows of chairs for the Mayor, his family and the Victors of the District, all of whom looked incredibly sombre.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the Victors of the 74th Hunger Games,” the Mayor of District Eleven
spoke clearly into the microphone. “Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark.”

Stepping out of the way he led the polite round of applause which accompanied the two Victors entrance into the small stage before the crowd fell completely silent.

“Thank you,” Peeta murmured into the microphone before looking down at the cards he had carried out onto the stage. “We're honoured to be here with you today and to be with the families of your fallen Tributes…”

He paused for a long moment, glancing down at the script he was supposed to follow before allowing the hand holding the cards to drop down to his side.

Katniss, who had seemed almost dazed since stepping onto the stage, turned to glance at her fellow Victor briefly before gazing out at the silent crowd once more.

All at once Mikhail could understand why Sasha had insisted they watch the recap. A Victor never spoke unscripted on their Victory Tour.

Never.

“Though they fought with honour and dignity till the end both Thresh and Rue were so young,” here Peeta paused, obviously thinking through what he wanted to say next now that he had given up on his pre-prepared speech. “But our lives aren't just measured in years. They're measured in the lives of the people we touch around us.”

“How isn't she saying anything?” Mikhail wondered softly as Katniss once again turned her head to watch her District partner as he spoke, her mouth pressed closed tightly.

Sasha hushed him loudly. “She does later, just keep watching!”

“For myself, for Katniss,” Peeta paused briefly in order to meet the silent girl’s eyes before returning to his improvised speech. “We know that without Rue and without Thresh we wouldn't be standing here today. So in recognition of that, knowing that it can in no way can make up for your loss, we'd like to donate one month of our winnings to the families of the Tributes every year for the rest of our lives.”

“...what?” Mikhail couldn't help but gasp even as the people of District Eleven applauded softly on the screen. “I thought...is that even allowed?”

“None of them have ever tried it before so I don't know,” his father murmured sounding equally as confused and surprised from where he sat in his favourite chair.

“Thank you.”

“Here where it gets really interesting,” Sasha murmured as Peeta stepped away from the microphone and headed back towards the doors which would take them back inside the Justice Building. Katniss stepping backwards beside him still watching the large crowd continuing to applaud them. “Wait until you hear what she says.”

At that moment Katniss seemed to change her mind about leaving the stage and stepped up to the microphone, her footsteps almost unsteady as though her legs were trembling.
“I just wanted to say that I didn't know Thresh, I only spoke to him once,” she spoke, her voice obviously choked with emotion. “He could have killed me but instead he showed me mercy. That's a debt I'll never be able to repay.”

At that moment the camera showed a close up of her face, catching the moment her eyes shifted to the stand where her little ally’s family were standing close together.

She looked as though she wanted to be sick.

“I did know Rue,” she managed to announce clearly. “She wasn't just my ally she was my friend. I see her in the flowers that grow in the meadow by my house. I hear her in a mockingjay call. I see her in my sister, Prim.”

Yes, she was definitely close to tears now.

“Bet she doesn't get that choked up about Adya…” Mikhail muttered gruffly, glancing airily away from the image even as her voice continued to echo through their home.

“She was too young...too gentle...and I couldn't save her…” Her voice broke just a little bit as she finished off her part of the speech. “I'm sorry.”

The screen went black for a moment before the interior of the studio returned once more, complete with Celestine and her creepy teeth.

“I knew they wouldn't show it!” Sasha complained loudly as the presenter began gushing about how moving their statements had been and how excited she was for the rest of the Tour. “They did that thing, the symbol with their hands…the one she did when Rue died. All of them. And someone did her whistle, the one from the Arena. And then the cameras cut out just as the Peacekeepers began forcing their way into the crowd!”

Mikhail frowned.

District Eleven, of all people, had made the first move of the Rebellion?

“…really?”

“Yes. It looked like it was going to get really nasty…”

“As it would considering how they all openly defied the Capitol like that,” their father muttered in obvious disapproval, clenching his fists on the armrests of his chair as he looked away from the image. “There'll be a lot of grieving families in Eleven tonight.”

“So you think we should just bow and scrape to please the Capitol, hoping we don't get Reaped, hoping out children and grandchildren don't get Reaped, for the rest of our lives?” Mikhail snapped, glaring across at his father. “That's not living.”

“It's better than being dead!” Brandon snapped, glaring back at his son.

“Is it?” Mikhail scoffed. “I think I'd rather be dead than live like this for the rest of my life. Why should the Capitol have so much power over us? They're just people too!”

“I don't want to ever hear you speak like that again!” his father practically screamed, jumping up out of his seat to glare down at Mikhail. “Your words are treason…”

Mikhail immediately jumped up so that they were eye to eye.
“Right now they are, yes, but one day they won't be,” Mikhail vowed, poking his father in the chest with one of his fingers. “One day we’ll have the freedom we deserve. One day our lives won’t be dominated by our fear of the Capitol.”

“You sound like one of those foolish revolutionaries trying to stir trouble,” his father scoffed loudly, pushing his son's hand away from his chest. “They'll all end up dead, mark my words, and we’ll just go back to how things were before.”

“Things will never be how they were before,” Mikhail voiced passionately and before he could say anything more, anything he might regret he stormed towards the front door. “I'm going to meet up with my friends. Don't wait up for me.”

“Mikhail…”

He cut his father's voice off by slamming the door behind him with enough force to make its hinges rattle before hurrying down the many flights of stairs.

Things were unusually strained between Mikhail and his father the next couple of days, neither of them willing to back down from their side of the argument, their similar personalities working against them for once instead of helping them as they usually did.

“Mikhail, some people, like your father, would rather continue to suffer in a way that they are familiar with than risk everything they hold dear on an uncertain future, even if the rewards would be worth it in the long run,” Juno murmured sadly as the couple snuggled together in their usual spot in Felyx's apartment, their large group of friends having gathered there to watch the recap footage for that day. “He just wants to keep you safe.”

Mikhail sighed.

“But if we all thought like that nothing would ever change,” he pointed out, grimacing as Katniss began praising the Capitol during her carefully structured speech.

Whatever had happened off camera in District Eleven had prompted the two Victors to follow their scripts to the letter, their smiles fixed on their faces even as the people of each District begged them to say what they were really thinking.

“Doesn't he want us to be free?”

Juno smiled sadly, running her fingers through his messy hair.

“Yes, of course he does,” she murmured, continuing to play with his hair soothingly. “He's just got more to lose than we do. We can step up and be brave, knowing that the people we care about will be looked after should anything happen to us but your father like so many others still sees himself as the person responsible for everyone's lives, for everyone's safety. He won't risk doing something that could get you hurt or worse.”

“Yeah…” Mikhail sighed, seeing things from her point of view and therefore understanding his father's words and actions a little bit better. “I guess if I was a father I'd have done things a little bit differently as well. Hopefully, though, by the time I am a father none of this will matter because we’ll all be living as freely as we deserve to be.”

There was a general consensus following his statement.

“Do you think anyone will stand for Adya tomorrow?” Sasha wondered suddenly from where she sat letting Willard braid her hair once more. “During the visit, I mean I always hate it when the stands are empty. That mean that there's no one left to miss them.”
Mikhail hadn't thought about that.

She was right, of course, about what the empty stand usually meant.

“It won’t be empty,” he vowed firmly. “Adya won’t be forgotten.” “But he's got no family left…” Ella pointed out, frowning in confusion. “They only allow the families of the fallen Tributes to stand up for them during the Victory Tour.” “Then we’ll be his family, or rather I will be,” Mikhail insisted firmly. “I'll stand for him.”

“Um, Mikhail?” Donovan mumbled softly, very much aware that of their current group only three of them were actually part of the movement. “What about…”

“I'll speak to Annoushka in the morning,” Mikhail decided, his words seeming perfectly innocent to those not involved in the dress rehearsal the following day. “She'll understand.”

Early the following morning Mikhail dressed in as many layers as he could find in order to protect him from the plummeting temperature and hurried across the District to catch Annoushka at the factory before she left for her designated position in the square.

“Adya?” she frowned as he trotted up to her, his breath fogging in the air as he struggled to get his breathing under control. “Shouldn't you be on your way already?”

“I need to ask you a favour,” he panted softly, pressing his hands against his sides. “No ones going to be standing for Adya today. He's got no family left, you see, and we…I don't think that's right. He was my friend and so I want to be the one to stand for him.”

Annoushka gave him a shrewd look.

“The others can do without me for this,” he continued quickly. “I know what I'm meant to be doing and where I'm meant to be doing it. They can fill me in on any issues later.”

“Ok,” she finally agreed, nodding her head once. “You can stand for him.”

“Thank you.”

They made their way to the main square where quite a crowd had already gathered under the watchful eyes of an entire platoon of Peacekeepers, their complete silence unnerving.

Mikhail pulled away from the rest of the group who set about finding their positions in the square and began weaving his way through the crowd until he was finally face to face with the young Peacekeeper who had been assigned to guard the steps of Adya's stand.

“What do you want?” the Peacekeeper asked from behind his half mask, one of the old ones that his the majority of his face but left his mouth and chin exposed. “Tributes family only.”

“I'm standing for them,” Mikhail responded, making sure to sound as confident as possible so that he was less likely to be questioned. “His parents are dead so I was asked to take their place, something about an empty stand looking bad on camera…”

The young Peacekeeper hummed thoughtfully, obviously considering his words, before offering him one sharp nod and moving aside to let him climb up the steps onto the stand.

Once in position he couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

Several people turned to stare at him, frowning as they obviously tried to figure out just ego he was and how he was connected to Adya before returning their attention to the doors of the Justice
Building, inside which Katniss and Peeta were most likely getting ready.

Glancing across at the other stand Mikhail offered the young woman standing beside a much older man a slow nod, pressing one hand to his heart in a silent gesture of sympathy which she immediately responded with a sad smile marring her pretty face.

Even with such a distance between them Mikhail could recognise the signs of guilt that she wore, signs which he saw every day when he looked in the mirror, and guessed that she was the female Tributes older sister and had been unable to volunteer because she was too old.

The older man was undoubtedly her father.

No sign of a mother, though.

His attention was drawn back to the main stage by the playing of the national anthem, signalling the start of the official ceremony moments before their Mayor rose from his seat and stepped over to the lone microphone which had been placed in the centre of the stage.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the Victors of the 74th Hunger Games,” their Mayor announced calmly, actually managing a smile. “Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark.”

The doors leading into the Justice Building swung open and out stepped the two Victors in question smiling politely at the crowd, dressed in stylish but practical outfits so as to combat the cold temperature but still look appealing to the Capitol viewers.

Unlike in every other District so far no body clapped and Mikhail felt pride swell in his chest. Peeta’s limp was more noticeable now that the image wasn’t restricted to just his head and shoulders as he stepped up to the microphone first, caused no doubt by the state of the art prosthetic legs he’d been fitted with after losing his leg due to “injuries sustained whilst competing in the 74th Hunger Games” or so the Capitol had announced.

“Thank you. We are honoured to be with you here today,” Peeta murmured softly, his hands trembling slightly as they clutched a bundle of prompt cards as he leaned heavily on his real leg. “And to be with the families of your fallen Tributes, who will be remembered for bringing honour to your District with their bravery and courage in the face of death.”

It was the same speech they’d been using in every single District since the “upset” they’d caused by deviating from their scripts on the first day but that came as no surprise.

What was a surprise was the reaction given by the previously silent crowd when Katniss Everdeen stepped up to the microphone with her own cards held at the ready.

“Murderer!” a nondescript voice called out from the centre of the large crowd before she could even open her mouth to speak, the cry instantly bring taken up by several others much to the shock of everyone on stage. “Murderer!”

Mikhail frowned slightly.

This definitely wasn't anything to do with their group given that they had decided that, despite her lack of popularity in the District due to her apparent lack of compassion or indeed any emotions at all for people who weren't her immediate friends or family, Katniss Everdeen was necessary for any sort of revolution to work as she had inadvertently become the face of the people with her “rebellious actions” inside the Arena.

Instantly the Peacekeepers delved into the crowd to find those who had spoken.
Up on the stage Katniss had frozen, her mouth open in shock.

“We also want to…” Peeta spoke up suddenly, tilting his head so that he could see what was written on his fellow Victors card. “…share with you our love and our gratitude to the Capitol for bringing us together. True love can mend the heart and banish loneliness, giving meaning to our lives and we are eternally grateful to the Capitol for allowing us to be together, to spend our lives together.”

Katniss finally seemed to pull herself together and cleared her throat, obviously preparing to speak up, only to be interrupted once more as she tried to speak.

“Murderer!”

It was all he could do to keep the smirk off of his face as she faltered once more.

Obviously she wasn't fond of hearing the truth…

Unfortunately there was no way that the owner of that brave voice hadn't been seen by the Peacekeepers moving through the crowd and all too soon a young man Mikhail vaguely remembered from school a few years ago was being knocked to the ground.

The Peacekeepers were merciless, laying into him with the butts of their rifles even as the crowd reacted around them, trying to pull them off of the young man to no avail.

Up on the stage Katniss and Peeta both wore identical expressions of shock.

Eventually they stopped laying into him and set about dragging him from the square, no doubt towards a place of swift execution, but even knowing this and despite being in obvious amounts of pain the young man still had the courage to call out once more,

“Murderer!”

“I've got this, Katniss,” Peeta murmured, obviously not intending for the microphone to pick up his voice as he removed the cards from her hands and, after flipping over to the next one, returned his attention to the now somewhat agitated crowd spread out in front of him. “We are all of us united no matter what District we live in, no matter what job we do, no matter what life we lead, in serving a common purpose.

Here he paused and Mikhail got the distinct feeling he was beginning to struggle with the obvious script he was supposed to follow, or rather Katniss was supposed to follow as he had stepped up to cover for the girl who still stood frozen in shock.

“The…the power and glory of the Capitol.”

A murmur spread through the crowd.

Around the edges the Peacekeepers adjusted their grips on their weapons, obviously getting ready to intervene once more whilst up near the stage Annoushka gave a signal for all of those involved in the dress rehearsal to remain calm, to not draw attention to themselves.

“Panem today,” Peeta spoke up firmly, looking out over the top of the crowd until his eyes met with Mikhail’s who, of course, refused to look away. “Panem tomorrow.”

Mikhail smirked.

Moving slowly he folded his arms across his chest, a casual display of how unimpressed he and
his friends were with their “performance” but not enough of an action to draw him to the attention of the Peacekeepers who by now we're definitely trigger happy.

“Panem forever.”

Peeta's voice broke almost painfully on the last word and he didn't even hesitate when their idiotic looking District Escort hurried up to lead both him and his silent partner off of the stage, all three of them trying to ignore the growing noise coming from the crowd.

Something caught Mikhail’s attention out of the corner of his eye, pulling his gaze away from the male Victors just in time to see a dozen or so children of Reaping age or younger begin launching rotten fruit and vegetables up at the two Victors from within the crowd.

“Ah!” Peeta’s cry of shock echoed through the microphone as both he and Katniss stumbled backwards in an attempt to avoid the worst of the onslaught, both of them already covered in the remains of the food which had been thrown up at them. “What the…?”

“Capitol scum!” “Go back where you came from!” “Like puppets on a string!” “Murderer!”

The cacophony of voices grew louder and louder, the screens displaying the live broadcast finally cutting out as the cameras were turned off moments before the Peacekeepers began attacking the crowd once more, striking down anyone in their way.

People screamed.

Mikhail could do nothing but watch from his position on top of the little stand as the crowd in the square began to flee in every available direction, the children darting nimbly between workers and Peacekeepers alike so as not to get caught and all the while Katniss and Peeta stood almost dumbstruck on the main stage watching the chaos erupting below them.

Eventually their ridiculous escort and alcoholic mentor stepped forwards, brushing the remaining food from their clothes and skin as they hurried them inside the Justice Building.

Finally Mikhail turned his attention away from the main stage and assessed his options for getting out of there, knowing that he needed to make himself scarce before the Peacekeepers arrested him like they were doing with so many random citizens.

People were still rushing around the stand he was stood on, completely exposed, so rather than using the steps which would put him directly in the path of the crowd he turned and jumped off of the back of the stand as carefully as he could manage in his work boots.

His landing wasn't brilliant, one of his ankles jarring painfully, but he managed to stay on his feet and was therefore able to take off running as soon as he was on the ground.

In the end five people were killed during the “incident” and nine more were summarily executed the following day for “disrupting the peace” and “inciting rebellious behaviour.”

One of those executed was a teenager who, because she had been caught with an allele in her pocket, had been held responsible for the “physical attack” of the Victors but Mikhail and the others had since learned that she'd had nothing to do with it.

The apple had actually been her lunch, not an unused weapon, as she’d just had the misfortune of not being quick enough to get away from the Peacekeepers.

Countless people had been injured either by the Peacekeepers or during their attempt to flee the mayhem, several people breaking bones slipping on the icy ground as they ran.
As far as the dress rehearsal was concerned the day had been a success, everyone able to get to their various positions in the required amount of time and the information they'd gathered about the various movements and habits of the Peacekeepers was proven correct.

The Peacekeepers in the square had only been brought in for the day, after all, and therefore their actions had been almost as unpredictable as the rest of the crowd.

They were ready.

And the unexpected show of support from the people of District Eight had served to reassure them that when the day finally came for them to make their move they wouldn't be standing alone for long, their fellow workers would rise up and stand with them.

Now they just had to wait for the right time.

**A/N** Just like with the previous chapters this one took on a life of its own, swerving away from my plan before coming back to it at the end. Hope it didn't disappoint. X
**Chapter Five**

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

**WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!**

**Stars Look Down**

**Chapter Five**

Mikhail was cleaning up at the end of his shift when the battered old holo-projector they kept on hand for any emergency broadcasts whirred to life, the image of Caesar sitting behind his usual desk in the Capitol appearing on the wall below the room’s only clock.

Almost as one everyone paused on what they were doing, some of them even dropping their scrubbing brushes into the bottom of their tubs or placing their buckets of water down with loud bands and clangs so that they could focus entirely on the screen.

Oddly enough Mikhail kept hold of his scrubbing brush, turning it over in his hands.

“What now?” Donovan grunted, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand as he leaned against the side of his tub, frowning across at the image.

“Never mind that,” one of the youngest runners scoffed loudly. “What is he wearing?”

The question was a valid one as Caesar seemed to have outdone himself in terms of unique style of clothing that evening with what appeared to be purple hair and eyebrows, something that Mikhail was pretty sure had ended up being the signature look of one of the poor Victors from previous years, a lilac shirt with what appeared to be a metallic dog collar hiding the top button and a shiny, striped suit jacket with deep satin lapels.

In short he looked just as ridiculous as always, possibly even more so thanks to the hair.

“Seriously?” someone scoffed loudly in response, nudging the young runner. “Were you expecting something different? This is Caesar Flickerman we’re talking about after all…”

“Hush!” Annoushka ordered sharply. “We need to hear what he has to say.”

After the success of the dress rehearsal it had been decided that the next time something “memorable” happened during the Victory Tour that their rebellion would begin for real.

Mikhail felt his body tense up with anticipation and, judging by the change in people posture and facial expressions, he wasn’t the only one feeling that way.

This could be the “memorable” moment they had been anxiously waiting for.
“Just when you thought things couldn't get more exciting going into a very special Quarter Quell our two lethal lovebirds, my favourite expression, added a new twist to their love affair,” Caesar announced on the small holo-screen, his body seeming to tremble with excitement as his unmistakable voice echoed through the unusually quiet room, his trademark smile showing off his impossibly white teeth for a moment. “Let's take a look.”

Turning his head the memorable host of the Hunger Games brought a nations attention to the smaller image which had appeared beside him, an image of himself wearing the exact same outfit that he appeared in now stood beside Katniss and Peeta, both dressed in the outfits they must have worn for the final day of their Victory Tour, their visit to District One.

After only a moment into the archive footage Peeta moved down onto one knee.

“Seriously? Who does that in real life?” Freya, usually so sweet and quiet, scoffed loudly. “I don't want a man to go down on one knee when he proposes to me, all showy and insincere and blatantly to please someone else. I want honesty. Spontaneity. Not that.”

There was no sound coming from the smaller image, in fact there didn't appear to be any sound at all for a long moment, but it pretty obvious what was going on.

“I mean look at her reaction,” Freya scoffed once again, gesturing to where Katniss Everdeen stood with her hands covering most of her face. “Completely fake. This is staged. She definitely knew he was going to propose before they walked out onto that stage.”

“I don't think anyone will care about that,” Topaz, a good few years older than her fellow tub worker, murmured almost sadly as she watched Caesars reaction to the “spontaneous” proposal on the screen. “All they'll care about is the fact that the little lovers they invested so much time and money in during the Games are getting married just like they should do.”

“A fairy tale ending for two star-crossed lovers…” Caesar sighed dramatically as the Katniss and Peeta hugged on the smaller image, ending the silence as he turned back to address his audience looking excited once more. “And then tonight the tour that began in the hollows of District Twelve will end. Where? Why at the Presidential Palace, of course, and I have to honour of broadcasting the event live this evening for your viewing please so please join us back here for the coverage of what is certain to be the petty of the year…”

Annoushka reached over and pulled the power cable out of the holo-projector, cutting whatever else he was about to say off as the image disappeared with a loud crackle.

“This is it,” she announced, confirming what Mikhail and the other members of the movement had all been thinking. “Those of you who do not wish to get involved should return to your homes as quickly as possible and stay there until the worst is over.”

A confused murmur spread through the majority of the group.

“The rest of you, you know what to do.”

All but throwing his scrubbing brush into his tub Mikhail snatched his jacket from where it was hung of an old hook and joined the rush of people hurrying out of the building, sharing an excited grin with Donovan moments before the pair of them met up with Misha and Felyx at the bottom of the stairs who were already armed with a couple of old pipes.

Nodding a sharp farewell to Annoushka who had remained on the stairs for an extra moment to monitor everything the four of them turn and began hurrying their way through the District
towards the Loading Bay, meeting up with the other members of their group en route as well as grabbing some more things to use as weapons, a plank for Donovan and an old chair leg for Mikhail, broken off into a somewhat deadly looking point.

“What's going on?”

They were asked this simple question by numerous people they passed in the streets, workers who had just clocked off, children hurrying to evening jobs after a long day at school and every time one of their group would answer simply,

“Our fight for freedom begins today.”

As they finally approached the loading bay accompanied by half a dozen unexpected volunteers they slowed their pace considerably so as not to give away their approach.

They needed to take the Peacekeepers by surprise in order for them to gain the upper hand early on, arming themselves with the Peacekeepers own weapons so that they would be better armed for whatever counterattack the Capitol decided to implicate.

Arriving at the road which would lead them into the centre of the loading bay the group split up into two groups, each group hugging the walls as they took their final few steps before coming to a complete halt at the very edges of the buildings now concealing them.

Finding himself on the right hand side of the road Mikhail silently volunteered to take a look at the loading bay, exposing himself as he leaned his head and shoulders round the corner of the building knowing from previous visits that he would have the best line of sight.

Thankfully because it was so close to clocking off time the loading bay was filled with workers wrapping up their jobs for the day and the Peacekeepers attention was fixed entirely on them, probably hoping to catch one of them slacking, so Mikhail was able to count their targets and make a mental note of their locations without being noticed.

“Two Peacekeepers in each watch tower,” he reported using the agreed hand signals to report to the group watching him from the other side of the road. “Four by the tracks almost straight ahead of us. Two on the loading platform. Two by the control room.”

“Civilians?” Misha asked from the other side of the road, also using the hand signals so as to get the question across without having to raise his voice and give away their position.

Mikhail’s only answer was a sharp nod.

He hadn't seen his father or uncle but he knew they'd be out there somewhere.

Hopefully they wouldn't do anything stupid, like staying out in the open when the fighting started, or there was a pretty good chance that they'd be caught in the crossfire.

Misha nodded sharply.

He had been placed in charge of their group after showing the greatest understanding of the various tactics which were discussed and practised at their meetings.

“Mikhail, Felyx, take out the watch tower opposite the tracks,” he ordered, his hand gestures quick and sharp. “Donovan and I will take the one by the office building.”

That made sense, Mikhail thought, as it would be easier for each pair to reach their assigned targets without being seen given that they were on opposite sides of the roads and the two watch
towers were placed on opposite sides of the loading dock so as to see everything.

“Everyone else conceal yourself behind your nearest watchtower until we can give you covering fire,” Misha concluded as calmly as he could. “Then we’ll take out the rest of them. Try not to hit any of the workers who will panic unless they’re already with us.”

Everyone offered one sharp nod to show that they had agreed and understood his orders.

Moving quickly and quietly the two groups slipped around the corners of their relevant buildings and into the large open area which made up the majority of the loading bay’ Mikhail leading the way for his group as they hurried to their nearest watch tower, a tall structure with cross-cross supports connecting the four legs and a partially enclosed platform at the top where the two peacekeepers were stood protected from the elements.

There was a partially enclosed ladder running up the front of the structure but that would leave them completely exposed and so, after handing their improvised weapons off to their fellow rebels as they would be too awkward to climb with, Felyx and Mikhail began the difficult task of climbing the cross-cross supports as quickly and as quietly as possible.

As part of their training they’d all learned several different methods of disarming an armed opponent, practising them on each other whenever they had the time, and once both of them had managed to climb onto the platform without being noticed Mikhail signalled that they should use the ankle grab method that Commander Paylor herself had taught them.

It was a relatively simple manoeuvre so long as you could sneak up behind your target without being noticed, something that they had managed by climbing up behind them.

Crawling forwards on their bellies the two young men shared a look before reaching out, grabbing hold of the Peacekeepers by their ankles and pulled their legs out from underneath them, their considerable upper body strength coming in handy for something other than wringing out lengths of dyed cloth as they sent the two Peacekeepers crashing down onto their fronts, the manoeuvre knocking their guns out of their hands at the same time.

Of course they didn't stay down for long.

Mikhail struggled to gain control of the Peacekeeper he had taken down, knocking his gun just out reach before literally crawling across the other man’s body even as the Peacekeeper continued to struggle almost desperately beneath him, his sharp breaths fogging up the inside of the helmet he was wearing and clouding his already impaired vision even more.

Using both his upper body strength and his entire body weight Mikhail was finally able to subdue the man with an arm across his vulnerable throat, his instincts taking over as he pressed down as hard as he possibly could until the Peacekeeper stopped struggling.

His stomach clenched painfully as he was faced with his own reflection on the dead man’s helmet, taking in the wild look in his eyes, the flushed cheeks and the grim smile on his lips.

He'd just killed a man in cold blood and he was smiling…

“Fuck…”

What had he just done?

“Hey!” Felyx snapped having succeeded in overpowering his own target, grabbing Mikhail by the back of his shirt and pulling him none too gently up to his feet, pressing one of the rifles into his hands. “You can have a break down later, after we've helped our friends. Ok?”
“O-Ok…” Mikhail mumbled, glancing down at the unfamiliar weapon before shifting his grip to the one they had been taught, minus actual weapons at the time, as he moved to stand at the edge of the platform, looking down at the loading bay below them. “Ok…”

Misha and Donovan opened fire first, Mikhail and Felyx joining in seconds later and the reaction was instantaneous, the workers either dropping to the ground or making a run for it even as the rebels charged at the remaining Peacekeepers who, of course, returned fire.

It was surprisingly difficult to aim properly and it took a few minutes too long for them to get the hang of the weapons, by which time two of their friends and a handful of workers lay dead on the ground, only two of the remaining Peacekeepers having been taken out.

With each shot he fired the butt of the rifle pushed back into his shoulder, the joint aching more and more each time and his finger was beginning to cramp up from pulling the trigger by the time all of the Peacekeepers had been taken out and the loading bay fell quiet.

In the end the fight had only lasted about fifteen minutes.

“Shit…”

Looking away from the dead bodies, their blood pooling on the ground around them Mikhail’s gaze fell on the body of the man he had killed with his bare hands.

Unlike the others there was no red blood staining his crisp white uniform, the crisp white fabric with its built in body army looking almost too perfect on such an unnaturally still body, helmet covered head tilted back, his arms resting on the ground up by his head, hands still partially clenched from where he had died still trying overpower Mikhail.

This time there was no stopping the clenching feeling in his stomach and he barely had time to lean over the side of the watch tower before he lost control, vomiting wretchedly.

A hand clasped at his shoulders as he gasped for breath between the painful heaves.

“You did good, Mikhail,” Felyx murmured reassuringly. “You did good.”

Did he?

Then why didn't he feel like it?

He should feel like a hero, triumphant in battle, but instead…instead he felt like a monster…

Like he was nothing more than a murderer…

“Hey,” Felyx muttered, turning the still gasping boy to face him. “I know what you're thinking. I know. But…it had to be done. *The needs of the many*, and all that jazz.”

Mikhail couldn't help but chuckle humourlessly.

“I don't think that quote really applies here, Felyx,” he sighed, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth as he grimaced at the taste left behind on his tongue. “*The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few* is usually used to explain moments of self sacrifice.”

“I know,” Felyx responded with a grin. “But it got you out of your little funk, didn't it?”

Mikhail couldn't help but roll his eyes in response.
“Ok, let's get this place locked down,” Misha called out as he descended the other watch tower using the ladder, the rifle he'd just acquired slung over his shoulder by the strap. “Felyx, you stay up there and keep an eye on things. Mikhail, I need you and Boris to…”

“Mikhail??”

His body froze as he heard his father’s voice echoing through the silence.

At least he hadn't been hurt in the crossfire but judging by his tone of voice he was pissed.

Felyx offered him a somewhat apologetic smile as he picked up his abandoned rifle, ducking his head and one arm through the strap so that it ended up resting across his chest with the weapon pressing across his back, before making his way to the top of the ladder.

His stomach clenched with nerves as he began his descent and it wasn't entirely to do with the prospect of facing his more than a little bit enraged father, more to do with the fact that climbing the tower hadn't seemed nearly as bad as making his way down the ladder.

Keeping his gaze fixed firmly on his hands he placed one foot below the other, finding each rung of the ladder carefully but quickly, and soon enough he was back on solid ground.

He barely had time to let out a sigh of relief, previously unaware that heights were not within his comfort zone, when he was being hauled away from the base of the tower by a familiar grip on the back of his neck, the speed with which he was being forced to move making it difficult for him to get his feet planted firmly for a long moment but eventually he was able to put up enough resistance to stop his father from moving them any further.

“What do you think you're doing, Mikhail?” Brandon Warrington demanded sharply as his son pulled away from his firm grip and spun to face his, his familiar blue eyes blazing with anger and defiance. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

A crowd was slowly gathering around them, a mixture of confused workers who had either managed to escape or survive the fighting and rebel insurgents, still armed for a fight.

“Getting involved with this sort of thing is suicide!”

Mikhail’s glare intensified as he faced off against the man he had looked up to and admired all his life, the man who had helped shape him into the person he was today, the man who should be supporting his actions and not arguing against them like he was.

“At least I would have died a free man, not some puppet of the Capitol,” he eventually spat towards his father, his hands clenching into tight fists at his sides as a murmur of agreement spread through the rebels within the crowd. “We have to do this! Can't you see that?”

“Mikhail…”

“We have to stand up for what we believe in, for what we deserve,” Mikhail pressed on passionately, his heated gaze locked with the tortured expression in his father’s eyes even as more people in the crowd began to murmur softly. “We have to stand up to them, if not for ourselves then for future generations. Don't they deserve to be free?”

Hidden towards the back of the crowd Misha shared a look with both Donovan and Felyx, leaning over the sides of their watch towers to take in the scene going on below them, and pulled out the recording device they'd managed to steal a few weeks previously.

It was meant to be used to keep a record of the oncoming days so that their actions might one day
be shared with all of Panem, inspiring the rebellion they believed in so passionately.

Mikhail, with his surprising way with words, would be a perfect thing to feature.

“We're prepared for this,” Mikhail pressed on, finally unclenching his fists so that he could gesture around at the scene surrounding them. “We've been waiting for this day to come for weeks, no, months, ever since the Games ended. And it's not just us any more, dad, not just our small group of rebels – we have students, workers, everyone, anyone! More and more people have been joining the movement since this farce of a Victory Tour began.”

“You think it's going to be this simple?” Brandon scoffed, throwing his arms wide in an almost identical move to that of his son only he chose to highlight the bodies of the fallen Peacekeepers. “You took them by surprise today but the people you've chosen to fight are a dangerous foe, with the men and the arms that you never can match! Oh, I suppose it seems pretty easy to just sit here and swat them like flies but just you wait and see what happens when the Capitol sends in their reinforcements. Don't any of you remember District 13?”

A grumble spread through the crowd.

“It's different this time,” Mikhail countered. “We have someone to follow this time, a symbol of hope to rally the people, to call them to arms and to bring them in line!”

“If you're talking about that silly girl…”

“I'm talking about the Mockingjay,” Mikhail interrupted his father calmly, his words receiving a faint cheer from his fellow rebels. “The people will follow the Mockingjay!”

“You've changed your tune,” Brandon snapped at his son, pointing an accusing finger at Mikhail’s chest. “You couldn't stand Katniss Everdeen a couple of months ago.”

“I don't follow Katniss Everdeen,” Mikhail snapped, all but spitting her name as his brain unhelpfully supplied images of his friend’s final moments. “I follow the Mockingjay.”

“I don't know how it's escaped your notice, son, but they're one in the same,” Brandon scoffed, shaking his head as he finally looked away from his son in order to address the crowd. “All of you are mad, blindly following a little girl towards your deaths!”

“They are not the same!” Mikhail all but screamed, his emotions finally getting the better of him for a moment. “Katniss Everdeen might be the face of this rebellion, the spark that started it all but the Mockingjay is its soul, its heart. We are all the Mockingjay!”

“Damn, I wish I had a camera…” someone muttered towards the edge of the crowd. “Talk about having a way with words. Who knew a little factory boy could be so eloquent?”

Misha grinned upon hearing those particular words, raising the camera he held higher up in order to get a better view of the two almost identical figures in the centre of the crowd.

“I'm sorry that you don't agree with my decision to fight, dad, but this world is finally changing and I'm not going to sit by and let someone else fight for me,” Mikhail continued, his tone softer as he regained control of himself. “I've made my decision.”

Here he paused, turning to address the workers gathered around them.

“Now it's your turn,” he announced clearly, faltering slightly when he caught sight of the camera but pressing on after receiving an encouraging nod from Misha. “We won't force you to join us in this fight. We’re not like the Capitol. But make no mistake my dad’s right, there is going to be a
fight. It may not be today, it may not be tomorrow but it will happen. And the Capitol will not be kind. We've all seen what they're willing to do to our innocent children in the name of entertainment. We all know exactly what they are capable of.”

He paused, letting out a deep sigh.

“The question you have to ask yourself is do you believe that freedom is worth fighting for?”

It was a completely unexpected voice which eventually answered his question, breaking through the slightly uncomfortable silence which had fallen on the group.

“I'll fight.”

Mikhail spun on the spot to find his school friends including Juno, the owner of the achingly familiar voice, huddled together at the back of the crowd nearest the loading bay entrance.

Her cheeks were flushed, her forehead covered in a light sheen of sweat and that paired with the way she was obviously struggling to calm her breathing told him that she and the rest of his friends had run all the way there as soon as the fighting had started.

Stepping away from the others she moved to stand directly in front of her boyfriend, blinking up at him through her thick lashes and offering him a dazzling smile.

“I'd like to live the rest of my life free,” she announced clearly, reaching up to slip her arms around his shoulders in a bold move considering they'd never been able to acknowledge their relationship in public before. “No matter how long or short a time that might be.”

Mikhail found his arms moving of their own accord, his hands settling on her waist as she tilted her face in the achingly familiar move which spoke of her desire to kiss him.

He smiled down at her.

“Freedom.”

Their gentle kiss was accompanied by a round of applause and wolf whistles from their friends, the rest of the crowd taking a moment longer to react to their actions.

“We'll stand with you, Mikhail!” Leroy called out just as their kiss ended. “Freedom!”

At his side Ella beamed, resting her head on his shoulder while her arms wound their way around his waist whilst poor Willard looked more than a little overwhelmed.

His friends words were all that were apparently needed for others to join in, countless other voices in the ever growing crowd pledging themselves to the fight against the Capitol.

Misha wisely chose that moment to step forwards and take charge again, the recording device he'd been used held casually in his hand having served its purpose for the moment.

“We need to lock down the District,” he explained their plan calmly, turning on the spot as he spoke so as to address each and every member of the crowd. “Nothing comes in and nothing goes out without our say so. Total lock down. This means we need to shut down the train tunnels so does anyone here know how to do that?”

Mikhail watched as several pairs of eyes turned to look at none other than his uncle Benjen who shifted somewhat uncomfortably under the sudden attention before nodding sharply.
“Aye,” he announced in his usual gruff voice. “I know how to shut them down.”

That came as something of a surprise to Mikhail who had thought that both his uncle and his father worked with the actual loading equipment, overseeing the exterior work as it were given their status as foremen but apparently they hadn't shared everything with him.

“And will you?” Misha asked, crossing to stand directly in front of Benjen. “Are you willing to stand with us? If not, are you at least willing to tell us how to shut them down?”

“Don't get your knickers in a twist before you have to, boy,” Benjen grumbled loudly, pulling the collar of his jacket up to cover his neck as he turned and began walking through the crowd towards the office building in the far corner of the loading bay. “I'll shut them down.”

Moments after he'd entered the building a warning klaxon sounded, the harsh sound cussing most of them to wince even as red lights began to flash all around the loading bay.

One of the workers who had joined the initial fight chuckled deeply.

“He's put us into quarantine,” he announced, stuffing his hands into his pocket in a remarkably casual move. “We're locked up tight all right, just like you wanted.”

“Those of you who want to return home may do so,” Misha announced, gesturing to the unguarded entrance to the loading bay. “We won't stop you. As my comrade said we aren't like the Capitol – we won't force you to fight if that isn't what you want.”

In the end only half a dozen people took them up on their offer to leave and all bar two of them were well past an age where they would have been useful in a fight anyway.

The other two were single parents who couldn't risk leaving their children alone in the world.

Everyone else stayed including, much to Mikhail’s surprise, his father.

“I don't like the idea of you being caught up in this, Mikhail,” Brandon murmured as Misha began organising everyone into groups, most of which would be used to guard/patrol the loading bay on a rotation that would give everyone a chance to rest but some of whom would be used as runners to spread messages throughout the District. “I don't like the idea of you being forced to fight. However, that said, I have thought about what you said and…and I agree that freedom might just be the prize worth fighting and dying for.”

“Thanks…”

“But I'll warn you now son, you're on your own when your mother finds out about this and if you think I was pissed off earlier you just wait till she gets hold of you,” Brandon warned him, seriously at first before allowing a broad smile to appear on his still handsome face. “Not to mention when she finds out that you've been hiding a girl from her as well.”

Brandon gave a dramatic wince.

“What's her name?”

“Juno,” Mikhail responded, glancing over to where the girls had been gathered together along with the younger volunteers like Willard and were being handed notepads and pencils. “Juno Summers. We had to keep it quiet because her parents wouldn't approve.”

“But that you'd know anything about disapproving parents,” Benjen chuckled having re-joined his brother and nephew after finishing in the office. “Right, Brandon?”
Much to his sons amusement the older man’s cheeks flushed red as he remembered the months he and his wife had spent keeping their budding relationship a secret so as not to alert either of their parents, neither of whom had ever really approved of their choices.

Brandon had been from a working class family, the son of a low level loading bay worker and an equally low level seamstress in the factory which made Peacekeeper uniforms.

Elisa had been the youngest child of the District butcher, a well-respected man with ideas above his station in regards to his families importance who had wanted his only daughter to marry the pompous son of the then District Mayor, securing their “position.”

In the end they’d only been allowed to marry because Elisa fell pregnant with Mikhail.

“Well, as long as they don't go down the same route we did…” Brandon muttered towards his brother, glancing over towards his son’s pretty young girlfriend who was making her way across to them. “At least not until they're both well out of a Reaping age…”

Mikhail frowned.

What were they talking about?

“Hey,” Juno murmured as she all but skipped up to him, leaning against his side. “We’ve been given the job of running messages back and forth between the rebel strongholds.”

“Even Willard?”

It was obvious even at a distance that Misha was struggling to explain the particulars of Willard’s job, even with Leroy helping him explain it and the notepad he'd been given.

“Would you rather give him a gun and put him on watch?”

Mikhail couldn't help but wince at the image that suggestion conjured up.

No, as well meaning as Willard could be giving him a gun was definitely a bad idea so making him one of the messengers was their only option if he wanted to be part of the fight.

“Have you been given a message to deliver yet?” Brandon asked suddenly, his piercing gaze fixed on the young woman leaning comfortably against his son’s side who stiffened noticeably as if only noticing his presence for the first time. “Juno, wasn't it?”

“Um, yes, Juno and…no, no message yet,” she responded, biting her lower lip nervously even as Mikhail linked their fingers together. “It's a…um…pleasure to meet you…”

Their plan had been to inform their parents of their relationship once they’d both turned eighteen and were no longer eligible for Reaping, making them young adults in the eyes of the law and therefore able to make choices for themselves in terms of who they loved.

“Are you permitted to take messages for us or is it official business only?”

Juno hesitated.

“No ones said I can't take messages for you…” she eventually admitted, gasping softly when her boyfriends father snatched her notepad and pencil from her free hand and began jotting down the message he wished to send, his handwriting crude but clear like most workers.

Elisa,
I need you and Sasha to stay in the apartment where it's safe for the time being.

Mikhail and I are ok.

We're helping out at the loading bay until all this unpleasantness is dealt with.

Don't come outside.

I love you both so very much.

Brandon.

Once finished he carefully pulled the page from the notepad, somehow managing to rip along the bound edge in a straight line, folded the sheet in half and held both the note and the notepad it had come from out to the teenage girl, the pencil balanced on top.

“I'm going to assume you know where we live,” he announced as she reached out to accept the items he offered, offering him a nod of confirmation. “Thank you.”

With that said Brandon turned away from his son, his son’s girlfriend and his brother and walked over to get his assignment from his son’s friend who appeared to be in charge.

“He’ll come round,” Benjen murmured, reaching out to squeeze Mikhail's shoulder. “He's just struggling to see his little boy in the grown up young man he sees here.”

Mikhail smiled thankfully at his uncle.

“Do you want to send a message as well?” Juno asked when Benjen moved to follow his brother, holding out the notepad and pencil for him to take should he choose to. “If I'm heading over to the accommodation blocks I might as well deliver a few at once.”

“Make sense, I guess,” Benjen murmured, accepting the pad and scribbling his own note although he didn't bother ripping his out like his brother did, merely scribbled his address at the top of the page before handing the pad and pencil back. “Thanks.”

As soon as the young couple were alone Juno let out a deep sigh, turning to bury her face in her much taller boyfriends chest as she bemoaned softly,

“Your dad hates me.”

“He doesn't hate you,” Mikhail sighed deeply, wrapping his arms around her body and holding her close. “It's just been a lot to take in in a relatively short period of time, you know, finding out that I'm part of a rebel movement and have a secret girlfriend….”

All Mikhail could be thankful for was the fact that his father had been too overwhelmed to question whether or not his and Juno’s relationship had remained “appropriate” as that was one conversation he definitely wasn't ready for and should be put off for as long as possible.

“I guess I should see if anyone else has a message to send,” Juno sighed, pulling away from him reluctantly but not before tilting her face up towards his in a silent demand for a kiss.

Her lips were as soft as ever against his, plump and far too inviting given their current surroundings and the fact that they definitely were not alone just like with their last kiss.

He'd never realised how awkward it would feel being affectionate in public after so much time spent keeping their secret, relying on clandestine encounters and whispered words.
“I love you,” he murmured when they finally parted once more, their lips slightly bruised and shining with moisture left over from their kiss. “Stay safe.”

“Me? You're the one in the strategic stronghold, Mikhail,” Juno scoffed, offering him a beautiful smile. “You're the one who needs to remember to stay safe, all right?”

“Let's both agree to stay safe then,” he suggested, reaching out to tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear in a delightfully intimate motion. “And I love you too, just so you know.”

Mikhail genuinely suspected that her smile could make everything seem all right.

“I'll see you later?”

He smiled as her statement came out sounding more like a question.

“Yeah. See you later,” he reassured her before they parted ways, Mikhail making his way over to Misha to find out what ground he'd been assigned to on the guard rotation.

He didn't know whether or not to be pleased or disappointed that he wasn't with his father.

“It worked,” Misha breathed in wonder as the two friends stood watching the first watch take their various positions around the loading bay. “I can hardly believe it. We did it!”

“Don't forget, this is only the beginning,” Mikhail found himself pointing out, tilting his head up to look at the wash of colour caused by the sun setting in the sky, a beautiful mixture of blue, red, orange, yellow and even pink and purple. “We've got a lot of work ahead of us.”

Unfortunately he was right.

Three days later everything went to hell when the Capitol finally retaliated after leaving them alone for long enough for them to get comfortable in their duties and positions.

They struck shortly before dawn.

Their bombers followed two bombing runs through the District over and over again, mercilessly dropping a mixture of cluster bombs and incendiary bombs the entire time they were above the District which caused two straight line of damage and at the point where they crossed sat what had once been the Justice Building, the main target.

Surprisingly the loading bay wasn't targeted by the bombers, probably because the Capitol would have a use for the site at a later date and therefore didn't want to damage it too greatly, so instead of being attacked by explosives Mikhail and the others found themselves facing countless Peacekeepers who had been dropped off the back of another hovercraft on the others side of the railway tracks and were focused on pressing the rebels back.

“We have to pull back!”

“No! Hold the line!”

“There's too many of them!”

Mikhail listened to the men and women screaming around him from his position behind a stack of crates close to the entrance into the loading bay, firing his rifle as best he could into the seemingly endless mass of white uniforms making their way towards them.

The person sharing his position cried out in pain and dropped to the floor, blood pouring from a
tiny little hole in the centre of his forehead, his eyes wide and empty.

“Fuck…”

Returning his attention to the chaos dominating the loading bay Mikhail had just begun firing again, picking his targets, when an impossibly loud voice echoed through the area.

“Surrender now and you shall be shown mercy! Continue to fight and each and every one of you will be eliminated along with the remainder of your families! Surrender now and you shall be show mercy! Continue to fight and each and every one of you will be…”

The same two phrases played over and over on a loop.

Mikhail couldn’t say the reaction was instantaneous but it quickly became apparent that the loud words combined with the never ending onslaught of Peacekeepers, all of them armed with superior weapons, was enough of a threat to crush whatever courage people had left.

“I’m out of here!”

That first cry of desertion and defeat was by no means the last and within moments half of their number had turned and fled, some not making it very far as the Peacekeepers were still firing on their various positions heedless of what way people were running.

“Mikhail!”

A large hand grabbed his upper arm even as his father’s voice sounded loudly in his ear, the older man pulling him down out of sight by the firm grip on his arm.

“This is hopeless,” Brandon hissed, flinching as bullets thudded into the other side of the crates they were now hiding behind. “We have to retreat so that we can live to fight another day. You were right. It is time that we stood up for ourselves and fought for the freedom we deserve but we cannot make our stand today. We have to get out of here.”

Mikhail hated the fact that his father’s words made perfect sense to him.

He didn't want to retreat.

He didn't want to give up at the first hurdle.

Thankfully it wasn't left up to him to make that decision.

“Retreat!”

As soon as the order was given the remaining rebels scattered, dodging bullets as they disappeared between buildings and along the road only to duck out of sight, using the network of alley ways to make their way back across the crippled District.

Fires were raging everywhere.

People were screaming, crying, begging for help…for mercy…

Mikhail stumbled over what turned out to be what little was left of a human body which had obviously been caught up in one of the explosions and, upon falling to his knees with a pain filled cry lost complete control of his stomach and retched for all he was worth.

Strong arms hooked under his shoulders, dragging him back up to his feet even as he continued to
retch and they were moving again, dodging whatever debris they could and stumbling unsteadily over whatever they could not.

At least the fighting seemed to have ended for now.

There were no more explosions.

No more gunshots.

Just people begging for help…screaming for their missing loved ones…

“We caused this…” he sobbed out weakly. “They were only meant to target us not…not…”

“Since when have the Capitol cared about the innocent people?” Benjen, his uncle and one of his rescuers, demanded gruffly as they joined the flow of people heading down into the tunnel which would take them through to the accommodation zone. “We need to hurry…”

At least none of the bombs seemed to have damaged the river embankments or tunnels.

That would have been bad.

However when they emerged on the other side of the tunnel they discovered that the river bursting its banks and flooding the surrounding area would probably have been a significantly more merciful than the fate which had befallen the innocent men, women and children hiding in what they believed to be the safety of their homes.

Four apartment blocks had been hit.

Two had been cut open as though with a knife, people's rooms open to the cold morning air like those of the dolls houses he'd seen once during a Capitol broadcast.

A third was on fire, the flames seemingly out of control.

And the fourth was just gone.

It took them all a long moment realise just which apartment block was missing.

“No…” Mikhail gasped in horror. “No!”

“Elisa!” Brandon screamed, dropping his sons arm in favour of running towards the pile of rubble which was all that was left of their home. “Elisa?! Sasha?!”

He wasn't the only one screaming.

“Mummy!”

“Lexi?! Lexi, where are you?!”

“Drew?!”

Mikhail felt himself drop to his knees, staring almost numbly at the pile of rubble being desperately searched by countless people, his father among them pulling at the concrete.

“Elisa?!” Brendan continued to scream desperately, his voice growing hoarse. “Sasha?!”

His face was wet with tears but Mikhail did nothing to wipe them away.
This was all their fault…

This was all his fault…

A/N I had originally intended to continue on through the next bit of my plan but this just felt like the best place to finish this chapter for which I apologise. More to follow as soon as I've written it but for once I have this story planned (albeit roughly) right the way to the final chapter so I know where I'm going. Suggestions are still welcome however.

A/N2 Cannot believe I managed to work in not only a quote from Star Trek but a fair few lines from a scene/song from Les Miserables as well. Showing my geek card, right now. Lol. Well done to anyone who spotted them without me pointing them out. x
Chapter Six

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Six

Sitting at the small kitchen table with his youngest cousin snuggled up in his lap, weak from hunger, Mikhail wasn't the only one to jump when the holo-projector in the living room whirred to life, displaying an image of the flag of Panem on the far wall for all to see.

“Atention! Lockdown has been lifted! All citizens of District Eight are to report to the Justice Building. Immediately. Attention! Lockdown has been lifted! All citizens of District Eight are to report to the Justice Building. Immediately. Attention! Lockdown has…”

Zoya, his Aunt who looked even more exhausted than usual, let out a deep sigh of relief.

Following the failed attempt to seize control from the Capitol the entire District had been put into an indefinite “lockdown” with hundreds of Peacekeepers patrolling the streets night and day to ensure that no one attempted to disobey the order.

Anyone who had been made homeless by the bombing raids had been forced to rely on friends and family to take them in, despite the fact that there would be no way to replenish food supplies until the lockdown was eventually lifted.

Benjen had all but had to drag both Mikhail and his father from the burning rubble of their apartment block, both of them weeping openly for the loss of the women in their lives, and had brought them back home with him without a second thought.

“I suppose we should get going,” Benjen sighed deeply, rubbing at the back of his neck as he rose slowly from his seat. “Boys, go and get your shoes and coats on.”

His older sons, ten year old Alexei and seven year old Piotr, obeyed instantly but four year old Ivan only snuggled further into Mikhail arms with a pitiful whimper.

He didn't understand why there had been even less food than usual.

He didn't understand why he couldn't go outside and play.

He didn't understand why everyone was so sad.
Adding two extra mouths to feed had not been easy for pore Zoya, particularly given the fact that she was six months pregnant and therefore in need of regular food.

“Come on, you,” she sighed, plucking her youngest son away from his beloved cousin and carrying him out of the kitchen to fetch his coat and shoes. “It's time to go for a walk.”

Mikhail stop himself from letting out a deep sigh once he was alone with his father and uncle who had both adopted a deep look of concern after hearing the announcement.

“They're not just going to let this go,” Benjen sighed, taking his jacket from where it had hung on the back of his chair and shrugging it on. “The Rebellion was successful, if only for a little while, but it made the Capitol look bad. They aren't just going to let that go…”

“Haven't they killed enough of us already?”

Mikhail flinched.

His father sounded so…defeated.

Losing his wife and daughter had broken something within him, leaving him a pale shadow of the man they had all known and loved and, in Mikhail’s case, looked up to.

Although to be honest Mikhail wasn't much better himself.

His every waking moment was plagued with guilt as he was forced to acknowledge that his actions were a contributing factor to the death of his mother and sister and his nights were filled with images his mind had created depicting their final moments.

In the end it had been something of a good thing that there hadn't been much to eat over the last few days as his appetite had been non-existent, what little he did eat tasting like little more than ash in his mouth and more often than not coming back up soon after.

As a result he was significantly than he had been before their day of action.

Pulling on his own jacket, now even more tattered than before due to what he put it through during the uprising, Mikhail followed the rest of his family out of their little apartment and joined the flow of people heading down the winding staircase.

A little hand slipped into his as they began their journey through the accommodation sector of the District, heading towards the nearest underpass which would take them across the river into the man part of the District where the Justice Building was located, and he somehow managed to muster a smile for little Ivan who was swamped by his own coat.

Unfortunately by the time Mikhail realised that this particular route would take them directly past what was left of their home it was too late to take the other path and so he was forced to clench is teeth together, focusing on the warm little hand in his own rather than the rubble and objects which had begun to appear beneath his feet…

The charred remains of a book…

A broken hair brush…

The sole of a chunky black work boot…

A blackened rag doll…
However when he stepped on something soft he was forced to look down, to pay attention to where he was going and was horrified to find he had stepped on someone's hand.

It was just a hand, no longer attached to an arm, and one finger bore a wedding ring.

“What's that?” Ivan's innocent little voice piped up. “Mikhail? Did you step on a rat?”

Mikhail reacted instinctively when Ivan moved as though he was trying to get a closer look, plucking his cousin up off the ground and settling him on his hip as he hurried onwards.

“It was nothing,” he murmured. “We should hurry. We don't want to be late, do we?”

He felt sick.

That person, whoever they had been, had lost their life because of something he had been part of, something he had actively contributed towards without considering all of the consequences and he knew that that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

He had thought of the personal consequences involved in his actions.

He had thought of the consequences facing the rebels in they failed.

But he hadn't truly considered the consequences of the innocent civilians, probably because he'd never once thought that they would be considered a target for the Capitols retribution.

He scoffed to himself.

Why wouldn't the Capitol target innocent people?

After all they were more than happy to make a sport out of watching children fight to the death ever year, happy to place bets, happy to make jokes and create songs about them.

Why wouldn't they be happy with killing men, women and children who had done nothing wrong?

The river seemed to be particularly violent today under the layer of ice which covered it, the rushing water echoing eerily throughout the underpass as they hurried through it.

Perhaps that was nature’s way of warning them that there was trouble ahead?

Their journey took them past the still smouldering remains of the factories which had been hit during the Capitols retaliation and once again Mikhail had to focus on keeping Ivan's gaze averted from the burnt husks which were once living, breathing human beings.

It was as they started to approach the centre of the District that they began to notice the unusual number of Peacekeepers not only lining the streets but the rooftops above them, all of them armed to the teeth with their fingers on the triggers of their deadly rifles.

“This is not good…” Mikhail couldn't help but mutter, several people around him murmuring softly in agreement. “I've never seen so many Peacekeepers outside of Reaping Day.”

It was true.

Not even the sudden influx of the armed men and women in white for the Victory Tour could compare to the numbers they were finding themselves surrounded by.

This was not good.
“But surely they can't mean to kill us all,” a young woman with a baby strapped to her chest with a length of green fabric whimpered. “Who would make their clothes?”

When they eventually arrived in the square they found literally hundreds of Peacekeepers standing in precise lines, marking out the pens which were usually used on Reaping Day, and there was a general feeling of unease as parents were separated from their children.

Mikhail found himself standing in one of the pens with his three cousins, Ivan still in his arms while the other two boys clutched at the back of his jacket and huddled close to his sides.

“Why can't we stand with mummy and daddy like normal, Mikhail?”

He hoped the smile he offered the boys was more reassuring than it felt.

“I don't know,” he answered. “But I'm sure everything will be fine. Just stay close to me.”

It didn't take long for everyone to be herded into the relevant parts of the quake by the utterly silent Peacekeepers, all of whom seemed like they would be more than happy to open fire on the large crowd and were simply waiting for the order to do so.

Mikhail really hoped it didn't come to that.

His attention was drawn to the stage, still erected in front of the Justice Building from the Victory Tour where the Mayor was slowly approaching the lone microphone.

Even he looked as though the time spent in lockdown had been hard on him, his cheeks sunken, his clothes hanging unusually from his body but as well as that he seemed to be limping, one leg trembling so much that it looked like it was about to give out on him.

“People of District Eight,” he murmured into the microphone, his shaking voice echoing throughout the square. “We gather here today to address the disgusting attacks which took place almost a week ago. These attacks were cowardly and misguided, organised by a few disturbed individuals who convinced others to do their dirty work for them.”

Mikhail shifted uneasily, wanting to protest but knowing that should he do so his life would be instantly forfeit as he would have identified himself a rebel.

“In order to address this issue the Capitol has seen fit to replace Head Peacekeeper Griffiths,” the Mayor continued and for the first time Mikhail noticed the conspicuous absence of the grey haired Peacekeeper. “And as such it is my pleasure to introduce the new Head Peacekeeper of District Eight – Rhaskos Varinius.”

Mikhail wasn't the only one to flinch backwards, his grip tightening on his young cousins, when they Mayor was replaced by the man who was now in charge of their “security.”

He was, to put it bluntly, a monster.

His face was a mass of scars, some small and shallow but most of them long and deep, twisting his features into a face that would haunt people nightmares for years.

His deep set eyes, a deceptively soft blue colour, seemed to burn holes into the souls of the people he surveyed and his thin lips were twisted into a sneer, highlighting the fact that one of them was split almost completely in two by one of the worst scars on his face.
His hair was the colour of straw and he wore it longer than any other peacekeeper Mikhail had ever seen, gathered at the base of his skull with the leather tie and while he wore the same uniform as their old Head Peacekeeper had worn Varinius looked as though he were about to burst the seams, his muscles bulging ridiculously beneath the White fabric.

This was a man who had been to hell and emerged victorious.

This was not good.

When he finally spoke his voice was surprisingly soft but no less threatening, barely able to be picked up by the microphone, and there was a sharp burst of feedback as someone hastily turned up the volume so that his every word would be heard by the large crowd.

“District Eight. You have been found guilty of the act of treason, of wilfully betraying your own country,” Varinius announced calmly, his hand coming to rest on the butt of the pistol clipped onto his belt. “As you are no doubt aware the punishment for treason is death.”

A murmur spread through the large crowd like wildfire, each and every person frantically looking around at all of the guns aimed somewhat casually in their general direction.

Varinius silenced the crowd with a single word.

“However…”

Hope filled eyes gazed up at him, causing his smirk to deepen before he continued with what was obviously a practised speech, designed to terrify the population of his new District whether they had participated in the failed uprising or not.

“…our glorious President Snow has decided to grant you mercy,” he continued, stunning the crowd into silence one more as he pulled his pistol out of its holder and tapped it against the side of his thigh. “Bring out the perpetrators!”

Mikhail watched, completely frozen in shock, as the doors of the Justice Building were swung open and a dozen people, hands bound, were dragged out and lined up along the very front of the stage, their toes actually hanging over the edge.

All of them had been beaten, their bodies covered in blood and bruises, and yet each and every one of them was easily identifiable to Mikhail and countless others as members of the rebellion, as some of the people who had met in secret to plan the uprising.

Annoushka was among them.

“President Snow has decided that these twelve traitors will serve as an example the people of District Eight,” Varinius announced calmly, bringing his pistol up to the microphone so that when he primed it the tell-tale clicks that the weapon made echoed throughout the now silent square. “You are hereby found guilty of treason and will be put to death in accordance with the Law of Panem, sentence to be carried out immediately.”

There was no time to prepare for the brutality that followed as the grotesque man put a bullet in the head of the man standing almost directly in front of him and was already firing at the next prisoner by the time the first man’s body had crumpled off of the stage, landing in an undignified heap at the feet of the now hysterical younger children.

He executed each one personally showing absolutely emotion.
The older children like Mikhail moved instinctively to comfort and silence the younger children as the last body struck the ground with a sickening thud, gathering complete strangers up into their arms as Varinius returned to his position at the microphone.

“The lockdown has been lifted,” he announced calmly, securing his weapon and sliding it back into its holder on his belt. “You will return immediately to your place of work upon dismissal. To thank the Capitol for their act of mercy your quotas have been suitably increased in order to make up for the damages caused and the time lost.”

He looked out over the large crowd coldly.

“Learn from this lesson,” he ordered them before adopting the familiar Peacekeeper salute, his right hand pressed over his heart. “Panem today. Panem tomorrow. Panem forever.”

As soon as he turned away from the microphone the Peacekeepers surrounding the square began ordering people to move, pushing those who didn't move fast enough and Mikhail found himself desperately trying to work his way against the flow of frightened people to get to his family whilst also somehow keeping all three of his cousins with him.

“Alexei?! Piotr?!?” his Aunts panicked voice dang out amongst many others. “Ivan?!”

No one called out for him.

“Hold on tight to me,” Mikhail ordered his youngest cousin whose grip around his neck obediently tightened as did his legs around Mikhail's waist, allowing him to let go of the little boy and grab his other cousins by the back of their shirts. “Stay close to me, boys.”

Zoya was alone when they finally found her, pressed against the side of a building to avoid the moving crowd, whilst desperately searching the hundreds of faces for those of her son.

“M-Mummy!” Ivan screamed as they approached her, all but launching himself out of Mikhail's arms and into hers, sobbing loudly into her neck even as his older brothers hurried to press themselves against her sides, equally as tearful as their baby brother. “Mummy…”

“Benjen and your father have already gone to work,” she finally gasped once she'd calmed herself down, her own tear filled eyes meeting Mikhail's. “You should probably get going yourself. I dread to think what they'll do to anyone who's late today…”

Mikhail nodded in agreement before frowning across at his aunt.

“What about you?” he asked softly. “Will you be ok?”

“I'll be fine,” Zoya reassured him, reaching out to stroke his cheek gently. “I'll get the boys to school and then get myself off to the factory. It's only a couple of minutes out of the way.”

“Ok.”

Smiling reassuringly at his frightened cousins Mikhail hurried away from them, ducking down an alleyway that would take him most of the way there, burying his cold hands deep in his pockets in an attempt to warm them up before he got to work.

He'd learned from previous experience that submerging cold hands in the hot dye mixture left you
feeling like thousands of needles were piercing your skin over and over.

Hurrying around to the back of the building Mikhail was about to hurry up the exterior stairs when he heard a loud sob coming from his right and, upon investigation, found Misha wrapped tightly in Donovan’s arms behind one of the refuse bin with Felyx standing guard.

“Misha…”

He moved without giving it a second thought, pressing himself up against his friends back and joining the hug, sharing a grief stricken look with Donovan as they both wished they could do more to comfort the young man who had just lost his mother in such a brutal way.

Mikhail knew exactly what sort of pain his friend was in.

No words were said.

No words needed to be said.

Eventually they were forced to pull apart, Misha softly thanking his friends and boyfriend, and the four of them hurried up the exterior steps to find the top floor oddly silent.

“Now that we’re all here may I present your new supervisor,” Jedediah sneered from his spot underneath the clock, gesturing with his cane towards poor Freya who looked absolutely terrified, already clutching the clipboard Mikhail was used to seeing in Annoushka's confident hands. “You will all be expected to put in an extra six hours every day from now on so that our new quota will be met. Any complaints, send them to that stupid bitch you used to call a supervisor and her friends who got us into this mess.”

Mikhail and Felyx only just grabbed hold of Misha in time to stop him from launching himself at the sneering foreman who was blatantly trying to bait him into doing something stupid, his grip shifting on his cane so that he'd be ready to attack once he was given an excuse, eager to finally get his hands on the cocky little bastard.

His precious mother wasn't around to keep him safe anymore.

“It's not worth it,” Mikhail hissed in his friends ear, his grip tightening to a point where he knew he'd be leaving bruises on Misha's arm. “Don't give him an excuse to fire you.”

“He'll get what he's owed when the times right.”

In the end it was Donovan literally stepping in front of his boyfriend that broke the tense moment, Misha’s head dropping forward to rest his forehead between Donavon’s shoulder blades while the taller young man glared across the room at the foreman.

“Is there anything else we need to know?” he requested calmly, folding his arms across his chest even as the foreman hissed in annoyance. “Or can we get on with our work?”

Mikhail calmly joined his friends in staring down the angry foreman.

“Not one of you leaves until today's quota is met!” the older man eventually spat, striking out suddenly with his cane and knocking the clipboard out of Freya's hands. “And the first mistake I find earns the perpetrator a one way trip out that door!”

With that said he stalked out of the room, shouldering his way through a group of female workers who would have been sent flying by his tough actions if those surrounding them hadn't reach out to support them or, in one case, literally catch them.
A soft whimper eventually broke the silence which had fallen following his dramatic exit.

“I don't think I'll survive an eighteen hour day…”

“Then let's try and get through this day's list as quickly as possible,” Freya announced, her own voice trembling as she was forced to step into Annoushka’s shoes, moving forwards to pick up the clipboard from where it had landed on the floor. “Ok, first order is for…”

It was two days later that Mikhail first heard the latest rumour which had been making the rounds of the District, a rumour which claimed that one of the twelve people executed by the Capitol had told their interrogators everything they’d known about the uprising, how it was planned, where it was planned and most worryingly who it was planned by.

“So they might come for you?” Juno asked fearfully during one of their brief moments together once he'd explained what he'd heard. “You were a big part of the planning stage.”

Mikhail sighed deeply, pulling his into his arms and pressing his face into her hair.

“They might,” he agreed softly. “But I knew the risks when I joined the movement. And, despite everything that happened, despite the people we lost, I still think it was worth it.”

It was true.

Despite the guilt he felt for the part his actions had played in the deaths of his mother and sister and those countless others he was still a firm believer that a rebellion was their only hope of freedom, that it was the only way to could get out from under the Capitol’s thumb.

He was thankful that all of his friends who had been active participants had made it through that terrible day with only a few cuts and bruises although Leroy and Willard had lost their mother, the grief hitting Willard the hardest of all of them, while Belle had lost her brother.

She was angry more than grieving.

Mikhail was wringing out the length of cloth he’d just dyed a blood red colour when the building literally shook from the force of an explosion, dust falling from the ceiling and ruining the dye baths still in process, not that anyone noticed as they all either ducked for cover fearing for their lives or rushed for the door, desperate to know what had happened.

He was part of the latter group.

They tumbles down the stairs and joined the flood of people on the streets, all hurrying towards the source of the thick black clouds which were rising ominously into the sky.

Turning a corner having followed a sickeningly familiar path Mikhail skidded to a halt.

“Oh My God…”

Factory Eighteen, where they'd met in secret to plan the uprising, was gone.

The large building had been reduced to nothing but a pile of burning rubble, not a single wall surviving what must have been a truly horrific explosion.

“How many people were inside?”

Mikhail wasn't the only one to blanch following the horrified question.
Factory Eighteen made Peacekeeper uniforms.

It was a busy factory.

It had one of the largest work forces in this part of the District.

“How could they?!”

Unlike with the previous bombings there weren’t even any signs of human remains, there was just…nothing left, as though the people working inside had simply vanished.

The windows of the factories surrounding Factory Eighteen had been shattered by the explosion and the exterior walls showed obvious signs of damage with one wall in particular looking only minutes away from collapsing itself, prompting a hasty evacuation of those who had stayed inside the building rather than investigate what was going on outside.

“500 men and women…gone…just like that…”

Mikhail brought a trembling hand up to his face, intending to wipe the unwanted tears from his eyes, but before he could make contact he froze, holding both hands out in front of him as he started to gasp loudly, staring at the red liquid slowly drying on his pale skin.

There was blood on his hands.

He must have cried out because suddenly he was being pulled into a tight embrace, a strong hand gripping hold of his chin and forcing him to meet the piercing gaze of his friend.

“It's dye,” Felyx told him firmly, obviously having figured out what had caused Mikhail to panic like he had, his own hands thankfully covered in a lime green colour. “It's not blood.”

Mikhail blinked, still staring down at his hands even though his head was being tilted upwards by the firm grip on his chin, slowly coming back to his sense.

It wasn't blood.

It was dye.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, lowering his hands and wiping some of the red dye off on the already stained fabric of his trousers. “I don't…I don’t know where that came from…”

“No need to apologise,” Felyx muttered firmly, releasing his grip on Mikhail’s chin and turning back to face the latest point of devastation within their District. “Not after this.”

If the Capitol thought that eliminating the place where the last uprising had been planned would eliminate all talk of future rebellion they were wrong, incredibly wrong.

Instead the seemingly unprovoked murder of innocent workers had the opposite effect.

People who had been opposed to the initial uprising for whatever reason we're now eager to join the movement growing once more, finally able to see that the only way out of this for any of them was to unite against their common enemy – the Capitol.

When the time was right every single person in District Eight would be willing to fight.

Only this time, unbeknownst to them, they wouldn't be alone.
A/N I had serious writers block whilst trying to force this chapter out but hopefully seeing the final instalment in the series will jump start everything in my brain once more and the next chapter won't be nearly so difficult to write. Comments & Suggestions welcome. X
Chapter Seven

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Seven

“Ladies and Gentlemen. This is the 75th year of the Hunger Games,” President Snow's deceptively soft voice was a fraction out of time with the image being projected onto the wall of Felyx's small apartment thanks to the questionable quality of the cheap holo-projector he'd managed to acquire for this very evening. “It was written in the charter of the games that every twenty-five years there would be a Quarter Quell, to keep fresh for each new generation the memory of those who died in the uprising against the Capitol.”

“Like there was any chance of us actually forgetting, given the way they treat us…”

Misha was the one who had spoken angrily, his method of handling his survivor’s guilt having been to let his anger at the Capitol grow and fester, but they all agreed with what he said.

“Each Quarter Quell is distinguished by games of a special significance,” President Snow continued with his carefully prepared speech. “And now, on this, the 75th anniversary of our defeat of the rebellion we celebrate the third Quarter Quell.”

Obviously none of them had even been a glint in their parents eyes at the time of the last Quarter Quell but they'd all heard the stories, had all seen the footage and therefore they were very much aware that this year was going to be different and not in a good way.

On the screen the President had already opened the card and was reading aloud from it but the audio took a few seconds to begin, accidentally turning the serious moment into nothing more than a farce for the large group of friend who had gathered together to watch it.

“As a reminder that even the strongest cannot overcome the power of the Capitol on this, the third Quarter Quell Games,” President Snow seemed to pause for a long moment and if Mikhail had to guess this part should have been in time with the odd little smirk he had barely succeeded in hiding behind one of his horrible smile. “…the male and female tributes are to be reaped from the existing pool of victors in each district.”

“What?” Juno gasped loudly, her grip on Mikhail’s hand releasing as she stared at the screen in shock, almost everyone gathered around her reacting in a similar manner. “Can they…”
“Yes, they can,” Mikhail found himself murmuring as sounds of the crowds displeasure were broadcast, even the people in the Capitol reacting in shock and anger like they were to the shocking announcement. “The existing pool of Victors… wait… that means…”

This was his last year of eligibility for the Games.

This was Juno’s last year of eligibility for the Games.

They would never have to face the risk of being Reaped ever again… but that wasn't the case for the rest of his school friends who were a year if not two years younger than him.

If they didn't put a stop to the Capitol, if they didn't bring an end to its murderous Games, then his friends could be forced to fight to the death just like Adya had been.

Adya...

“They shall therefore present themselves on Reaping Day, regardless of age, health or situation.”

“They can't be serious!” Ella protested loudly from where she sat cuddled up with her boyfriend. “Woof’s pushing 80! He'll never survive through another set of Games!”

“And may the odds be–”

The broadcast cut out suddenly, the out of sync words left hanging although every single one of them knew exactly how that disgusting phrase would have ended.

“I didn't think that Capitol could do much worse than sending innocent children into an Arena to die but old men and women who have already played their sick games once?” Misha snorted angrily, bringing his clenched fist down against his thigh. “It's disgusting.”

“Didn't sound like the people in the Capitol were particularly happy with it either, for once,” Belle pointed out from her own spot perched on Felyx's lap, the two of them having become an item since the uprising where they'd nearly died. “That could work in our favour.”

“They're only upset because their favourites are going to have to fight and probably die all over again,” Leroy snorted loudly, reaching out to take hold of his simple-minded brother's hand when the boy whimpered softly. “They just don't want to lose their pets.”

Tightening his arms around his girlfriend’s waist he pulled her body towards him until her back was pressed up against his chest, her bottom nudging against his crotch a fraction too much as he pressed his face into the curve of her neck as he inhaled her unique scent.

“Guys? Shouldn’t we be heading home soon?” Ella suggested softly, pressing a kiss to Leroy’s cheek. “After all we don’t want to risk being caught outside after curfew.”

She had a point.

Eight people had been caught outside after curfew since Varinius had begun enforcing it.

Two had been executed on sight.

Three had been executed the following morning in the square.

The final three had been teenagers and, as such, not “eligible” for execution and so had been flogged so thoroughly that one of them had died of his wounds two days later.
It was definitely not a good idea to be caught breaking the curfew.

Misha had moved in with Felyx a week after the execution of his mother, unable to afford the rent for his childhood home on his own what with his father having been killed during a “work related incident” before he was even eligible for the Reaping.

Donovan had followed his boyfriend two days later.

“I’ll see you guys later,” Belle called out, lingering on the threshold with her arms around Felyx’s strong neck once everyone else was in the hallway. “Don’t bother waiting for me.”

Making their way down to the ground level of the building the group went their separate ways, Ella giving Leroy a parting kiss before hurrying off towards the small apartment blocks towards the south of the District while Leroy began leading his brother home.

Before the uprising Mikhail had lived on the opposite side of the accommodation zone to his girlfriend but now that he and his father were staying with his Uncle they were only a couple of blocks away from each other and therefore the couple began walking home together.

“So…I suppose this means we’re safe, for the time being,” Juno sighed deeply, linking her fingers with his and hugging his muscular arm with her free hand. “I thought I’d feel…”

“I know,” Mikhail murmured softly. “Even for the Capitol this feels…wrong…”

“But maybe one day soon everyone will be exempt,” Juno murmured as softly as she could, prompting Mikhail to lean in to hear her. “Maybe one day soon there won’t be any Games.”

“Now that will be something worth celebrating,” Mikhail sighed longingly, reaching down to tuck a wayward lock of hair behind his girlfriend’s ear whilst using their joined hands to lead her into the shadows caused by a nearby building. “Don’t you think?”

“Oh, yes…”

Pressing herself against his chest once they were successfully out of sight she initiated the first kiss by going up on her tiptoes, winding her arms around his neck and pressing her soft, plump lips to his dryer, thinner ones causing both of them to moan softly.

His arms moved to wrap around her waist before sliding lower, gripping hold of her bottom through the heavy duty fabric of her knee length skirt in a move so sudden it caused her to gasp loudly, pulling her mouth from his so that she could smirk up at him.

“Mikhail…”

He returned her smirk with one of his own as he used his grip to lift her up off the floor, encouraging her to wrap her legs around his waist as her head finally came up level with his.

It was Mikhail who initiated the second kiss.

No longer having to use her grip to pull herself up to his level Juno was free to burying her fingers in his hair, tugging on the dark blonde strands as she ground her hips down against his, all the while encouraging him to deepen their kiss in a move that was all too familiar.

They’d never done…it…standing up but Mikhail could definitely understand why some of the other men at the factory had sounded so excited by the prospect, feeling awed at how much trust Juno was placing in him as she relied entirely on his strength to keep her safe.
Turning suddenly he pressed her back against the rough brickwork as gently as possible, the move still making her gasp in such a way he knew she was more excited than annoyed.

“Juno…”

Her legs tightened around his waist.

“No…more…Games…” she panted between kisses, one of her hands releasing his hair in order to tug at her skirt until the fabric was bunched up around her waist leaving just the relatively thin fabric of her winter underwear between her body and his, still fully clothed unfortunately.

“Mikhail…just imagine…no more Reaping’s…no more Games…”

It didn't matter whether or not she was referring to their own freedom from the Games or the idyllic future they were willing to fight for, not in that moment as her hand began making quick work of unbuckling his belt in a familiar move before moving on to unbuttoning his trousers which proved to be slightly more challenging in their new position.

Soon only the fabric of their underwear was between them and then, not long after that, not even that was in their way and they were joined in blissful harmony.

It was dangerous considering how exposed they were and how close it was to their curfew but in that moment he couldn't care less, lost in the pleasure only Juno could bring him.

They didn't last long.

They never did but that didn't matter to either of them, knowing that they were still learning the art of loving each other but would have many years together to get better at it.

“We're free…” he panted against her lips as they calmed down, still pressed close together with her legs wrapped around his and his trousers around his ankles. “Juno…”

“Yes?”

“Marry me?”

It wasn’t how he had imagined proposing to her, not by a long shot, but for some strange reason it felt like it was the perfect moment, both of them enjoying a mutual high brought on by a heady mixture of physical pleasure and dreams of a better future.

Her smile would have been answer enough but he needed to hear the words.

“Yes,” she all but whimpered, pressing her lips to his. “A thousand times, yes…”

They were so lost in their celebratory kiss that they didn't hear the footsteps approaching them until they were roughly interrupted by a hand on Mikhail’s shoulder, gripping tightly and pulling him backwards so quickly that he literally dropped her down to her feet.

“Hey!” he cried out angrily, fixing his underwear so that he was decent before turning to face the person who had grabbed him…only to freeze in shock at the sight of the two armed Peacekeepers smirking at him from behind their visors. “Oh…sh*t…”

“What have we here then?”

Mikhail wished he could pull up his trousers but he daren't move, instead all he could do was reach back and pulled Juno in close behind him as the two Peacekeepers chuckled.
“A little factory slut and her bit of fluff by the looks of it.”

Mikhail flinched as the two Peacekeepers laughed together, the one who had grabbed him actually reaching around him to run his gloved fingers through Juno’s hair.

“How about it?” he enquired darkly. “How much for a quick fuck?”

His reaction was completely instinctual, his hands moving as though they had a mind of their own to shove the Peacekeeper back a couple of steps whilst he snarled loudly,

“She’s not a fucking whore! Don't you dare touch her!”

Behind him Juno let out a fearful whimper.

“You just made a big mistake, boy…”


Mikhail had barely finished hissing his frantic instructions towards his girlfriend…fiancé…when the butt of a rifle connected with his jaw, sending him spiralling away from her with a grunt of pain, blood bursting from his split lip.

Thankfully the two Peacekeepers were now more interested in him that the escaping form of the girl he loved and so she was out of sight by the time the next blow landed.

“Don't you know that striking a Peacekeeper is a crime, boy?”

He was thankful that his instinctual response of pointing out that it had been more of a shove than a strike was made impossible by the damage down to his mouth.

“I'm going to enjoy seeing you flogged,” the Peacekeeper sneered down at him whilst they worked together to get his arms behind his back, cuffing his wrists together. “And then I'm going to enjoy finding that little slut of yours and showing her what a real man can do.”

They were lucky they'd cuffed him before making that particular threat.

Or was he the lucky one?

The penalty for killing a Peacekeeper, after all, was significantly higher than just striking one.

Mikhail glared at the two of them, blood dripping freely down his chin, as they dragged him through the streets to the Justice Building where he was unceremoniously dumped in a cell.

“Idiot…” he hissed at himself once he was alone, his hands still cuffed behind his back making sitting difficult and lying down completely impossible. “Idiot…”

He was just thankful that Juno had gotten away and all he could hope was that the two Peacekeepers didn't get a good enough look at her face to be able to identify her.

Sleep didn't come to him that night.

How could they have been so stupid?

Yes, they’d risked doing things in semi-public places before but never so close to curfew and they'd never lingered like they had done this time, they'd never been so slow to move on.

Dawn came all too quickly and he was dragged from his cell by a couple of Peacekeepers who
were deliberately rough with him as they led him out of the building and onto the wooden stage which he noticed was still covered in a light dusting of snow, hiding the bloodstains which had been left behind on the weathered planks following the executions.

His hands were released suddenly, a firm grip on each wrist bringing them up to the twin manacles at the top of the temporary cross which was always used for public floggings.

Mikhail was annoyed to hear his own groan of pain as his arms were locked in place above his head, forming a ‘v’ shape, wishing he could have kept silent just to annoy them but the ache in his shoulders had simply been too strong after being immobilised for so long.

They secured his ankles in place with a larger pair of manacles, forcing his body to adopt an ‘x’ shape whether he wanted to or not, and then finally a thick leather strap was secured around his hips, low enough that it wouldn't be in the way of the flogging.

“Punishment for public indecency stands at ten lashes,” one of the Peacekeepers announced calmly, surprising Mikhail with the fact that they had obviously decided to add to the original charge without informing him. “Punishment for striking a Peacekeeper stands at twenty lashes. Punishment for resisting arrest stands at ten lashes.”

In a fairer world he would have protested that last accusation as he had not resisted arrest.

Of course in a fairer world none of this would have happened in the first place.

“Therefore the accused is sentenced to fourth lashes to be carried out immediately,” the Peacekeeper continued, never once mentioning Mikhail by name which just went to prove the fact that they didn't actually care for the legalities when it came to punishing citizens. “Peacekeeper Haldane, you will carry out this punishment. Peacekeeper Brent, you will assist him in his duties so if you please get the accused ready for punishment?”

Wasn't he already ready for punishment?

A deadly looking blade appeared in his peripheral vision and he turned his head quickly in order to track its movements, watching somewhat fearfully as they cut through not only his jacket but the two layers of shirts he wore underneath until his back was completed bare.

“You know I would have taken those off if you'd asked?”

Where he found the confidence to speak up he'd never know but it was instantly worth it when all of the Peacekeepers gathered on the stage glared at him whilst a few unfamiliar voices somewhere behind him let out startled chuckles which were quickly silenced.

So there were people gathered to watch his flogging, were there?

Oh, he was definitely wouldn't be giving the Peacekeepers the satisfaction of hearing him scream then no matter how much this was going to hurt.

He'd been witness to a few public floggings in his life but usually they were for minor infractions and were over and done with relatively quickly.

The last time he'd seen someone get anywhere near as many blows as he was about to get they’d had to be carried unconscious from the stage and they'd never been the same since.

“Just for that, boy, I won't be going easy on you…” Peacekeeper Haldane growled, retrieving the old whip that was always used for the public floggings and shaking it out dramatically.
Again Mikhail simply couldn't help it,

“You were going to go easy on me? That's not very Peacekeeper-ish of you, is it?”

This time he heard some familiar voices chuckling softly, letting him know that his friends had gathered to support him (figuratively and literally, he suspected) and were watching.

The first blow of the whip across his back took him completely by surprise, forcing him to clench his teeth together to hold back his cry of pain as fire seemed to burn across his skin.

He'd heard someone say that you couldn't feel anything after the first ten.

They were a liar.

He could sense Peacekeeper Haldane getting frustrated with his lack of a response and about midway through his punishment he felt the force of the blows increase, the whip now cutting through his skin and sending blood flooding down his abused skin.

And still he somehow managed to hold back his screams of pain.

In fact towards the end, when Peacekeeper Haldane’s arm seemed to be tiring and the blows were getting lighter and lighter, he actually managed to laugh out loud.

Peacekeeper Haldane growled loudly and prepared to strike him again.

“Punishment complete, sir!”

The young voice of Peacekeeper Brent sounded before the latest blow could fall, much to Peacekeeper Haldane's annoyance, and their superior officer ordered Mikhail released.

It was obvious that they expected him to collapse once the manacles were released and the leather strap removed but there was no way Mikhail was giving them the satisfaction.

Instead when was finally free of all the restraints he grit his teeth against the agonising pain and pushed himself up and away from the wooden cross, actually making a show of stretching out his neck from side to side before nodding to Peacekeeper Haldane who had yet to put the whip away and heading for the stairs down of the stage.

His friends rushed to meet him at the bottom.

“Mikhail!” Donovan hissed, reaching out to help him but Mikhail shook his head. “What?”

“Won't…give them…the…satisfaction…” he grunted, clenching his fists in what remained of his clothes before beginning to walk slowly across the square. “In fact…here’s a little something…I learned from Adya's mum…when I was little…”

He'd never had the same quality of singing voice as his friend had but he could certainly a carry a tune well enough and so, with blood pouring down his back, his body alternatively numb or burning with unbelievable pain he looked up at the morning sky and began to sing.

“When the sky is a bright canary yellow,

I forget ev'ry cloud I've ever seen.

So they called me a cockeyed optimist,

Immature and incurable green.”
His friends were understandably startled by his actions.

Unlike Adya he'd never been one for randomly bursting into song but it was the only thing he could think of to do that would annoy the Peacekeepers without getting him into more trouble, after all they couldn’t exactly arrest him for singing, could they?

“I have heard people rant and rave and bellow,
That we're done and we might as well be dead.
But I'm only a cockeyed optimist,
And I can't get it into my head.”

Someone, their voice thankfully unfamiliar, wondered aloud as to whether or not he had been driven insane by the severe flogging he had just received.

Every step he took was agony, his body trembling with the exertion but he pressed onwards, furled by his somewhat desperate determination not to give in to the Peacekeepers.

“I hear the human race,
Is fallin’ on its face,
And hasn't very far to go.
But ev’ry whippoorwill,
Is sellin’ me a bill,
And tellin’ me it just ain't so.”

He was almost there, the way out of the square was in sight and he knew that as soon as he was safely out of their line of sight he wouldn't be able to remain upright for much longer.

“I could say life was just a bowl of jello,
And appear more intelligent and smart.
But I'm stuck like a dope,
With a thing called hope,
And I can't get it out of my heart!
Not this heart...”

He couldn't have timed it any better if he'd tried, his suddenly weak voice trailing off at the end of the song just as he turned the corner and slipped out of sight of his main audience.

Quick thinking hands caught him under his arms when his legs gave out unexpectedly.

“Mikhail!”

“Fuck! We need to get him to the hospital!”

He was vaguely aware of his friends hushed voices as they worked together to find the best way
to support his rapidly unresponsive body without causing him too much more pain.

In the end his arms were draped across Felyx and Donovan’s shoulders, their inner arms wrapping around his lower back underneath the worst of the wounds and grabbing hold of his belt so as to keep a firm hold on him while their outer hands held onto his wrists.

“Misha, run and let them know what's happened at the factory.”

“What? No, I want to—”

“Misha, they need to know or we’ll all lose our jobs!”

Mikhail attempted to apologise to his friends for getting them into this mess with him but all that came out of his mouth was a pain filled groan that only seemed to make up Misha’s mind, the older boy turning on the spot and sprinting away from the slow moving group.

They were halfway to the hospital when Mikhail’s legs suddenly stopped working, seemingly unwilling to even support his weight let alone carry him on through the District.

“I’m sorry, Mikhail,” Felyx apologised as soon as they realised what had happened, causing the injured boy to frown in confusion while everyone else shuffled around as they came up with a new plan that would be quicker but would definitely hurt him more. “Brace yourself.”

Felyx released him briefly so as to stand directly in front of Mikhail, shooting him a deeply apologetic look before he dropped to one knee and used his grip on Mikhail’s wrist to pull the wounded boy forwards and down until his torso was laid across Felyx’s shoulders.

The scream which was torn from between Mikhail’s lips as the wounds across his back were stretched by the new position could only be described as animalistic, prompting numerous murmured apologies and Felyx pushed himself back to his feet, one arm wrapped around Mikhail’s thigh while the other held onto his arm in order to keep him secured in place.

By the time they arrived at the hospital Mikhail was barely conscious, his vision completely unfocused with an inky blackness creeping in around the edges in a silently threatening way.

Oddly enough the only coherent thought that came to mind as they lay him face down on one of the beds in the single hospital ward was that there was no way he’d be able to afford the morphling they were about to give him but it was too late to point that out by then.

He was kept in the hospital for two weeks, his wounds healing slowly but surely under the professional medical care, and kept entertained by a steady stream of visitors.

Juno, unsurprisingly, practically lived at the hospital with him to the point where she had been allowed to assist with the changing of his dressings having seen how it was done enough times that she knew each and every step of the procedure by heart.

He hated the fact that she felt responsible for this.

“It wasn't your fault,” he told her almost every single day. “It takes two to…you know…plus if I hadn't mouthed of to them after you'd gotten away I would have gotten of lightly.”

That was a lie of course.

There was no “getting off lightly” where Peacekeepers were concerned but if it helped to dissipate the guilt that was obviously tearing her apart inside then he would keep saying it.
His father, uncle and aunt took turns visiting him although his nephews were kept away.

At first they'd been angry with him for “attacking” a Peacekeeper but, after learning the somewhat edited truth about what had happened which had focused mostly on the threats to Juno, all three of them understood his motivation but not necessarily his methods.

Ella and Belle visited when they could although Leroy and Willard only visited once, the younger boy getting too upset to risk visiting a second time and Mikhail understood.

Misha, Donovan and Felyx visited almost as much as Juno although theirs was balanced around their extra-long work shifts and the curfew, something they all took very seriously now, and they had reassured him that not only did he still have a job to return to but that they were going to help him pay off the mounting hospital bill.

He'd protested that, of course, but his friends were stubborn and wouldn't take no for an answer so when he was finally released from the hospital half of his bill had already been paid off without his knowledge, leaving a much more manageable sum for him to pay off.

Zoya insisted that he spend a couple more days at home, adjusting to being out of the hospital where most things had been done for him, before returning to work and he simply didn't have the heart to argue against her, knowing that she needed the reassurance of his returning health every bit as much as he did just as his mother would have.

It was the first time since her death that he was glad his mother wasn't around to see this.

Eventually he was allowed to return to work, making his way through the District and up to the top floor of the Dyeing Factory along with his friends who had apparently been “picking up the slack” in order to keep his job secure and were more than happy for him to return.

“I comes to something when a fifteen hour shift sounds like heaven,” Donovan muttered as they took their jackets off and hung them out of the way. “Give us a shout if you need to.”

“I'll be fine,” Mikhail reassured his friend, rolling his shoulders in order to test the mostly healed wounds on his back. “Don't worry, I won't do anything stupid. I know my limits.”

“Won't do anything stupid, he says…” Donovan snorted loudly with a grin. “What, like punching a Peacekeeper and getting yourself flogged half to death? That sort of stupid?”

“For the last time I didn't punch him,” Mikhail laughed loudly, rolling up his sleeves as he moved across to his tub and began prepping for the first order of the day. “I shoved him.”

Donovan’s wasn't the only laugh he received in response.

His back felt like it was on fire for most of his first day back, the still healing wounds stretching painfully every time he bent of his tub of wrung out some of the fabric but he was relieved that none of them had split open as that would not have been good.

Within a few days the twinges of pain had become so expected that he was able to work as his previous speed and efficiency, simply pushing through it for the duration of his shift.

And then, all of a sudden, Reaping Day was upon them.

Despite the fact that the Tributes would be selected from the “existing pool of Victors” anyone of Reaping age still had to produce themselves for registration, supposedly so that the annual census would be kept up to date in spite of the “unusual circumstances.”
As he stood waiting to have his finger pricked with Juno he couldn't help but remember how different everything had been this time last year, when he'd first realised that the dishevelled boy struggling in front of him had been none other than his missing friend, Adya.

Mikhail was making his way towards the Justice Building with his little sisters hand held tightly in his own when, due to someone standing in the middle of the road sobbing noisily, they were forced to move to one side and he found himself accidentally bumping into someone with enough force that the other person would have fallen had he not released his hold on his sisters hand to grab hold of them by their arm, literally holding them upright.

“Hey, you ok?” he asked the dishevelled figure worriedly, continuing to hold onto the person who he could now tell was a boy, pathetically thin and covered in layers of muck and dirt.

He was not expecting to hear a familiar voice come from behind the curtain of matted hair.

“Mikhail?”

“Adya?” he gasped in shock. “Is that you?”

He hadn't seen or heard from his friend since the first, prompting most of them to think that he'd either died along with his parents or been sent to the community home.

Keeping a firm hold on the smaller boys arm he used his other hand to push back the long black hair, revealing an achingly familiar face save for the scars surrounding his eyes.

“It is you…” he breathed in shock, feeling his sister press herself against his side as people continued to hurry past them. “Where have you been? I haven't seen you since…”

“Since the fire…”

“Yeah…”

He found himself stroking the tips of his fingers across the raised scars underneath Adya's blank eyes and he realised with a lurch of his stomach that his friend couldn’t see.

“I thought…” he mumbled weakly, his brain refusing to function properly as he realised with horror exactly what must have happened to his old friend in the wake of the fire. “I thought that you’d been taken in by someone but…but that's not what happened, is it?”

“No,” Adya confirmed with a slight shake of his head. “I've been living on the streets…begging, you know? I…I sing for money or food or…whatever.”

He'd been living on the streets all this time?

“But…your eyes…” he couldn't help but gasp loudly in shock, his fingers continuing to map the damage done to his friend’s handsome face. “…how have you managed to…”

“I've managed…”

Mikhail felt the now familiar twinge of guilt as he stepped forwards and extended his hand to the Peacekeeper sat behind the desk, barely reacting when his finger was pricked with the little needle and his blood pressed down onto the page of the book.

“Mikhail Warrington,” the Peacekeeper announced after scanning the blood. “Eighteen.”

Instead of confirming his identity Mikhail simply turned away from the desk and moved to join the...
crowd of children gathered in an unusually disorganised group in front of the stage, no one bothering to remain in their groups like normal due to the nature of the Reaping.

He joined his friends, slipping his arm around Juno and holding her close to his side whilst ruffling Willard’s hair, making the trembling boy smile shyly in his “not quite there” way.

“Welcome!”

Mikhail was surprised to realise that not even their District Escort sounded as cheerful as usual, a sign that he was just as affected by the Capitols decision to go through with the Quell as everyone else although obviously not for entirely the same reasons.

“Welcome!”

Even his clothes weren't as flamboyant as usual, the toned down style and colours making him almost unrecognisable from the man who had stood up there the previous year in his horrific lime green suit and fascia pink shirt, only his high voice confirming his identity.

“Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favour,” Hixas, their District Escort, murmured into the microphone with significantly less gusto than he had in past years, his hands hanging at his sides instead of gesturing wildly. “Now, before we begin, we have a special film brought to you all the way from the Capitol…”

No one paid any attention to the broadcast this year, not even Hixas and the other Capitol officials, as it was at that particular moment that the Victors were escorted into the square under armed Peacekeeper guards and led up to stand on the relevant sides of the stage.

Woof looked so old standing alone on the male side, his shoulders hunched, his white hair ruffled by the wind and his expression painfully vacant as he mumbled softly to himself.

Over on the female side of the stage Cecilia was wiping away her tears and smiling down at her husband and children who had pushed their way to the very front of the crowd, people parting instantly to allow the distraught family of the kind hearted Victor through.

“Why must they put them through this?” someone growled. “We all know how this is going to end – why did that have to put on this farce when there only one slip in each bowl?”

It was true.

In the history of the Hunger Games they had had a grand total of three Victors.

Woof, who had won the 15th Games when he was seventeen years old after successfully evading all of the other Tributes before finally taking out the surviving Careers in their sleep.

Annoushka, who had won the 37th Games when she was sixteen after using Woofs successful tactic of evading all of the other Tributes until she’d had no choice but to join the final battle which she had only won by being the one to last the longest after being stabbed.

She'd died when Mikhail was only a toddler although no one had ever explained how.

Most people suspected it had been suicide.

And then there was Cecelia, who had won the 60th Games by forming an alliance with her District partner, combining her intelligence with his strength so that they could eliminate the careers and anyone else who crossed their path, using the Arenas urban landscape to their advantage to the point that the Games had finally come down to just the two of them.
When they'd refused to kill each other the Gamemakers had released mutts.

Cecelia had won because she could run faster than her District partner.

“Now the time has come for us to select the...the courageous young...um...” Hixas paused, glancing blatantly across at Woof who was pulling at a thread on his jacket rather than paying any attention to what was going on around him. “…courageous man and woman who will have the honour of representing District 8 in the 75th Annual Hunger Games.”

The large crowd was silent but for the hysterical sobbing coming from Cecelia's three young children, none of whom were old enough for Reaping yet, who would not be calmed.

“Ladies first,” Hixas murmured, stepping over to the bowl and retrieving the single slip of paper from inside the large glass orb before returning to the microphone. “Cecelia Hayes.”

Cecelia didn't step forwards, she crumpled to her knees with a loud thud, her hands reaching over the edge of the stage for those of her completely hysterical children.

Holding Juno close to him as the crowd reacted to the emotional scene before them Mikhail couldn't help but remember the sick feeling of relief he'd felt when his sister had been spared the year before, tinged with his own desperation for his luck to hold out.

“C-Congratulations. And now for the boys...I mean...the men...”

He could still remember Hixas’s disgustingly cheerful voice from the previous year’s Reaping Ceremony as he'd called out his friend’s name, his eyes scanning the crowd for poor Adya.

“No...” Adya gasped weakly beside him, his body beginning to shake even as he pressed himself up against Mikhail’s side, his hands clenching and unclenching uncontrollably.

“Adya...” Mikhail had all but sobbed, sick with his instantaneous feelings of relief before the growing feeling of guilt spurred him to gasp loudly. “I'll...I'll vol–”

“Don’t you dare!” Adya had hissed, turning suddenly so that they two of them were facing each other even as they continued to call out for Adya to come forwards, his hand squeezing Mikhail’s painfully tight. “Better the cripple than someone ego has a future, right?”

Mikhail’s response had been instantaneous if somewhat hesitant due to his disbelief.

He simply hadn’t been able to believe that this was really happening.

“N-No...Adya...”

“Help me to the stage, Mikhail...” Adya had requested, his voice tight. “Please...”

In that moment Mikhail had realised that his fragile looking friend was far stronger than he could ever hope to be and so, trembling almost as much as Adya, he had helped his friend make his way through the crowd towards the stage which featured in all of their nightmares.

“Come along, boy, we don’t have all day.”

Mikhail had never hated the Capitol and its people as much as he had at that moment.

“W-We’re at the steps...” he’d murmured, tears falling unashamedly from his eyes as he looked down at the friend he hadn’t spoken to in so long and was now losing. “Adya...”
“Goodbye, Mikhail…” Adya had murmured softly. “And thanks…”

“Wilberforce Gascoigne.”

The unusual use of Woof's real name dragged Mikhail out of his memories just in time to see the dithering old man stand up straight and look across at Hixas with a frown.

“Yes?” the all heard him ask through the power of the microphone. “Can I help you?”

The already agitated crowd began to murmur angrily as everyone came to the same conclusion, that the Capitol was sending a young mother and a senile old man to die.

“M-May I present our Tributes for the 75th Hunger Games – Cecelia and Wilberforce!”

It was pretty obvious that even Hixas was struggling to keep it together now as he pushed on with his scripted performance, keeping his gaze fixed on the crowd rather than the woman sobbing on the floor of the stage and the old man repeating his earlier question.

“And may the odds be ever in your favour.”

Mikhail wasn't the only one who scoffed in response to that particular statement.

The odds?

They were going to be going up against some of the most cold-blooded killers the Games had ever produced and when the time came being senile or a young mother wouldn't help.

It was as much of a death sentence for them as it had been for Adya.

Woof left willingly with the Peacekeepers although Mikhail suspected he had no idea what was going on but Cecelia, poor Cecelia, clung to her children's hands until two of the Peacekeepers literally lifted her up off of the stage and carried her into the Justice Building.

“Mummy!”

It was utterly heart-breaking to watch as Cecelia's husband attempted to comfort his children, gathering them into his strong arms even as they continued to scream for their mother to come back, for the “mean people” to leave their mother alone.

“I can't stand this anymore…” Juno sobbed weakly, hiding her face in the centre of Mikhail’s chest as she wrapped her arms around his waist. “Please, can we just go?”

“No,” Mikhail countered softly. “We have to stay until they're on the train.”

It was something of a tradition for everyone to wait and watch the Tributes walk from the Justice Building to the nearby train station, sometimes in silence, sometimes when the Tributes were particularly young offering words of comfort and compassion.

But they were always there, lining the route, and that wasn't going to change this year.

He wasn't sure who started it but when the doors of the Justice Building opened up only a couple of moments later, not long for anyone to have visited, someone began to sing one of the old songs and soon everyone who knew it had joined in as they watched their Victors turned Tributes being escorted to the Train Station by a large squad of armed Peacekeepers.
It seemed that since Adya had drawn the Capitol's attention to some of the old songs they hadn't known existed that their District had decided to speak their mind with such songs.

It was an odd way to unit together but for some reason it just felt…right.

“Black clouds are behind me, I now can see ahead.

Often I wonder why I try hoping for an end.

Sorrow weighs my shoulders down,

And trouble haunts my mind.

But I know the present will not last,

And tomorrow will be kinder.”

This particular song was one that almost everyone had either sung or heard at least once as it was often used at funerals, the mournful melody but hopeful words easing low spirits.

“Tomorrow will be kinder.

It's true, I've seen it before.

A brighter day is coming my way.

Yes, tomorrow will be kinder.”

Woof was smiling as he passed them, humming along to the music, but Cecelia was still crying almost hysterically as she looked desperately over her shoulder for her family, the Peacekeepers actually having to drag her along to keep up with the rest of the group.

“Today I've cried a many tear, and pain is in my heart.

Around me lies a sombre scene, I don't know where to start.

But I feel warmth on my skin,

The stars have all aligned.

The wind has blown, but now I know,

That tomorrow will be kinder.”

Moving as one the crowd followed them once they'd been passed by and together they watched as they were loaded onto the train, literally in Cecelia's case, and the train was just pulling out of the station when they came to the finally part of the song.

“Tomorrow will be kinder.

I know, I've seen it before.

A brighter day is coming my way.

Yes, tomorrow will be kinder.

A brighter day is coming my way.
Yes, tomorrow will be kinder.”

A/N I had me some serious writers block with this until I went and saw Mockingjay Part 2 (I didn't cry…I didn't…ok…I did…) and then tada! Inspiration! That said I sincerely hope this didn't suck and that people are still interested in this story. Comments welcome. X

A/N2 Songs used in this chapter were “Cock-Eyed Optimist” from the musical South Pacific and “Tomorrow Will Be Kinder” from the Hunger Games soundtrack. X
Chapter Eight

Despite the fact that her hands were soft and gentle Mikhail couldn't help but wince when his fiancé began massaging the scar tissue now covering his back through the thin shirt he wore, trying to help ease some of the stiffness which was becoming a common occurrence.

“Sorry…” she mumbled, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck just as Felyx got the holo-projector working and the first image of this year's Arena appeared on the wall with half of the screen dedicated to the emerging Tributes. “Is that…are they surrounded by water?”

“I suppose they had to do something special as its a Quarter Quell…” Ella mumbled from where she was snuggled up with Leroy. “It's a bit unfair though. What if they can't swim?”

Leroy snorted loudly.

“Then they'll be eliminated quickly, won't they?”

Felyx and Bella hurried out of the curtained off kitchenette, passing out little glasses of black market whiskey to everyone just as the countdown began on the screen.

“5…4…3…2…1…”

Slamming back their drinks the group of friends watching, the alcohol burning its way down to their stomachs, as several of the Tributes dived into the water.

“Of course she can fucking swim…” Mikhail found himself growling as the camera focused on Katniss Everdeen for a long moment, showing her moving through the water with practised ease until she reached one of the spokes made up of uneven rocks, pulling herself up just a fraction of a second before Brutus. “Is it wrong to hope he guts her?”

“Yes,” Juno informed him tensely. “I know why you hate her but we need her.”

“For now.”
The camera seemed determined to stay with her for the moment, showing her sprinting along the spoke closely followed by Brutus while on the next spoke over, shown in the background of her shot, Gloss caught his foot on something and took a tumble.

As she reached the weapons cache in the Cornucopia the screen split into four sections, one staying with her whilst the other showed the other focal points of the bloodbath.

Oswin, the District Six male was shown having the misfortune of climbing into the spoke between Katniss and Brutus, causing the Career to turn his attention on him.

“Woof!” Willard cried out suddenly in distress, drawing all of their attention to the third section of the screen where their male Tribute, was shown falling into the water, his weathered face twisted in panic as he struggled to stay afloat. “Help him!”

Leroy leaned across to hug his brother while on the screen Woof lost his fight with the water and sunk below the surface, the cameras somehow following him in order to show them his last moments, bubbles pouting out of his mouth as his body stilled.

The first canon of the 75th Hunger Games sounded.

Woof’s lifeless face dominated the section for a long moment before the feed changed to show Amethyst, the female Tribute of District 5, scrambling up the beech.

“Woof…” Willard moaned tearfully, eagerly pressing himself to his brother’s side to accept the comfort offered by his main caregiver. “Why didn't anybody help him?”

A second canon prevented Leroy from answering, drawing their attention to the second screen where Brutus had just dropped Oswin’s lifeless body into the water, his neck obviously broken and in the background of the shot they could just make out Klara, the female morphling addict from District Six sprinting into the surrounding jungle.


For a moment it looked as though Katniss was about to get her first kill of the Games when she swung her newly acquired bow around towards where Gloss had been sprinting towards her, prompting the huge Career to stumble at the end of his chosen spoke.

She fired.

Mikhail doubted their group was the only ones to react with confusion when instead of taking out the obvious threat to her survival all she did was wound him, shooting her arrow deliberately through his calf muscle and sending the handsome Career tumbling into the water clutching at the shaft of the arrow where it stuck out of his muscular leg.

“Um…what's going on with Seven and Three?” Felyx wondered, pointing towards the fourth section of the screen with the glass still in his hand. “Is she…is she helping them?”

Mikhail frowned.

The she in question was Johanna Mason, the sly, cunning Victor from District Seven who was renowned for having a volatile temper which had been very evident during her interview.

“Well, hell yes, I'm angry. You know, I'm getting totally screwed over here. The deal was that if I win the Hunger Games, I get to live the rest of my life in peace. But now, you want to kill me again. Well, you know what? F**k that! And f**k everybody that had anything to do with it!”
Mikhail had been both surprised and impressed by her achingly human response.

And now there she was, armed with a deadly looking axe helping an obviously unsteady Wiress out of the water on the opposite side of the Cornucopia to Katniss whilst Blight, the male Tribute from District Seven, helped Beetee gather weapons and other supplies.

“Why would they…?”

Juno gasped loudly.

“Finnick!”

Across both of the sections at the top of the screen the footage was dedicated to where Katniss and Finnick were now facing off against each other, both armed with their signature weapons and both assessing each other for any sign of weakness of injury.

“Good thing we’re allies, right?”

Finnick's voice was as calm and confident as it ever was, the words sounding infinitely sultrier than they really should have done as he held up one hand to show off…

“…what's with the bracelet?”

“Where did you get that?”

“Well it obviously means something to her,” Mikhail responded to his fiancé's confused question, noticing the way Katniss's panicked gaze flickered back and forth between Finnick’s remarkably calm features to the golden bracelet twinkling brightly on his wrist.

“Where do you think?”

Whilst one of the sections had remained dedicated to the odd alliance between Seven and Three, following them as they rushed into the jungle, the third section showed Jayson, the male Tribute from District Five sneaking up behind Katniss with a sword aimed at her neck.

“Duck!”

Katniss had barely obeyed the sudden command when Finnick's trident sailed through where her torso had previously been, striking Jayson in his own chest and knocking him backwards as a canon fired, signalling the instantaneous death he had been given.

“He just…” Belle murmured in obvious confusion. “He just saved her life!”

“What the heck is going on?” Felyx murmured beside her, running his hand across the top of his head as he watched the screen closely. “First Seven and Three, now Four and Twelve?”

“Don't trust One and Two,” Finnick advised his new ally whilst arming himself with a fresh trident from the rack of them inside the horn. “I'll take this side, you hold them off.”

He paused suddenly, frowning out across the water towards the pedestals.

“On second thoughts I'll go find Peeta,” he announced suddenly, spinning his trident so that the blade was pointing downwards at his side. “Try not to get yourself killed.”

Both Finnick and Katniss had a section of the screen dedicated to them, following their
movements as they separated but the group of friends were only vaguely aware of Katniss firing an arrow towards Enobaria and missing as their attention was drawn to the third screen, the one that wasn't still following Johanna, Blight, Beetee and Wiress.

“Willard. Don’t look.”

Accompanying his firm command with a tug on the back of his brothers neck Leroy forced the younger boy who was entirely too innocent for his own good to hide his face against Leroy’s shoulder as the image of Cecelia appeared on the screen.

Their female Tribute had obviously just struggled to get to the spoke, gasping desperately for air following what had obviously been a difficult swim for her and had just begun to pull herself up onto the rocky spoke when Cashmere had appeared out of nowhere.

“I'm sorry, Cecy…”

Despite her seemingly genuine apology and the distress showing on her stunningly beautiful face the female Careers hand were steady and strong as she reached down and pulled Cecelia's head sharply to the left, effortlessly snapping her neck and ending her life.

Her canon sounded whilst Cashmere was gently lowering her lifeless body back into the water, an uncharacteristic tear falling down her usually expressionless face.

“I'm sorry.”

Mikhail wasn't the only one stunned into silence by the Careers unusual display of sympathy, the Gamemakers themselves taking a moment too long to switch to the next interesting feed meaning that everyone saw the three fingered salute Cashmere offered the body now floating peacefully on her back in the rippling water before the image of Brutus killing Maybelle, the female Tribute of District Nine, by smashing her head onto the rocks.

“…this Games isn't making any sense…” Juno eventually broke the silence in the small room, tears dripping slowly down her face as she refused to look away from the screen. “Seven and Three. Four and Twelve. And now an apologetic kill from District One? I don't…”

“They're friends…” Mikhail murmured softly. “It is different this year because they all know each other. They all...they all know about Cecelia's family. That's why...why…”

“That's why she made it as quick and painless as possible,” Donovan murmured, holding Misha close as his boyfriend wept silently beside him. “I never thought the day would come when I would be thankful for something that a Career did but that...that was the only sort of kindness Cecelia could have been given once she was in that Arena. A quick death.”

“Yeah…”

“Katniss!”

Finnick's sharper than usual voice drew their gazes simultaneously up from the image of Brutus coldly kicking Maybelle’s body into the water to where the infamous playboy of District a Four was stumbling back towards the equally infamous Girl on Fire.

“Mags found him. He's over here.”

Almost as though the Gamemakers had been waiting for Finnick to finish speaking the image of Brutus sprinting towards the Cornucopia was replaced with their first glimpse of Peeta for the
entire Games so far and it wasn't good, the young Tribute obviously struggling to cling onto his pedestal whilst fighting off a desperate attack from Roman of District Nine.

The older man had apparently pulled Peeta down into the water and was now trying to force the blondes head under the water, taking advantage of the fact that Peeta, like so many of his fellow Tributes from the outer Districts, obviously couldn't swim.

Peeta was determined not to go down easily, however, and managed to land several powerful blows to the side of the other man’s head just as the other sections became one once more in order to show Finnick and Katniss coming to a sharp half beside Mags.

Landing a punch of his own to Peeta's temple Roman grabbed the younger Tribute by the neck and pushed him under the surface, the two of them struggling together until Peeta managed to get away from his attacker, clinging desperately to the side of his pedestal.

Roman, gasping for air, grabbed Peeta by his hair and pulled him backwards into the water once more, both of them disappearing under the surface too quickly for Katniss to be able to get a good enough shot that she wouldn't accidentally hit the boy she apparently loved.

Handing his trident over to Mags without hesitation Finnick dived gracefully into the water, propelling himself towards the struggle but he was unable to reach them in time.

Unlike with Woof the cameras stayed above the surface, focusing on Katniss's horrified face and Finnick's desperate attempt to get to his supposed ally before it was too late.

Much to his surprise Mikhail found himself silent rooting for the boy from District Twelve, acknowledging if only to himself that Peeta was probably the only one he could stand to see win as the Tribute had a gentle soul and had only ever killed with mercy before now.

A canon sounded.

“No…”

As one the group of friends leaned forwards, eyes locked on the top half of the screen where a body slowly floated to the surface on its front, the head still completely submerged.

“Peeta…”

Just as Finnick was about to turn the body over to check the person’s identity a second body surfaced a couple of feet away from his current position, gasping painfully and thrashing in the water as they tried desperately to keep their head above the water.

“Peeta!”

With Finnick supporting him the obviously shaken young man made his way over to join Katniss and Mags on the spoke, throwing himself into his supposed girlfriend’s arms.

Movement in the third screen drew their attention for a moment and they watched as Gloss, armed with the bloody arrow he had obviously just removed from his calf, took down Lorna, the female Tribute from District Ten, who had been attempting to sneak away from the Cornucopia with a back of knives by jamming the arrow deep into her vulnerable neck.

A canon sounded a moment later, drawing Katniss’s attention back to where the Careers had now gathered together in front of the Cornucopia, all of them armed and deadly.

“We should probably get out of here…” Finnick murmured, accepting his trident from Mags
before turning and offering the frail woman his back, helping her climb onto him like a child would be carried by their parents. \textit{“We’ll be safest in the jungle… I think…”}

The section which had been following Johanna and her group switched suddenly to show Seeder pulling herself up out of the water on the other side of the Cornucopia as quickly and as quietly as she could, hurrying forwards to grab an elegant looking sickle from the top of a pile of weapons before turning and heading towards the nearest spoke.

She had almost made it a third of the way along when she tripped on one of the uneven sections of rock and, with an involuntary cry of shock, fell noisily into the water.

Brutus led the Careers as they hurried around to the other side of the Cornucopia, not even hesitating when he caught sight of the woman now struggling to climb back onto the spoke.

He drew his arm holding the spear back and launched the deadly projectile into the air with enough force that when it punched its way into Seeder’s side it slid all the way through, emerging with a brightly coloured spray of blood on her other side.

A canon sounded before she’d even begun falling back towards the water.

Seconds later the images of inside the Arena were replaced with a single image of Caesar Flickerman and Claudius Templesmith in their usual seats behind a desk in the studio.

\textit{“Well, there you have it folks,”} Caesar announced with a deep sigh and a bright smile. \textit{“Quite possibly the most exciting opening to a Games that we have ever seen.”}

\textit{“Ok, time for another round of drinks,”} Felyx announced, smacking his hands down on his thighs before jumping up from his seat and disappearing into the kitchenette just as Claudius began his annual assessment of the bloodbath. \textit{“Someone mute that thing.”}

Belle obediently moved forwards to turned the volume down as far as it go, silencing the in depth analysis of the various deaths and rating them in order of impressiveness.

Unsurprisingly Woof’s slow death had been rated as the least impressive of the lot.

\textit{“Felyx! Where the bleeding hell did you get those?”} Donovan demanded sharply, his eyes going wide with shock when Felyx finally returned with a bottle in each hand but not bottles of the black market whiskey they’d been expecting, bottles of very expensive looking Capitol whiskey complete with the official Capitol Seal on the labels. \textit{“Are you insane?”}

Felyx smirked, beginning to fill up everyone's glasses from the half empty bottle in his right hand after placing the still full and still tightly sealed bottle in front of the holo-projector.

\textit{“Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies.}

\textit{“You stole it didn't you?”}

\textit{“How could you think such a thing?”} Felyx responded with a bright laugh, filling up his own glass last before returning to his seat beside Belle on the small armchair they'd found a few weeks ago. \textit{“No, I just happened to see it fall off the back of a cart heading towards the Justice Building, that's all. Why waste such good stuff on Peacekeeper scum?”}

\textit{“You're going to get yourself shot one of these days,”} Mikhail snorted before holding his glass up high once more as he cleared his throat. \textit{“To Woof and Cecelia. Our Victors who didn't deserve the way the Capitol treated them. May they rest in peace.”}
His friends eagerly echoed his toast, all of them knocking back the strong liquid in their glasses in one hit once more, making all bar Felyx and Mikhail gasp in shock.

“I don't think we should open that second bottle,” Juno mumbled, wiping her hand across her mouth. “I don't know about the rest of you but that stuff is significantly stronger than anything I've ever had before now and my parents will kill me if I come home drunk.”

The others agreed and the second bottle stayed sealed for now, although one good thing about the unusual strength of the alcohol was that Willard fell asleep pretty soon after that and was spared the remainder of the mandatory viewing for the day.

Mikhail had been talking softly with Juno about their dream wedding, their heads tilted close together, when Ella suddenly gasped and literally threw herself across the room in order to turn the volume up on the holo-projector once more.

“Peeta!” Katniss's terrified voice filled the room suddenly. “No!”

Mikhail turned his attention back to the screen just in time to see Peeta Mellark trigger an explosion seemingly in the middle of nowhere, sparks flying everywhere as his body was thrown backwards through the air, crashing into Katniss who was knocked down with a cry.

“What was that?!?”

“I have no idea…”

“Peeta?” Katniss gasped fearfully, crawling across the ground until she was all but plastered across his ominously still chest. “He's not breathing. He's not breathing.”

Finnick looked up from where he was helping Mags back to her feet, both of them also having been knocked down by the unexpected explosion, his own expression fearful.

“He's not breathing!”

They watched, none of them speaking, as Finnick all but threw himself into Katniss, pushing her away from Peeta with a surprising amount of force before pressing his lips to Peeta's.

Katniss, now aiming an arrow at Finnick's chest, was as confused they were.

“What's he doing?”

Finnick had stopped kissing Peeta now and was pushing repeatedly on the boy’s chest.

“Cardiopulmonary resuscitation.”

For a brief moment all of them looked away from the screen to stare at Ella who flushed prettily under their attention, her hands fluttering nervously in her lap.

“…what?”

“He's trying to get him breathing again before his heart stops beating,” she explained softly, tucking her hair behind her ears. “It's a medical technique. I read about it at school.”

“Oh…”

“Peeta?”
“Come on,” Finnick grunted almost desperately between compressions. “Come on.”

They watched as he paused, lowering his head to listen quickly to Peeta’s heart before starting his compressions again, never once looking at Katniss who finally dropped her bow.

“Please wake up,” she begged pathetically, leaning down until her face was all but pressed against Peeta's completely unresponsive one. “Please wake up.”

“Come on,” Finnick continued to beg, sounding more exhausted than ever. “Come on.”

“Huh…” Juno sighed thoughtfully.

“What?” Mikhail asked, putting his arm around her waist and pulling her tit against him.

“I thought their relationship was completely fake, just something they concocted to help them in the Arena, but does that look faked to you?”

Mikhail looked back towards the screen just as they zoomed in on Katniss's tearful eyes.

“She really loves him…” Misha breathed softly from his own spot in Donovan’s arms.

“Come on,” Finnick begged, pausing his compressions to press his lips to Peeta's once more, forcing air from his own lungs into the younger boy’s. “Come on Peeta.”

“Please, Peeta…”

Mikhail could practically hear the canon sounding in his head when Finnick returned to giving the powerful chest compressions, putting his whole body into them for a long moment before suddenly Peeta’s mouth opened wide and he sucked in a lungful of air.

“Peeta!” Katniss all but screamed, clutching at Peeta's shoulders. “Oh my God!”

Her hands moved up to cradle his head, her thumbs stroking his skin while his fingers smoothed his damp hair back from his unnaturally pale face as his eyes fluttered open.

“Be careful, there’s force field out there…”

His voice sounded awful, weak and frightened, but his soft words succeeded in dragging a tearful laugh from Katniss before she leaned down and pressed her lips to his.

“Oh, yes…” Juno sighed deeply as the kiss dragged on for a long moment, neither of them making a move to pull away. “That's definitely real…”

“You were dead,” Katniss sobbed when they finally parted, his hands fluttering around his head nervously as she stayed close to him. “You were dead. Your heart stopped.”

“It’s ok,” Peeta reassured her softly. “It's working now.”

“That was close…”

Mikhail hummed thoughtfully, leaning back as Caesar appeared on the screen once more in order to explain what had just happened to the people who didn't have their own walking-talking-textbook to hand, Ella already explaining the technique in more detail to Leroy.

He couldn't make sense of Katniss Everdeen.
She was a cold killer who gave mercy to some but none to others who deserved it more.

She was an emotionless statue who sobbed like a child when someone she loved was hurt.

She was a nobody from District Twelve who was the face of the rebellion.

No, Katniss Everdeen didn't make any sense at all.

~*~*~

Taking the bundle of damp fabric from the frail young woman Mikhail had just dropped it into the violet coloured dye simmering away in his tub when the holo-projector whirred to life, the familiar beeps announcing that the day's mandatory viewing was about to begin.

He and everyone else had been at work for a couple of hours already by that point, arriving before thesis had properly risen into the sky, but the Capitol were renowned for the fact that they slept in late with their days beginning no earlier than nine o'clock.

“Good Morning Panem!” Caesars silky smooth voice called out as his ridiculous image appeared on the far wall of the room, the workers all glancing towards in briefly before retuning most of their attention to their work. “And Happy Hunger Games!”

“And what an exciting morning it is, Caesar!”

Claudius sounded like a giddy child, actually clapping and bouncing in obvious excitement.

“Well that's never a good sign,” one of the older workers in the room muttered. “Something big must have happened during the night for them to detour from their usual script.”

“Very exciting indeed, Claudius,” Caesar agreed gleefully, leaning forwards in his seat as he smirked out at the people being forced to watch him. “Now for those unfortunate souls who were unable to continue watching the Games through the night here is the recap.”

Mikhail rolled his eyes at the predictable wording, carefully massaging the fabric under the surface of the dye mixture whilst raining his eyes to watch the aforementioned recap.

A loud booming sound echoed around the room when lightning suddenly covered the screen, followed by several more booms and flashes of light intermingled with images of the various Tributes faces as they stared towards the light show from wherever they were.

A digital clock in the corner of the screen showed that the lightning had struck at midnight.

“Odd…”

“I thought this next surprise was a truly inspirational move by the Gamemakers,” Claudius's gleeful voice announced as the image changed to one of the Seven/Three campsite with Wiress sitting up on watch. “So unlike anything they've ever done before…”

In the corner of the screen the clock showed the numbers rolling over to 0100.

At first it simply looked like it had begun raining inside the Arena which, contrary to what Claudius had just said, was nothing unusual but when Wiress tilting her head back in order to swallow some of the much needed liquid they were able to see the red stains on her skin.

“Is that…?”
If the rain, or rather the blood rain, hadn't woken he companions then Wiress’s scream certainly did, all three of them jumping to their feet with their weapons in hand.

“What the…?!”

“Blood! It's fucking blood!”

Wiress let out a fresh scream of fear and took off running, blinded by the horrific downpour.

“Wiress!”

“I'll get her!”

Blight took off after the panicking Tribute, weaving through the trees with practised ease while Johanna helped a seemingly injured Beetee to follow at a much slower pace.

“Who the hell comes up with blood rain?!”

“Wiress!” Blight called out on the screen, catching a glimpse of the still screaming woman and making a sharp turn in order to cut her off and catch up with her quicker. “Wiress!”

Mikhail wasn't the only one to flinch away from the screen as Blight seemed to run headlong into something that simply wasn't there, his body being thrown through the air by the same sort of explosion that Peeta had survived only this was so much worse.

On the screen Wiress stumbled to a halt, her impossibly wide eyes looking down at the smoking body which had been thrown towards her and landed only a few feet away.

A canon boomed.

Johanna and Beetee stumbled, a look of panic covering their faces in the same instant.

“Wiress!” “Blight!”

Mikhail grimaced, knowing the fear and horror the two were feeling would be something close to what he'd been put through when he realised that their building had been hit.

His hands continued to move automatically, twisting the stirring the fabric in the familiar pattern he favoured, while his gaze remained fixed on the screen like everyone else's.

Johanna's face went blank when they found Blights body.

She didn't scream or cry or rant or rave.

She stood and stared down at him, the blood rain continuing to pour down on her body until she looked like something out of a person’s nightmares, like an image of death itself.

Wiress was still screaming, clutching at Beetee’s shoulders as the male Tribute attempted to lead her away from the body slowly disappearing into a pool of blood caused by the rain.

“We need to find some sort of shelter!” Beetee called out as the rain seemed to increase, all three of them flinching as they were struck by the fat droplets. “Johanna!”

Johanna finally looked away from her friend’s body.

“Did you see anything we could shelter under?”
“Can't see a bloody thing in this rain,” she responded before chuckling darkly to herself, spreading her fingers wide and watching the blood splashing against her palms. “Bloody…”

Now there was a twisted sense of humour if he'd ever seen one…

“Can you believe that this isn't the most exciting thing to happen last night, Caesar?” Claudius gasped dramatically as they reappeared in the screen, prompting Mikhail and most of the others to focus their attention back on their work for a moment.

He still had ten minutes to go before this piece needed to be removed from the dye.

“I know!” Caesar exclaimed, practically squealing like an overexcited child as he bounced on his seat. “Let's take a look at what happened to our favourite Star Crossed Lovers…”

Mikhail dreaded to think what they considered to be “more exciting” than blood rain…

He wasn't the only one to nearly ruin the fabric he was working on as he watched in horror as Katniss, Peeta, Finnick and frail old Mags tried to escape what appeared to be a killer fog, his hands clutching at the rim of the tub heedless of the way they were being burnt.

In fact it was the horrific on screen death of poor Mags, sacrificing herself so that Finnick could help Katniss get Peeta to safety, that finally jolted him back to life.

“Shit!” he hissed, snatching his hands away from the tub, flinching briefly from the sting of the burns before reaching into the dye mixture to extract the fabric. “Shit…”

He began wringing out the fabric, hoping that it wouldn't be ruined by the extra time it had spent in the dye mixture, whilst on the screen the fog was stopped by an invisible barrier.

“That is so messed up…”

In the corner of the screen the little clock showed that this had all happened at 0200.

“What excellent work the Gamemakers have done this year!” Caesar announced proudly as the screen left the surviving three washing their wounds in a little pond of dirty water, returning to the brightly coloured Capitol Studio. “I can't imagine how difficult it was to come up with all these different obstacles for our brave Tributes to face.”

“I know, Caesar, they've really pulled out the stops for this special year and I cannot wait to see what happens next!” Claudius agreed cheerfully. “Speaking of which…”

Mikhail had just handed over the dyed fabric and pulled the plug to let the tub drain when the screen switched back to recorded feed from inside the Arena, once again showing Katniss, Peeta and Finnick although the clock showed that an hour had passed.

“I'm sorry about Mags…”

“She was never going to make it so…”

Going through the motions of getting the supplies he needed to scrub his tub clean of the violet coloured dye he was about to get to work when someone gasped loudly.

“What is that?”
“Mutts.”

Finnick's soft voice unknowingly answered the shocked question from inside the Arena just as the screen split into four sections, each one showing a different angle of the same scene.

Katniss and Finnick had armed themselves and were staring around at the odd looking creatures appearing in the trees around them but Peeta, leaning against a tree which seemed to be leaking water, had absolutely no idea that anything was wrong.

“What sort of animal is that?”

“No idea.”

“Peeta?”

“Yeah?”

A close-up was shown of his face as he looked over his shoulder towards Katniss, a confused frown replacing his previously calm expression as he noticed their defensive stance.

“Walk over here slowly.”

Mikhail wasn't the only one to flinch when Peeta turned back towards the tree and found himself face to face with one of the creatures which let out a loud roar, a roar which was taken up by all of the other creatures as the young man stumbled backwards slowly.

“I hate when they use mutts,” Felyx muttered, punching the side of his tub. “Makes it even more unfair, doesn't it, to add deadly creatures for them to fight as well as each other.”

Mikhail grunted in response.

It had seemed to him, over the years, that the deaths caused by mutts were even more difficult to watch than the ones caused by other Tributes.

They were usually messier, if nothing else, and often more prolonged.

As they watched the creatures began circling the three Tributes, getting closer and closer as they continued to snarl and growl towards the obviously frightened trio.

“Get to the beach.”

It was all well and good for Katniss to say that but they were completely cut off, only an idiot wouldn’t be able to see that, and it only took a couple of seconds for one of the creatures to launch itself towards her back with a loud growl, it’s monstrous teeth aiming for her neck.

Mikhail's hands clenched into fists as Finnick's quick reflexes saved her life.

After the first one had attacked and been killed it devolved into complete and utter chaos, creatures attacking them from every angle, forcing them to become very creative with their weapons of choice given how close together they were – a trident, a bow and a machete.

It looked as though Peeta was in trouble but he managed to stab the creature through its heart despite being pinned to the ground and then, suddenly, Katniss was knocked off her feet by another one of the creatures, falling back into the pond and disappearing under the surface with her bow the only thing holding the creature and its sharp teeth away from her.
This could be it…

Adya's death could be avenged...

And then Peeta was there, risking his own life in order to save hers yet again by plunging his knife into the creatures back, pressing it deep until the thing stopped moving at which point he pulled the thing off of Katniss and hauled her up and out of the water.

“We’ve got to get to the beech!”

The cameras followed them as they made a mad dash in the direction of the beech, stumbling down the mud covered hill with even more of the creatures following them.

Katniss was knocked down once more, followed by Peeta who unfortunately lost his grip on his machete as he fell and was left completely unarmed and pressed up against a tree.

“Shit…”

And then, just as the creature threw itself towards him, another figure appeared seemingly from nowhere to throw themselves between Peeta and the creature.

The mutts sharp teeth sunk deep into the mud covered Tributes neck, forcing a feminine scream of pain to sound in the air even as Peeta scrabbled to grab his machete and plunge the blade into the creatures own neck, pushing it off of the twitching body of his saviour.

“Who is that?” Katniss asked during a brief respite, the creatures circling out of the range of their weapons for a moment during which all three of them looked down at the figure now struggling to breathe, bleeding pouring out of what was left of her neck.

“The morphling,” Peeta answered even as the creatures attacked once more, Finnick fending them off with his trident. “Help me get her.”

Between the two of them Peeta and Katniss were able to drag the morphling away from the creatures and down onto the beach, Finnick following close behind whilst keeping the creatures at bay with his admittedly impressive skills with his trident.

“See, this is why I prefer Peeta to that bitch,” Mikhail muttered as they watched them stumble into the water, the creatures skidding to a halt at the edge of the jungle. “He actually cares about people, not just the people he knows. He cares about everyone.”

Indeed Peeta had gathered the injured woman into his arms, supporting her head and shoulders even as her frail body floated on the surface of the clear blue water.

“What's her name?”

“Klara,” Donovan answered softly, his hands hidden beneath the dye mixture in his own tub even as he gazed across at the screen. “Winner of the 49th Hunger Games.”

“How do you even know that?”

“Caesar announced their previous wins at the beginning of the interviews, remember?” Donovan pointed out, his arms moving below the surface. “And I have a good memory.”

“Hey. Hey. It's ok…” Peeta's soothing voice echoed through the unusually silent room, each and every person turning to watch as the cameras zoomed in on where he was comforting the woman in his arms. “It's ok. Shh. Shh. Shh. Hey, do you want to see something?”
Her frightened eyes met his and she nodded minutely.

“Look up. Look,” Peeta instructed her, tilting his own head up to look at the sky above them which was a stunning wash of colour thanks to the approaching dawn. “Look at that. It’s incredible, isn’t it? All those colours. Don’t worry about anything else.”

She was still struggling to breathe, the morphling, but her body was slowly beginning to relax in his arms as she gazed up at the sky, mesmerised by the pinks and blue and oranges.

“We’re here with you. It's ok...” Peeta reassured her softly, smoothing back her matted hair as he gazed down at her face, watching as she slowly relaxed until eventually she was completely still, her eyes still looking towards the sky even as the life fled from within them.

A canon sounded.

“What a touching scene from Peeta Mellark, comforting a woman who should have been his enemy in her last moments,” Caesar murmured as the screen returned to the studio just in time to show him wiping a completely fake tear away. “Eleven Tributes eliminated. Thirteen remain. And I'm told that there has been another exciting development which we should just be able to catch now that we return you to the live broadcast.”

A terrified scream filled the air as the image switched to the live feed just in time to show Amethyst, the female Tribute from District Five, desperately trying to outrun a huge tidal wave only to be brutally swept away by it, the cameras following her body as it was spun around under the water and smashed into trees with a succession of sickening thuds.

Someone somewhere in the room let out a horrified whimper.

A canon sounded.

“Did someone declare a public holiday that I wasn't aware of!?” a sharp voice broke through the heavy silence which had followed the shocking death and as one every single person in the room switched their attention from the screen to the man standing in the open doorway, leaning heavily on his dread cane as he glared around at the workers. “Well?!”

For the next couple of hours the Games were ignored as they struggled to meet Jedidiah’s impossible standards, all the while trying not to do anything to warrant a punishment whilst ignoring the way he pressed himself up against the female workers, his hands wandering across their bodies unpleasantly whilst his cane kept them trapped in place.

One day, Mikhail vowed, when he was no longer dependent on this job he would giving Jedediah the thrashing he deserved and he’d use his own blasted cane to do it!

It was only once he’d returned to his usual haunting ground that they were finally able to return some of their attention to what was happening inside the Arena, glancing at the screen out of the corners of their eyes as they continued to work at their normal pace.

“Um...” one of the runners suddenly piped up from where she’d paused in the centre of the room, arms weighed down with a load of damp fabric as she stared up at the screen with a confused frown on her face. “Since when did Three and Seven join with Four and Twelve?”

It was true.

When Mikhail was finally at a point where he could look away from his work having been given
a difficult colour to work with he found that the screen was split into two sections; on the left were the Careers who were crouched down just inside the tree line watching the Cornucopia and on the right were Katniss, Johanna and Wiress, the former helping the latter to wash the bright red blood off of her body as she seemed incapable to do it herself.

“Tick Tock.”

“Seriously, what is with the alliances this year?” Felyx muttered, striding over to grab the damp fabric from the stationary runner so that he could dump it into his tub. “It didn’t make sense when they were in two different groups but now? Now it's borderline ridiculous!”

“I cannot…have fun with Nuts…”

Something told him that whilst they hadn’t been able to pay attention to the Games the already disturbed Tribute from District Three had broken even further, her eyes fluttering around wildly as she repeated the same two words over and over again.

He really couldn't blame Johanna for reaching her wits end.

“Tick Tock.”

“Ok, that was different…” he muttered to himself as a much more insistent tone entered Wiress's voice, her hands clutching at Katniss's arms until the younger Tribute gasped, her eyes going slightly wide as she looked around her at the jungle surrounding them.

“…it’s a clock…” she gasped, only just loud enough to be picked up. “It’s a clock!”

Several voices called out almost as one in response to her declaration,

“It is?!?”

“How the heck did she figure that out?”

“I guess you look at things a little differently from the inside.”

“Oh my God, it's a clock!” Katniss sounded positively ecstatic now, clutching at the older woman in turn with a beaming smile on her face. “Wiress, you're a genius!”

“I guess that explains the little clock they out in the corner of the screen for the recaps this morning,” Mikhail muttered, thinking back to previous years when there had been no such clock at any point throughout the Games. “Seriously, who even comes up with these ideas?”

“Some sick bastard, that's for sure.”

Their fifteen minute break for lunch was announced, only half of them actually producing food from the pockets of their jackets whilst the others made do with just a drink of water.

Mikhail was one of the latter, food being so tight that he had voluntarily gone without lunch alongside his father and uncle so that the boys would have something to eat at school.

“This entire Arena seems to be laid out like a clock, with a new threat every hour but they stay only within their wedge,” Katniss announced from the screen where she was shown leading the rest of her group along one of the spokes. “It all starts with the lightning. Then the blood rain, fog and monkeys. That's the first four hours.”
On the left side of the screen the Careers nodded to one another before breaking out from their hiding places, splitting up in four separate directions so that they could all make their way towards the Cornucopia without their targets spotting their approach.

This was not going to be good.

“At ten that big wave hits from over there.”

“Wiress, you're a genius…” Finnick breathed as he overtook Wiress, smiling down at her.

“The tail points towards twelve,” Peeta figured out, pointing to how the monstrosity was lined up within the Arena, prompting Katniss to follow him and look out over his shoulder.

“That's where the lightning strikes at noon and midnight.”

“Where?” Beetee demanded softly.

“That big tree.”

The genius of District Three hummed thoughtfully, lifting his glasses up so that he could squint out in the direction that the much younger Tribute was pointing.

“Good.”

None of them paid much attention to Wiress who had paused upon reaching the main section of the Cornucopia, barely stepping off of the spoke before she began turning on the spot, looking out at the jungle surrounding them without really seeing it.

“Hickory dickory dock. The mouse ran up the clock,” she sang to herself, smiling like a child would. “The clock struck one. The mouse ran down. Hickory dickory dock.”

Even though the others had disappeared inside the horn of the Cornucopia the camera stayed with Wiress, showing her crouching down by the waters edge with her hands clasped to her chest, warning everyone watching that something was about to happen to her.

“Hickory dickory dock. The mouse ran up the clock,” she continued happily, completely unaware that she was now the focus of so many people attention as she swayed from side to side. “The clock struck two. Down he flew. Hickory dickory dock.”

On the other side of the screen the image suddenly showed Gloss swimming under the water, a knife clutched tightly in his right hand while his left patted along the underside of one of the spokes, the rocky path acting as a guide for the deadly Career.

“This isn't going to be good…”

Wiress leaned forwards to pat at the water with her hands and for a moment she appeared on both sides of the screen at once, her hands appearing just ahead of Gloss.

“Hickory Dickory dock. The mouse ran up the clock,” she continued to sing as she removed her hands from the water and turned to face the others, sitting down on the rocks with her back to the water. “The clock struck three. He did flee. Hickory Dickory dock.”

With the camera following Gloss’s approach they all knew the exact moment he was about to strike, surging up from under the surface and grabbing hold of poor Wiress from behind, plunging his knife down into her chest without a moment’s hesitation.
Her canon sounded even before she'd finished gasping in shock.

The screen which had been dedicated to Wiress and her demise shifted within the blink of an eye to show Katniss and the others reacting to her death, her arms moving automatically to fire an arrow into Gloss’s bare chest before he'd even let go of Wiress's limp body.

His eyes went wide for a moment before his body tumbled back into the water.

No canon sounded, however, but there was no way he could survive that.

Cashmere appeared on the left side of the screen, her beautiful face twisted in agony as she watched her brother disappear before she snapped out of it and let out a scream of agony.

Throwing herself forwards, armed with a knife which appeared to be identical to the one her brother had wielded, she was unprepared for the fact that Johanna would take it upon herself to defend Katniss, pushing the younger woman out of the way with enough force to send Katniss sprawling onto the ground before launching her axe towards Cashmere.

It struck her in the centre of her chest, the blade cutting deep between her breasts and sending her spinning off to the side, striking the ground just as her canon sounded.

District One, some of the obvious favourites to win, were out of the Games.

“Never thought I’d see the day when I’d feel sad over the death of a Career…”

Several people, Mikhail included, murmured softly in agreement.

Yes, Cashmere had killed Cecelia but she’d done it quickly and cleanly, she’d shown mercy to the older woman and spared her family the pain of watching something even more horrific.

“Here,” Misha muttered, pressing a small piece of bread into Mikhail hand. “Eat.”

Offering his friend a grateful smile, his stomach having begun to cramp painfully as he watched the others eating what little they had, he accepted the piece of bread and popped it into his mouth whilst returning his attention to what was happening on the screen.

Finnick and Peeta were locked in a deadly battle with Brutus who was genuinely one of the most terrifying people to watch in these Games, his muscles bulging underneath his skin.

And yet as terrifying as he was the Career was obviously struggling to gain the upper hand.

Over in the other section of the screen Enobaria was shown rising up out of the water, her fang like teeth bared in a growl as her eyes focused on the fight taking place on the other side of the Cornucopia, not even hesitating to fling one of her deadly knives towards Finnick.

One of the younger women gasped loudly as the blade slice across his left bicep sending a burst of blood into the air, the fabric of his long sleeve offering no protection at all.

“Thought her aim would have been better than that…” Donovan muttered, frowning at the screen as the blade continued along its path without causing any more damage. “What with how they said she was the one who taught that girl from last year how to throw knives…”

It seemed to be a moment for missing easy shots, however, as when Katniss fired back at the sharp-toothed Career she too missed, allowing Enobaria to dive back into the water.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this…”
“No!”

Finnick’s voice echoed throughout the room as he grabbed hold of Peeta when the younger man attempted to follow Brutus when the Career turned and hurried away from the Cornucopia, heading towards the nearest spoke so as to make his escape from the group.

No one could stop Katniss hurrying after him, however, closely followed by Johanna.

They had barely made it around the edge of the Cornucopia’s horn when the ground beneath them shook, sending all of them tumbling to the ground even as Brutus and Enobaria were shown still making their escape completely unaffected by the tremor.

Within the blink of an eye the camera’s focus shifted, one section of the screen now dedicated to Finnick and Peeta whilst the other focused on Katniss and Johanna.

And then the Cornucopia began to spin.

“What the…?”

In the corner of the screen they saw Cashmere’s body roll off of the spinning ground, disappearing into the churning water even as the other Tribute’s struggled to hold on.

“That’s insane…”

Katniss lost her grip, sparking a gasp from several people in the room as her body slid down the jagged rocks towards the tempestuous water, but Johanna managed to grab hold of her before she could hit the water, using her axe to lock them in place.

“How are they even doing that?”

Almost at exactly the same time that Katniss lost her grip Beetee too began to tumble towards the water, appearing at the top of the screen moments before Finnick grabbed hold of him, pulling him out of the way just as one of the weapons caches tumbled over sending the deadly blades flying towards Peeta who was obviously struggling to hold on.

In a move worthy of some of the most exiting Career moments of past Games the young boy from District Twelve managed to roll out of the way at the last second whilst holding onto the rocks with only one hand, holding himself in place even as the ground continued to spin.

“No!”

Johanna’s desperate scream drew all of their attention back to the other section of the screen and Mikhail found himself sucking in a sharp breath as they all watched Katniss strike the water, immediately vanishing under the surface of the chaotic water.

The order came for them to get back to work just as the Cornucopia began to slow down, eventually coming to a halt just as Mikhail set about stoking the fire beneath his tub.

“She’s alive!”

Damn.

Glancing across at the screen he saw that Katniss had indeed survived, given that she was now pulling herself up onto one of the spoke as she coughed and spluttered weakly.

Johanna was the first to reach her, helping her up, but it was Peeta who spoke.
“You ok?”

On the screen Katniss offered him a weak thumbs up while Finnick began raiding what was left of the supplies for things that would be useful to them, stocking up on anything and everything before helping Beetee limp towards the others on the long spoke.

“Let’s just get what we need and get off this bloody island.”

His afternoon was dominated with a series of complicated orders, difficult colours, difficult fabrics and in one particular case significantly more fabric than they were usually required to dye in one go but thankfully that particular order was for pink silk, an easy combination.

Because of this he only became aware of the psychological torture that Katniss and Finnick were being put through when his friends and co-workers began a serious discussion about how disgusting all of the tricks being used by the Gamemakers were this year.

“I don’t think I could stand to listen to voice of people I loved screaming like that for an hour,” Felyx admitted softly, shuddering as he began to wring out his latest project.

Mikhail couldn’t help but agree although he knew that if they really wanted to torment him they’d be best off using his mother and sisters voices rather than anyone living, well aware that he would succumb to guilt over their deaths far quicker than anything else.

“They’re playing dirty this year, that’s for sure,” Misha agreed, his arms submerged in the dye mixture he was currently working with. “Makes me wonder if they haven’t already decided who they want to win and are just drawing out the planned deaths of the others.”

It wouldn’t surprise Mikhail if what his friend suspected was true.

Katniss and Peeta had embarrassed the Capitol last year, tricking them into allowing two Victors instead of one, so he doubted that they would be the ones they were hoping to win.

It was probably Finnick or Enobaria, charismatic and popular Victors that they were.

Or perhaps Gloss, who despite all previous expectations, had somehow survived long enough to swim to shore where he was able to strip off his shirt without disturbing the arrow protruding from his chest and using it to bind it in place, not risking taking it out.

He was now slowly following Katniss and her group, his hand pressing against the bandage surrounding the broken arrow shaft in order to keep pressure on the wound as he moved.

Mikhail was one of the last people to achieve his quote that day and so the room was almost completely empty as he gave his tub a final scrub, all the while watching the screen which had just cut away from an interview with Kol and Nerilla, District Two’s mentors that year, in order to show one of the remaining Tributes sprinting through the jungle.

“Fuck…” the Tribute, who Mikhail eventually identified as Hugh from District Ten, gasped fearfully as he nearly ran headlong into a tree whilst glancing over his shoulder. “Fuck…”

It was pretty obvious that he was running from something but for a long moment Mikhail couldn’t see what he was so afraid and even when he did finally spot the creatures that were perusing the Tribute it still took a long moment for him to accept what he was seeing.

Rabbits.
Not your ordinary brown rabbits which had appeared in some previous Games either.

No, there were fluffy white bundles of…well…fluff and Hugh seemed absolutely terrified.

“What the…?”

It was then that Hugh made what turned out to be a fatal error in not spotting the thick tree root before it was too late, his foot fetching in it with a loud thud, the momentum of his body sending him crashing down onto the ground with an inhuman scream of pain.

Seconds later the rabbits proved just what was so terrifying about them.

They pounced on him, their jaws opening wide to display the disproportionate teeth which had been hidden from view until them which sliced through the young man’s flesh as though it were butter, each creature attacking a different part of his body.

His screams increased when the rabbits began to dismember him, chewing their way through his flesh and bones until his arms and legs were no longer connected to his torso.

Eventually, though, the screams stopped and by then it was almost merciful when the canon sounded signalling that Hugh was dead, the rabbits continuing to feast upon his remains.

It was one of the most gruesome deaths he’d ever seen and that was saying something.

As the image on the screen changed to show Katniss and her merry band of misfits watching the remains being collected by the hovercraft, the metal claw descending a grand total of five times, he set about finishing off his end of day routine so that he could head home.

Annoyingly it was too late for him to try and meet up with Juno, the streets already emptying as the curfew approached, and so he made his way home, hurrying along with his head down and his hands in his pockets so as to not draw any unwanted attention.

He did not need another run in with Peacekeepers.

There was a bowl of stew waiting for him when he got, along with a crust of black bread, which unfortunately didn't do much to assuage his hunger but was better than nothing.

Checking that the apartment was locked down properly for the night he quickly turned off the lights, stripped out of his clothes and made his way to the bungle of blankets on the floor by the radiator that served as his bed, his father already snoring away on the sofa.

He'd only been asleep for less than an hour when the house was filled with the unmistakable sounds of a child having a terrifying nightmare, no doubt about the images they had been forced to watch during the mandatory viewing sessions at school.

Unsurprisingly this wasn't the last time that his sleep was disturbed by night terrors that evening, some his own as his mind relived the footage but mostly his poor cousins.

As such it was even more of a struggled than usual for him to emerge from his cocoon of blankets the following morning, joining his father and uncle at the table for a meagre breakfast of stale bread, lightly toasted, and tasteless dripping washed down with water.

Mikhail was the first to leave the little apartment that morning, kissing each of his cousins on the top of their head as they settled down for their own breakfast already dressed for school, hoping to catch a few moments with Juno before heading over to the factory.
He took up his usual spot, leaning against the wall of the building opposite her apartment block and waited as long as he could but unfortunately she hadn't made an appearance by the time he was forced to abandon his spot and make his way across the District.

As with the previous day they'd all been hard at work for a good couple of hours, the sweat literally dripping off of their bodies as the heat outside rose almost enough to rival the heat inside making it doubly unbearable, by the time the morning “catch up” was aired.

“Good Morning, Panem!” Caesar greeted too brightly, dressed in his usual “stylish” suit in what was undoubtedly a suitably air-conditioned studio. “What an exciting day we had yesterday, ladies and gentlemen. Let's have a quick look back at some of the highlights.”

Mikhail snorted.

*Highlights.*

They might as well have just come out and said “*let's watch the deaths in order so we can pick out which was our favourite*” or “*let's have a good laugh at the boring deaths*” as that was what they really meant, each gruesome demise being replayed on the screen.

“Bet they wouldn't find it fascinating if they'd grown up being eligible for a Reaping,” Donovan muttered, putting a little more force than was necessary behind his next twist of the fabric he had just finished working on. “I'd like to see them giggle over a death then.”

“And now let's have a look at what happened this morning before we started broadcasting,” Caesar instructed his audience once the image of Hugh’s dismembered body had finally been replaced with one of the two hosts. “First let's check on our Careers…”

Mikhail looked up from the painfully yellow liquid in his tub just in time to see an artistic image of the sunrise shift into an image of the two careers who had apparently managed to make it back to the Cornucopia without the others noticing and had set up a temporary camp inside the large horn, sharing each other's body heat rather than lighting a fire.

They’d also apparently decided to make some alterations to their outfits which the Capitol greatly approved of if Caesar and Claudius's audio responses were anything to go by.

Brutus was now clad in nothing but his skin tight trousers, his utterly terrifying chest, back and shoulders being displayed for everyone to see as he shared the point of his spear.

Enobaria, meanwhile, had taken a knife to her clothes so as the cut off the bottom parts of the skin tight trousers before turning the top she wore into a tank top, removing the sleeves completely and exposing her ridiculously chiselled midriff until only her breast were hidden.

“And shall we see how the only Tribute to go it alone this year is faring?” Claudius suggested cheerfully, moments before the image shifted to show Chaff already up and moving, using a machete to cut himself a path through the dense jungle. “Oh dear. Poor old Chaff isn't looking a little worse for wear, don't you think? Caesar?”

“Indeed,” Caesar agreed as Chaff was shown to stumble, his gaunt face searching the sky, obviously hoping for a parachute. “Do you think its lack of food or lack of alcohol which is proving to be his biggest struggle? We all know how much he likes to drink…”

“And who can blame him?” someone demanded angrily from across the room. “I know I'd have turned to drink if I'd been put through the shit he has gone through in his lifetime.”
Mikhail couldn't help but grunt in agreement.

He honestly didn't know what was worse; being killed inside the Arena or making it out, surviving when so many didn't only to be paraded around the Capitol like some sort of pet.

“**And finally let’s see what the largest alliance in these Games got up to this morning.**” Caesar announced, flashing a smile at the camera as the studio was shown briefly before the screen was dominated with an image of Katniss and the others gathered on the beach. **“Did you know that this particular alliance has set a new record? Never before have District Twelve worked with Districts Three or Districts Seven and it was only last year that they were linked with District Two when Peeta joined the Career pack for a short time.”**

It was obvious by the way they were all gathered in a little circle that they were preparing for a discussion of some sorts but no one was prepared for it to be Beetee who spoke up.

**“I have a plan,”** he announced clearly and calmly, looking around at the faces of his fellow Victors as he fiddled with a spool of wire. **“Where are the Careers the safest? The jungle?”**

Johanna scoffed loudly, shaking her head as she countered firmly, **“Jungles a nightmare.”**

**“Probably here on the beach,”** Peeta murmured softly, looking down at the sand beneath him before glancing around the group, obviously feeling the need to check that they agreed.

**“Then why are they not here?”** Beetee asked simply, an odd smile gracing his lips.

**“Because we are,”** Johanna answered proudly. **“We claimed it.”**

“What is he going on about?” Misha grunted, looking up briefly from where he was scrubbing his tub clean between dye jobs. “Why does it matter where they feel safe?”

**“And if we left they would come?”**

**“Or stay hidden in the tree line,”** Finnick pointed out softly, gesturing around them to the trees which were currently giving them shelter from the artificial sun burning above them.

**“Which in just over four hours will be soaked from the ten o’clock wave,”** Beetee concluded, his smile growing as he turned to face Katniss. **“What happens at midnight?”**

**“Lightning strikes that tree.”**

It was pretty obvious from her tone of voice that she was just as confused as they were.

**“Here's what I propose,”** Beetee announced, obviously content with the level of understanding his allies had shown despite their obvious confusion. **“We leave the beach at dusk. We head to the lightning tree. That should draw them back to the beach.”**

“**What's so important about the Careers being on the beach?**” Donovan muttered, wiping the sweat from his forehead on his shoulder as he passed his finished work over to a runner.

Mikhail wasn't the only one to shrug in response.

He had absolutely no idea what the Victor from District Three was going on about.
“Prior to midnight we then run this wire from the tree to the water,” Beetee explained, holding up the spool. “Anyone in the water or on the damp sand will be electrocuted.”

“Is he serious?” Felyx snorted. “Crash! Bang! Zap! No more Careers? That's brilliant!”

“Yes,” Mikhail murmured in agreement. “As long as the plan works, that is.”

Apparently he wasn't the only one with doubts.

“How do we know that the wires not going to burn up?” Johanna demanded gruffly.

“Because I invented it,” Beetee responded proudly. “I assure you it won't burn up.”

Stepping back from his now clean tub so that the latest dye mixture could be sorted out by his supervisor, the liquid splashing all over the place as it was poured in, Mikhail was able to study the facial expressions of the group of Victors contemplating the proposed plan.

Johanna, the angriest member of the alliance, remained remarkably impassive as she shared a look with Finnick, both of them looking rather sceptical although Finnick also seemed slightly hopeful, his mouth quirking up ever so slightly even as his shoulders relaxed.

Unsurprisingly Peeta's expression was one of sadness and regret, the gentle young man regretting every life that had been lost in both of the Games he had been forced to compete in unlike his “wife” who stared at each of them in turn, her eyes bright and calculating.

“Well, it's better than hunting them down,” Johanna eventually muttered, breaking the silence that had fallen on the group just as Mikhail was beckoned back over to his tub, accepting the bundle of damp fabric from the rubber who hurried across to him.

“Standard length of time for this one,” his supervisor informed him. “Might need to give the dye a couple more minutes to heat up properly, however, as there's a lot of colours mixed together in a new combination and it's proving to be rather stubborn in regards to heat.”

Mikhail nodded to show he understood.

“Yeah, why not?” Katniss enquired from the screen just as he placed his hand under the surface of the dye to check its temperature. “If it fails no harm done anyway. Right?”

“I say we try it.”

Despite his words stating that he agreed with her his eyes told a different story and Mikhail found himself, just like last year, hoping that if anyone made it out alive it was the gentle boy from District Twelve who wore his emotions like a second skin for all to see.

By the time his latest dye mixture was simmering at the right temperature and he carefully began massaging the dye into the large quantity of fabric he had carefully submerged in it the screen had returned to an image of the two idiotic hosts who were now busy comparing Beetee's “genius” plan with the plan which had secured his victory during his own Games.

Mikhail had never seen footage from the 53rd Hunger Games before now, mostly due to the fact that it wasn't one of the Capitol favourites due it's less than bloody conclusion.

Now, as the two hosts described how electricity seemed to be a favourite weapon of Beetee's, there was a small box in the corner of the screen showing a younger version of the Victor from District Three, his dark skin covered with countless painful red blisters as he struggled to survive
in what was obviously a desert terrain with limited survival skills.

“Of course at the time we had no idea what a clever brain young Beetee was hiding from us,” Claudius murmured, referring to the fact that Beetee had been all but forgotten about during his Games by everyone, both inside and outside of the Arena, until eventually it was just him and the six members of the Career pack left alive. “I loved this moment…”

Mikhail watched as the teenaged Beetee snuck out of his hiding place once the Careers had left their camp in front of the Cornucopia to go hunt for him, his feet slipping in the sand as he hurried to help himself to some of their food and water before he began searching through the supplies for something that would be useful to him, eventually coming across a spool of what appeared to be garrotting wire and a battery powered heating unit.

“I remember watching this as a kid,” one of his fellow workers murmured as the small screen displayed Beetee working the wire into a large net which he then spread out across the ground inside the Careers camp, hiding the wires with a thin layer of sand before attacking the heating unit, cutting his fingers on the sharp parts inside the things as he connected the net he’d made to its power source. “I was so confused. We didn't have access to electricity then like we do now, it was all candles and wood-burning stoves.

Remaining hidden within the piles of supplies, his hands resting on the power switch of the heating unit, Beetee was shown waiting all day for the Careers to return to the camp.

He even waited until they were all standing within the “target zone” as the two hosts referred to it before flipping the switch, sending jolts of electricity zooming along the wire and up through their bare feet, all of the Careers having stripped off their heavy shoes.

They were dead, their bodies smouldering ever so slightly, in a matter of seconds.

A commotion over on the other side of the room drew everyone's attention away from the screen just as it was switched to the live feed from the Arena, their eyes instead finding the new runner who had only started a couple of weeks earlier struggling to put out the flames making their way up his trouser leg having pressed too close to one of the tubs fires.

His frightened whimpers turned to panicked screams, tears flooding down his cheeks just moments before someone poured a bowl of water over his leg in order to extinguish the flames, revealing the badly burned flesh beneath the ruined fabric of the boys trousers.

“He was told about leaning too close to the base of the tubs,” Solomon, one of the oldest runners who had been working at the factory since he was a young man, muttered once the boy had left the room, sobbing pathetically as he headed home with strict instructions to return to work the following day. “Still at least he won't make the same mistake again.”

As far as live feeds went that particular days turned out to be rather unspectacular, the only interesting thing they noticed was that time seemed to be passing quicker for those inside the Arena than for those outside it, the supposedly hour long “active sectors” of the Arena actually taking anywhere between thirty and forty-five minutes but never lasting an hour.

It wasn't unusual for them to do this, however, as they often wanted the “action” to take place at a “convenient time” and so, as Beetee’s plan was set to begin at midnight when most of them would either be sleeping or partying, time had been adjusted accordingly.

As it was the live feed didn't “pick up” until after they'd had their fifteen minute lunch break, making it mid-afternoon inside the Arena, when Brutus and Enobaria finally managed to track down Chaff in one of the sectors that had recently been active but was now safe.
“Brutus,” Chaff greeted the two Careers in a remarkably calm manner after the two of them had successfully trapped him against the base of a large tree. “Enobaria.”

“Chaff,” Enobaria returned the greeting softly. “You're not looking so good, old man.”

“Less of the old, thank you,” Chaff responded with a chuckle, making a show of patting his protruding belly so that it wobbled. “I'm in the prime of my life, I'll have you know.”

Brutus snorted loudly, shaking his head almost ruefully as he brought his arm back and took aim with his spear, pausing at the last moment to share a look with Enobaria who nodded.

“How a drink for me if either of you manage to get out of here alive…”

Chaff’s final words were cut off by the sound of the spear sliding deep into his chest, his eyes glazing over almost immediately and blood began to drip from his open mouth.

A cannon sounded.

Mikhail found himself dealing with a particularly stubborn length of fabric which seemed to be particularly opposed to accepting the dye as he needed it to for the next hour or so, his fingers aching as he was forced to massage the fabric for a significantly longer length of time than usual before it finally gave up the fight and turned green like it was supposed to.

Unfortunately this also put him behind on his daily quota.

“How does he even know that?!”

“He's from Three,” Misha pointed out in response to his boyfriend’s loud exclamation, taking a brief moment to gulp down some water. “They're all clever twats in Three.”

“You two girls take this. Unspool it carefully. Make sure the entire coil is in the water, understand? Then head to the tree in the two o'clock sector. We'll meet you there.”

“I'm going to go with them as a guard.”

Peeta was obviously trying to sound firm but he failed spectacularly.

“No,” Beetee counted the younger man instantly, shaking his head as he turned to face the two from District Twelve who had moved to stand beside each other as soon as the group had come to a halt. “No, no, no, you're staying here to protect me and the tree.”

“No, I need to go with her.”

Mikhail frowned.

Was there something going on beneath the surface between Katniss and Peeta?

The looks being passed between the two…
The way they were determined to stay together…

Could it be that they were planning to double cross their friends?

“There are two Careers out there, therefore I need to two guards.”

“Finnick can protect you just fine on his own.”

Yup, Mikhail decided, there was definitely something going on.

Nodding to his supervisor that his tub was ready he took a brief moment to strip off his shirt as some of the others already had in an attempt to cool themselves down, revealing the horrifically scarred skin of his back to the room as he hung his damp shirt with his jacket.

It was weird, the fact that inside the Arena was already getting dark thanks to the time difference whilst in District Eight the sun was still pouring mercilessly through the windows.

“Yeah, why can't Finnick and Johanna stay with you?” Katniss suggested from the screen, nodding to the other two Victors in turn. “Peeta and I will take the coil.”

Beetee did not seem impressed by the way his instructions were being argued with.

“You all agreed to keep me alive until midnight, correct?”

“It's his plan,” Johanna pointed out simply. “We all agreed to it.”

“Is there a problem here?”

It was Finnick who finally picked up on the weird level of tension growing between their small group, fingering the deadly blades of his trident as he looked back and forth between Katniss, Peeta, Johanna and Beetee with a frown marring his handsome features.

“Uh oh!” Donovan snorted loudly. “Looks there's trouble in paradise…”

Misha turned to frown across at his boyfriend,

“I'm concerned that you consider the Arena to be paradise…”

“Excellent question…”

Beetee's voice was heavy with suspicion as he turned his bespectacled gaze on Katniss.

“No,” the girl in question hurried to answer them. “There's no problem.”

Mikhail had a feeling that he wasn't the only one who didn't believe her.

He couldn’t stop himself from pulling a rather disgusted face the cameras closed in suddenly to capture the kiss she proceeded to press against Peeta's lips far too intimately.

Seriously, talk about being a big bunch of perverts.

By the time they pulled apart Mikhail could have counted her eyelashes if he'd wanted to.

“I'll see you at midnight,” she promised him softly before taking the spool of wire from Beetee, her hands shifting on the handle until she found a position that was comfortable.
“Alright,” Johanna announced, bringing her axe up to rest on her shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Mikhail gave the screen half of his attention as he started work on his next piece of cloth, relieved to find that this was an easy fabric to work with as well as a nice simple colour.

As it had been countless of time over the past couple of days the screen was split into three columns; the left showing Katniss and Johanna as they made their way back along the path they had just taken to reach the tree, the right showing Brutus and Enobaria moving stealthily through the jungle, weapons in hand, while the centre column showed Finnick and Peeta standing guard silently, barely glancing at each other, whilst Beetee worked.

Every now and then one of the sections flickered to show either a different angle of the same group or a quick flash of Gloss, hiding just out of sight watching Beetee work.

“Come on. I want to put as much distance between me and this beach as possible,” Johanna muttered, glancing back at where Katniss was carefully making sure that the wire unspooled smoothly like it was supposed to. “Frying is not how I want to go.”

Over in the right column Brutus was suddenly shown standing on what was obviously the wire they’d already laid, trapping it against a rock as he prepared to slice through it with the machete he’d obviously taken from Chaff’s body after killing him earlier on.

“There’s something…” Katniss muttered, tugging at the wire for a long moment whilst glancing back the way they had come, her confusion and fear shoeing on her pretty face.

Brutus leaned out of the shadows and into the light cast down upon them by the artificial moon, revealing himself to Katniss and Johanna as he sliced through the wire with ease.

He expected Enobaria to attack next.

Heck, he was pretty sure everyone expected Enobaria to attack next.

Instead Johanna moved like a thing possessed, using the flat side of her axe like a club so as to knock Katniss off of her feet with a powerful blow to her vulnerable temple.

“Shit!”

Katniss was down but not out, mumbling in shock and pain, when Johanna suddenly drops down on top of her and uses the blade of her axe to dig into her vulnerable forearm.

Her scream, which was quickly muffled by Johanna's hand was one of pure pain.

In their section of the screen Brutus and Enobaria are gown sharing a brief look of surprised confusion in response to the surprising betrayed before they both head towards Johanna.

“Stay down.”

Everyone had stopped what they were doing, countless piece of fabric would no doubt be ruined but no one cared in that moment as they watch Johanna smear Katniss blood all over her neck before turning to face her oncoming attackers, blood dripping from her hands.

Bringing up her bloodstained axe she throws it towards Brutus but he dodged it easily.

Giving the body at her feet one last glance Johanna turned and took off into the jungle, prompting both Enobaria and Brutus, who had obviously fallen for her trick with the blood and believed Katniss to be a cannon waiting to happen, to follow her.
“Come on!”
“…what the…?”

Mikhail found that he couldn't even form words properly as he watched the cameras shifting so that the left section showed Johanna fleeing through the jungle, glancing back over her shoulder whilst the right section continuing to follow her blood thirsty pursuers.

Katniss was forgotten for the moment.

“Johanna!” Finnick called out from the centre section of the screen, abandoning his position guarding Beetee in favour of running into the jungle. “Johanna! Where are you?!”

It seemed that the cameras were content to ignore those least likely to fight at that particular moment as the camera abandoned Peeta and Beetee in favour of following him.

He stumbled up to the area where the attack had happened but there was no one there.

Katniss was gone.

“Johanna?”

It was difficult to know where to look after that.

Enobaria and Brutus caught up with Johanna just as Peeta was suddenly shown abandoning Beetee who was obviously preparing to do something including a wooden spear and the wire, hurrying into the jungle with his machete held high as he screamed for Katniss.

The fight was brutal, blood being drawn on all three participants by the time Finnick was shown literally stumbling into them having been following the sounds of metal clashing.

As he faced off against Enobaria the section which had been dedicated to him suddenly split into two and showed Peeta and Katniss passing within metres of each other but going opposite directions, Peeta heading towards the fight, Katniss heading for the lightning tree.

“I don't know where to look…”

Mikhail sympathised with the young woman who's pathetic whimper was barely heard over the scream Johanna let out as Brutus landed another hit with his spear drawing more blood.

“Peeta…” Katniss mumbled as she stumbled into the clearing which surrounded the tree, her worryingly vacant expression desperately searching for sign of her husband. “Peeta?”

Something, or more importantly someone, triggered an explosion.

Finnick managed to stab the three prongs of his trident into Enobaria’s thigh, causing the deadly Career to cry out in pain whilst flinging one of her knives towards his face, the blade slicing along his jawline before severing a chunk of his hair as it continued on past him.

A camera briefly showed Beetee's ominously still body on the ground as Katniss rushed over to grab the makeshift spear from where it had been flung away from the invisible forcefield, obviously the cause of the explosion, and study the blackened wire wrapped around it.

A quick tug on the wire confirmed that the other end was connected to the lightning tree.
“I didn't think their plan had anything to do with the forcefield…”

“It didn't…”

It also didn't escape Mikhail's notice that she hadn't checked on Beetee, her ally, once.

“Peeta!”

It's not Katniss crying out for him this time but Johanna, pinned under Brutus’s substantial form, and it is not a hopeful cry or a worried cry, more an angry, somewhat annoyed one.

“Peeta! Get out of here!”

Peeta ignored her, stumbling into the fight almost blindly as he ignored Finnick and Enobaria who were all but locked in a deadly dance of blades and blood, focusing instead on swinging his deadly machete towards Brutus's thick neck as though it were a tree trunk in his way.

It was the first time that the gentle boy from District Twelve had killed someone by choice, Brutus moving too slowly to stop the blade from sinking deep into the side of his neck.

There was blood everywhere.

It erupted from the wound like a fountain, covering both Peeta and Johanna in the few seconds it took for the cannon to sound loudly as Brutus's body slumped to the ground.

“Brutus!” “Peeta!”

The two very different screams came from both sides of the screen, Katniss looking around her in fear while Enobaria abandoned her fight with Finnick in an incredibly reckless manner as she chose, instead, to attack poor Peeta who was now completely defenceless.

Johanna began to struggle out from underneath Brutus's body, desperately trying to get hold of the axe lying on the ground between her and Peeta but it was too late and all Peeta could do was twist out of the way and slam his hip into Enobaria's stomach.

They tumbled to the ground, a tangle of limbs and Peeta grabbed hold of her wrists in order to keep the blades she held away from his body but there was only so much he could do to a voice her razor sharp teeth as she snapped precariously close to his vulnerable neck.

“Finnick!” Johanna screamed as she finally got free of Brutus’s dead body and tackled Enobaria, grabbing her axe on the way and began fighting the older woman. “Go! Find Katniss! Help Beetee finish the plan! Peeta and I can take care of old sharp tooth here!”

Finnick was obviously torn between wanting to help his friend and wanting to obey her.

In the end Peeta, now armed with his machete having finally managed to pull it free of Brutus's neck, made his decision for him by turning and screaming at the top of his voice.

“Go!”

Mikhail wasn't the only one edging towards the screen, abandoning his tub and the fabric slowly dying inside it in favour of tracking the action as closely as possible.

It seemed as though Enobaria was determined to go down fighting if she had to go out at all and pretty soon both Peeta and Johanna were struggling to keep up with her deadly blades.
“Katniss, where are you?”

Finnick had absolutely no idea that as he was slowly edging into the clearing, trident held carefully in his hands, Katniss was lining up a shot to take him out from her hidden position.

She hesitated at the last second.

“Kill him,” someone muttered darkly. “Capitol slut deserves it.”

It was then, of course, that Finnick finally spotted Katniss and froze in place, altering the grip on his trident to make it seem significantly less intimidating than it had moments before.

“Katniss…” he murmured softly, meeting her eyes. “Remember who the real enemy is.”

“What is going on?”

On the screen Katniss slowly lowered her bow, almost perfectly in time with Enobaria slashing a long line across Peeta's back as he failed to move out of her way fast enough.

High above all of their heads the clouds started gathering rapidly, dark grey clouds that were already flashing with the powerful lightning which was obviously about to hit the tree.

“Wait. Didn't they say that hits at midnight?” one of the youngest runners gasped loudly, turning to old Solomon who was stood next to her. “It's not midnight is it?”

“They mess with the time inside the Arena, lass, you know that.”

“Oh…yeah…”

On the screen Katniss makes no attempt to hide the moment she figures out what Beetee was trying to do, her wide eyes glancing back and forth between the wire and the storm.

“Katniss, get away from that tree!”

It came as no surprise to anyone that she ignored Finnick's shout, hurrying across to where Beetee still lay unconscious on the ground and began wrapping the end of the blackened wire, pulled quickly from the wooden spear, around the deadly tip of her arrow.

“Katniss! Get away from that tree!”

Again she ignored him, rising to her feet and taking aim seemingly at nothing.

“What is she…?”

With a simply twitch of her fingers she let the arrow fly high up into the air just as the first bolt of lightning struck the tree to her left with enough force to send both Katniss and Finnick flying through the air with identical cries of pain as their bodies hitting the ground.

The wire glowed brighter and brighter until suddenly the entire screen went black.

“What the…?”

Silence descended upon the room as they waited for the screen to flicker back to life…

Nothing happened.

The silence stretched on and was only broken by the sound of footsteps pounding their way up the
external stairs, closer and closer, until finally a man literally tumbled into the room.

“They’ve brought down the Arena!” he announced, gesturing towards the blank screen. “The rebels have brought down the Arena! Fighting’s broken out all over the District!”

“What?!”

“The Peacekeepers are being overwhelmed already!” the unfamiliar young man continued with a deep laugh. “This is it, for real this time! We’re at war with the Capitol!”

“Fuck…”

**A/N** Phew! That was a long and challenging chapter to write but I wanted to get the Quarter Quell over and done with in one chapter rather than dragging it out for too long. Hope you all enjoyed it. Comments & Suggestions are very much appreciated. X

**A/N2** Due to the fact that my different Hunger Games stories have become linked together I had to make a few alterations to this chapter. It’s not a major change, per say, but it’s important to one of my other stories. Basically this a longwinded way of saying that Gloss didn’t die during the 75th Hunger Games and will return. X
**Chapter Nine**

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

**WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!**

Stars Look Down

**Chapter Nine**

“The Capitol won't care who they kill,” Commander Paylor announced to the crowd of people willing to join the fight, all of them armed in one way or another be it with a seized Peacekeeper weapon or a length of pipe. “Therefore we must find some way to get the non-combatants, the young, the elderly and the sick, somewhere where they will be safe.”

“What about the cellars?” someone piped up. “Won't they be safe there?”

Commander Paylor shook her head.

“There won't be enough space for everyone,” she explained. “Not every building has a suitable cellar. We can use them as shelters for us, the fighters, but not the civilians.”

Other ideas were put forwards and dismissed just as quickly as the first.

“This is hopeless…” Mikhail muttered. “They won't be safe so long as they're inside this District, it's as simple as that, so we should be focusing on figuring out how to defend it.”

“Why don't they go outside then?” Willard asked absentmindedly as he played with strap of Leroy's rifle where it crossed across his brother’s back, pouting when his brother spun around to look at him and in doing so dislodging his hands. “Leroy, I was…”

“What did you say?” Leroy all but demanded. “Willard…”

He wasn't there only one leaning in to hear the simple-minded boy’s suggestion.

“I said why don't they go outside then now can I have the strap back to play with?” Willard repeated impatiently as he pulled on his brother’s arm, trying to turn him. “It's all twisted…”

Several mouths dropped open in shock.

Mikhail let out a bark of surprised laughter.

“Willard! You're a genius!”

“…no I'm not…” Willard mumbled, shaking his head sadly. “Shouldn't say that. It’s mean.”
“No, honestly, Willard,” Mikhail hurried to reassure the younger boy that he wasn’t being sarcastic like some people were when they address him. “You’re an absolute genius!”

Giving the confused boy a pat on the shoulder Mikhail pushed his way through the crowd until he was stood only a couple of feet away from the worried looking Commander Paylor.

“Commander?” he called out as loudly as he could, drawing her attention along with almost everyone else’s. “I know what we need to do to keep the non-combatants safe.”

“Oh?” someone who had already made a suggestion which had been quickly dismissed as useless sneered across at him. “Come on then. What's this brilliant idea of yours, boy?”

Mikhail glared across at the older man.

“They won’t be safe so long as they're inside the District,” Mikhail explained, receiving confused nods in response. “I didn't see it at first either, the solution, because it's almost too simple. If they won't be safe inside the District then we need to get them out of it.”

He'd never seen a crowd as large as this fall silent so quickly outside of mandatory viewing.

“And just where do you suggest we put everyone?”

Mikhail’s mind raced as he struggled to come up with an answer for Commander Paylor, dismissing several ideas immediately before something equally as simple as the original suggestion appeared in the back of his mind only to grow and grow and grow.

“We can spread people out into several camps concealed within the trees to the south of the District, outside the wall,” he explained quickly, gesturing vaguely in the direction he spoke of although his eyes never left Commander Paylor's. “There will be plenty of materials to use to make the camps, plenty of wood for fires, plenty of animals to eat...”

A few people around him murmured softly in response to his suggestions.

“And it shouldn't be too hard to conceal the camps from sight as the trees are so thick and dense,” he continued, relieved to notice that Commander Paylor was beginning to smile ever so slightly, just the corners of her mouth turning upwards. “The Capitol will never expect us to do this. We always do so badly in the Games because we’re a completely urban District. They'll expect us to be too afraid of what's beyond the wall to risk going beyond it.”

“Mikhail, isn't it?” she enquired softly, her smile blossoming completely as he nodded in confirmation. “I remember the help you gave us during the first rebellion. And now you've helped us again. This is the best solution we have to keep the civilians safe for the future.”

After that it was a quick round of planning, mostly focused on how they were going to break through the thick wall surrounding the District, whilst also selecting people to act as guards at each of the camps, mostly people with young families including his uncle Benjen.

“I want all of the non-combatants evacuated from the District by sundown tomorrow,” Commander Paylor ordered once the various jobs had been allocated. “Get to it.”

And so that was how Mikhail found himself in the centre of the housing sector, working alongside the rest of the squad he'd been assigned to evacuate the non-combatants.

“Take only what you can carry!” he called out across the noise of the men, women and children flowing out of the apartment block directly in front of where he was balanced on a low wall so as
to be seen. “There will be no electrify where you are going! We have no idea how long you are going to be there so be prepared to wrap up warm when winter arrives!”

He heard the familiar shine of the hovercrafts engines before he saw them, flying low and quick across the housing sector heading towards the northwest corner of the District where various buildings which made up the school were located, separated from the rest of the District by two tunnels which cut underneath the fast flowing river which had split long ago to create a large ‘Y’ shape, separating all three sectors of the District from the others.

Seconds later they heard the all too familiar sound of explosions and saw plumes of thick black smoke rising high into the air and Mikhail was eternally thankful that the idea to place the non-combatants in the school had been overturned long before he'd stepped forwards with his idea or else everyone cowering around him would have already been killed.

“Make your way towards the south tunnel with all of your belongings!”

Of the three tunnels which had been created to allow the people of District Eight to get around swiftly and efficiently the south tunnel, the one which linked the housing sector with the factory sector, was by far the biggest as it was always the busiest which was lucky as the civilians were now rushing towards it like they were caught up in a stampede.

Once on the other side another squad was in charge of guiding them to the narrow exit which had been created in the wall surrounding the District and Mikhail did not envy them the job of controlling the frightened masses so that they didn't crush each other to death.

Eugene Foster, his squad leader, appeared at in front of him suddenly.

“Peacekeepers have blown the wall to the north of the school and are amassing their troops on the grounds of the school,” he passed on the news one of the runners had just given him, his eyes scanning the frightened crowd as his finger moved to rest of his guns trigger. “Keep your eyes open and be ready to move out quickly. And get these people moving!”

Eugene was the only member of ‘Squad 16’ that Mikhail hadn't known before the rebellion.

In terms of age Mikhail’s father, Brandon was the most senior member of their squad at forty-two but had turned down the offer of leadership when it had been initially offered to him as had Ella’s father, Nate, who wasn't much younger than him at forty leaving it up to Eugene to step up despite being only thirty-five and never having been in a position of leadership before as he'd worked on the shop floor of one of the packaging factories.

Felyx, Donovan and Misha came next at twenty-one, nineteen and eighteen respectively.

Juno, Belle, Ella, Leroy, Willard and Mikhail himself made up the rest of the squad despite everyone’s concern that Willard would be more of a hindrance than a help.

“He was the first one to think of putting the civilians outside of the District,” Mikhail had argued instantly. “I just took his idea and ran with it. He won't be a hindrance.”

He really hoped he hadn't made a huge mistake but Leroy had been grateful for his help.

When the second round of explosions began it was obvious that these were different, smaller but no less terrifying and significantly closer to their current position.

“Get these people out of here!”

It didn't take much to get the terrified crowd to begin running towards the south tunnel as fast as
their legs could take them, Mikhail and rest of his squad staying back to make sure that they got everybody out of the buildings as they’d been instructed.

Pretty soon the explosions were accompanied by gunfire, both getting closer and closer to their current position until finally the Peacekeepers appeared, rushing around one of the apartment blocks as they opened fire on the crowd without a moment’s hesitation.

Mikhail dropped down behind the wall he had been stood on and began firing back, trying to ignore the screams of the civilians as they were injured or, worse, killed.

“This is hopeless!” Nate screamed from where he had taken cover. “We need to pull back!”

He was right.

Eugene nodded shortly, prompting them to break cover and run after the last of the civilians, jumping over the countless bodies now littering the ground in order to get away.

Sprinting after the others Mikhail stumbled in someone’s blood, his stomach churning at the very thought, he spotted a young boy sobbing loudly as he crawled away from the body of his tragically young mother, his right trouser leg soaked with an alarming amount of blood.

He didn’t even pause to think before altering his direction of travel, moving the sling of his rifle further onto his shoulder in order to secure it as he scooped down and grabbed the boy, lifting him up into the cradle of his arms without even breaking his stride.

A bullet struck the ground where the boy had just been stretched out.

Rounding the corner of a building he was relieved to see a line of rebel soldiers, guns raised in anticipation of the fight that was coming towards them, and he put on a last burst of speed to get himself out of their line of fire before the Peacekeepers reached them.

It came down to a matter of seconds during which he stumbled once, his foot catching on a piece of rubble, and he was forced to turn his stumble into a slide in order to make it, dropping down under his comrades line of fire so that they could open fire on their enemy.

“Fuck…” he grunted, climbing back his feet with the boy still arms and running away from the fierce gun battle now taking place in a crouched position so as to keep himself as small a target as physically possible. “What sort of cowards open fire on women and children?”

“Peacekeepers.”

Working together they herded the terrified non-combatants to the hole in the wall, handing them over to the Squad waiting on the other side to take them to the various camps before helping those who had been wounded to make their way to the hospital which had been set up in Factory Eleven, the cotton mill having been stripped bare and filled with cots and medical supplies in preparation for the casualties they all knew were going to happen.

“We’ll take the boy now,” one of the women who had volunteered to act as a doctor or nurse at the hospital murmured, hurrying forwards to scoop the sobbing boy out of his arms. “Might want to get that leg of yours taken care of before it becomes infected.”

His leg?

Looking down he found that the slide he had taken on the uneven ground had had the unfortunate side effect of tearing through his trousers and stripping off some of his skin.
“Ow…” he muttered as it started to throb with pain now that he had become aware of it, gratefully accepting the help offered by another nurse who guided him down onto a chair and crouched beside him to assess the injury. “Just clean it up and stick a bandage on it.”

She nodded, hurrying away to get the supplies she needed.

He emerged from the hospital an hour later to the news that the Peacekeepers were digging in along the offensive line they had created, running right along the water’s edge on the other side of the river and cutting through the housing sector, their advance having been halted by the various actions of the rebel forces who had set up their own defensive line along their side of the river which included blowing up their entrance to the North Tunnel.

In the time it had taken for his leg to be treated his District had been split in two.

After that first day the fighting became pretty much constant, each side attempting to outmanoeuvre the other in the housing sector which caused the area now known as “No-Mans-Land” (the space better the Peacekeepers offensive line and the rebels defensive line) to fluctuate in size whilst suffering a horrific amount of damage from countless attacks.

At any given point there were seven active Squads deployed throughout their half of the District with three Squads kept ready in reserve while those not on duty either helped around the District or were sent out to one of the forest camps for some much needed “down time” away from the fighting and a strict rota was adhered to in order to keep it fair.

The embankments along the river had been split up into four sections; Alpha to the west of the North Tunnel, the North Tunnel itself or rather what was left of it, Bravo stretching out between the North and South Tunnels and the South Tunnel which was a key strategic point as it linked the factory sector with their half of the housing sector.

Each of these sections had a Squad assigned to them and there were two in reserve.

Charlie, Delta and Echo were significantly smaller stretches of the line but as they were on the edge of “No-Mans-Land” they suffered significantly more attacks and so the increased numbers in the smaller area was definitely necessary or they wouldn't hold out for long.

Each Squad that had been assigned to these three areas over the last few weeks had suffered heavy losses, mostly due to a couple of Peacekeeper sharpshooters, and on more than one occasion their reserves had had to be called in to maintain the security of the line.

And then there were the bombing raids.

At first the Capitol only bombed them at night, their hovercraft flying over them in the darkness and raining death and destruction down upon them as they struggled to find shelter in what remained the various factory buildings and apartment blocks.

Then, after these night raids didn't break the rebels spirit as they'd hoped, they'd begin bombing at any time during the day or night but never at the same time two days running.

They became unpredictable which was significantly more dangerous for the rebels.

As a result they started marking where instant shelters were around the District so that, should a hovercraft be spotted, they knew where to head for and wouldn't be caught out in the open when the payload was dropped on whatever building was that days target.
Only the hospital had gone untouched and that, they suspected, was only so that after the fact they
could claim to have shown mercy to the people inside the large building with the Red Cross on a
white background painted on each of its external walls and its flat roof.

Mikhail wasn't the only one to believe that the worst detail a Squad could be given was in fact one
of the least dangerous, one that was unlikely to result in death.

Burying the dead.

They'd dug four large mass graves in the woods far away from the forest camps and every day
one poor Squad had to carry the dead from the hospital to their final resting place.

It wasn't dangerous, no, but it was morally destructive and soul destroying.

The first time Squad 16 had been given the detail not a single one of them had been able to stop
crying as they laid the dozen or so people to rest in an unmarked grave, stripped of their
belongings which might be useful in the coming day of the fight and covered with only a thin
layer of dirt so that the next group could be laid out on top of them.

Mikhail had lost what little had been in his stomach and hadn't felt truly hungry for days.

He hadn't been the only one.

It was a miracle the forest camps had remained undetected, what with the Capitol sending their
hovercraft directly over them to reach the District sometimes, but the camouflage had been
perfected so that from the air you couldn't even tell there were any makeshift buildings or shelters
and those living in the camps were well practised at hiding out of sight.

Things were looking pretty dire, their ammunition running dangerously low when they finally
made contact with District 13, the supposed leaders of this rebellion, and were able to put in a
desperate request for whatever supplies they could afford to give them.

“Your request has been noted, District Eight,” the cracklings voice at the end of the radio
responded. “It will be processed as quickly as possible. We will keep you informed.”

Almost a full week later they received news that their supplies would be “dropped” that day and,
just as they'd promised, shortly after the latest bombing attack by the Capitol a second hovercraft
was spotted in the sky only this one had a Mockingjay painted on its wings.

Hundreds of tiny parachutes fluttered out of the vehicle, floating elegantly to the ground and they
were gathered up they found medical supplies and ammunition.

The only thing that District 13 had declined to send was any food.

~ * ~ * ~

With the arrival of several pounds of explosives and detonators it had been decided that it was
about time that they struck back at the Peacekeepers and Commander Paylor proposed that a
group of volunteers made their way across the river and plant explosives at any strategically
important points they could find, particularly around the school which had become the
Peacekeepers headquarters since the fighting had broken out in the District.

“This is a dangerous mission,” she explained seriously to those gathered for the briefing, all of the
Squads apart from those on duty. “There's a high chance that those ego manage to cross the river
won't return. That is why I have made the decision to ask for volunteers.”
Mikhail would have put his hand up along with all the rest had Juno not launched herself at him, pleading with him not to go as she couldn't bear to be parted from him like that.

The attack was planned out to the smallest degree and Mikhail, along with the rest of his Squad, found himself stationed in the Alpha stretch of the line where half of the volunteers would be departing from in small boats constructed out of various materials.

On the journey across the volunteers only had the current to contend with and within into time at all were scampering up the opposite bank, avoiding the Peacekeeper patrols and vanishing into what was pretty much unknown territory towards their assigned target.

The school.

The rest of the volunteers had departed from the Bravo embankment and were tasked with making it into the occupied areas of the housing sector and taking out whatever they could.

“I thought fighting was bad enough but waiting?” Mikhail muttered to anyone who was listening as they all remained perfectly still in their various positions, sir rifles trained on the opposite bank where they wait for anything to happen. “Waiting is so much worse…”

In the end it was the sound of gunfire coming from the housing sector which ended their long wait, followed closely by a series of explosions as the second group of volunteers detonated their charges early so as to still implement them despite obviously being caught.

“Bloody hell…”

A cheer from the rebels manning their line in the housing sector echoed through the night air, covering the noise suddenly coming from the other bank as the first group of volunteers frantically sprinted down the embankments to the boats having successfully completely their mission without bring caught, setting the timers on the detonators for dawn.

Hopefully the Peacekeepers would believe that the attack on the housing sector was the only one and wouldn't start checking the school for explosives before that time arrived.

For once luck was most definitely on the side of the rebels as, a couple of minutes after the sun appeared on the horizon, the school was bombarded with over a dozen explosions.

The large building shook ominously once the last explosion had sounded and then, with everyone cheering wildly from their side of the river, they watched the old building folded in on itself like a house of cards as the poorly maintained walls collapsed due to the damage.

It was a significant victory for the rebels.

Unfortunately the bombing they suffered in retaliation was the worst one so far, lasting over two hours and flattening almost every factory building which had previously been left standing apart from the hospital which now stood almost completely alone amidst the ruins.

~ * ~ * ~

Sitting on the ground outside what had effectively become their headquarters Mikhail and countless others waited rather impatiently for the morning briefing the end so that their various Squad leaders would emerge and put them out their misery, telling them what their assignments were for the next few days and whether or not it was an easy or a difficult one.

Considering they hadn't been posted out to watch the line in the housing sector in a while he had a feeling that was where they'd be going, out to the most dangerous part of the entire District as
there wasn’t a river separating the two forces, just a thin stretch of land.

“What's taking them so long this morning?”

“I would imagine someone's arguing against whatever their assignment is.”

“Or something could have happened.”

Mikhail sighed.

Morale was beginning to suffer following a week of intense bombing raids and increased fighting resulting in more casualties than ever, all without any obvious signs of progress.

People were beginning to wonder if an end would ever be in sight and that was dangerous.

“Juno?” he muted softly, leaning towards his fiancé. “Do you remember that song Adya used to sing for us when it was a particularly bad day at school or during the Games?”

“Um…”

“Are we downhearted? No! Then let you voices ring…” he sang softly, relieved when she instantly began nodding as she recognised the simple tune. “Fancy giving it a go? I'm going to change a couple of the lyrics but I think this lot could do with a bit of…cheering up.”

She glanced around at the mixture of gloomy or frustrated faces.

“I think you might be right.”

Linking his hand with hers he cleared his throat and began to sing loud enough to be heard, his mind racing as he decided what to change the necessary lyrics to when the time came.

“Are we downhearted?”

“No!”

Juno’s cheerful response took more people by surprise than his actual singing had, particularly when she started gesturing for other people to join in with her part of the song.

“Then let your voices ring,
   And altogether sing.
Are we downhearted?”

“No!”

Unsurprisingly their own Squad was the loudest group to join in but they certainly weren't the only ones, several people grinning across at them as Mikhail continued with the first of his carefully altered lyrics, hoping that the words he'd chosen would fit with the tune.

“Not while the Mockingjay still lives.”

A loud cheer almost drowned of the musical response Juno was leading, more and more of the people searching out his face in the crowd and turning their bodies to watch him as his friends pushed and prodded him until he stood up, rifle slung over his shoulder.

“No likely!”

“While we have friends for company,
And weapons in our hands we need not fret.
It's a long, long way to the Capitol,
But we're not downhearted yet!”

The rallying cry which followed the end of the brief song was enough to make him stumble back against the wall at his back, a somewhat goofy smile blossoming on his face.

“Sing it again, lad!”

By the time Commander Paylor and the Squad leaders emerged from their meeting, curious about all the noise, they found the crowd of people on their feet singing along with the entire song having gone through it enough times to pick up the words themselves.

Misha had also pulled out the battered old recording devise and was moving through the crowd, catching the various expressions on the crowd wore as they sung loud and proud.

“Are we downhearted? No!
Then let your voices ring,
And altogether sing.
Are we downhearted? No!
Not while the Mockingjay still lives. Not likely!
While we have friends for company,
And weapons in our hands we need not fret.
It's a long, long way to the Capitol,
But we're not downhearted yet!”

They ended up singing it through a couple more times, Commander Paylor grinning broadly as she nodded her head in approval and joined in, before eventually they all split up into their various Squads and hurried away to complete the assignments they had been given.

Mikhail had been correct in his assumption as to where they would be heading.

“We’re to relieve Squad 27 out at Echo and hold the line there for the next four days at which time we will be relieved,” Eugene announced as they group gathered together, checking over their weapons and the spare ammunition they had stored in their pockets. “As you are no doubt aware the fighting has been particularly bad out in Echo, it being the furthest point of the line so keep your wits about you and keep your heads down.”

They made their way through the ruins of their District in single file, rifles in hand and ducking behind whatever shelter was available to them once they emerged on the other side of the South Tunnel and began making their way through Charlie and Delta.

As per usual they kept up a remarkably cheerful conversation, teasing one another about various things although a large portion of the teasing was laid upon him this time for the song, even his father who was usually completely mission orientated joining in for once.

It pained him to see the man his father had become following the loss of his wife and daughter, the loss of his home and his job, the loss of his self-perceived security.

He was a much valued member of their Squad but his personality was so drastically altered that there were times that Mikhail thought he was fighting alongside a stranger rather than the father he had loved and respected all of his life, looking up to him as a pillar of strength.

Sure, they’d had their differences but it was usually to do with Mikhail’s safety such as when he’d protested his involvement in the first uprising and now that none of them would ever be safe again
until this was over once and for all the subject had never come up again.

Arriving at Echo they relieved Squad 27 who looked absolutely exhausted, their eyes somewhat glazed as they hurriedly fell back from the front line after a difficult few days.

They doubled be going to straight to a rest period at one of the forest camps.

*Echo* was unique for two main reasons when compared with the other sections.

It had multiple places for people to shelter and fire from, the area having been where a couple of the smaller apartment blocks had once stood close together before they were destroyed leaving only rubble behind in various heights, shapes and levels of stability.

Unfortunately the same could be said for the stretch of “No-Mans-Land” it overlooked, the same buildings having created far too many places for the enemy to hide should they attack.

Nate, Donovan and Willard were assigned to the point closest to “No-Mans-Land” sheltering behind what had once been someone's bedroom wall, the yellow wallpaper still clinging to the brickwork despite the level of destruction it had gone through recently.

Next closest to the line were Eugene, Belle, Felyx, Ella and Leroy who were all tucked away inside the almost intact remains of one of the apartments from the ground level of the building, using the empty window panes as firing positions and the walls and suitable cover.

This left Mikhail in the group furthest from the line, hidden behind an enormous chunk of debris which, although not very high, was very thick compared to the other bits of rubble.

Misha, Juno and his father were with him and they were the ones who had been tasked with cooking their meals and preparing their hot drinks over an open fire when the time came.

They never got the opportunity to test their fire making skills.

Just as the group were tucking into their midday rations, simple sandwiches made of stale bread with only a minimal amount of filling, the Peacekeepers opened for all along the line.

It was chaos.

Snatching up his rifle Mikhail attempted to fire back alongside the others but they were being attacked by a vastly superior force, bullets impacting the rubble around them almost constantly making it practically impossible to move enough to fire back.

There was nothing they could do.

*A/N* I know. I'm a horrible human being for leaving it where I did but it works. The song I used towards the end of the chapter was “Are We Downhearted Yet?” which was popular during the First World War but obviously I had to tweak a few of the lyrics to get it to work within the confines of this story. I will warn you that it is a rather catchy tune and it has been stuck in my head since I wrote it into the chapter. Lol. Comments welcome. X
Chapter Ten

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

CHAPTER WARNINGS – Violence/Bloodshed, (Original) Character Death(s), Torture and Rape

Chapter Ten

Pressing himself against the chunk of rubble they were now using as cover Mikhail pushed his arms up over the top and opened fire blindly for a moment before finally risking poking his head up to take a look at the situation as his father and Misha were doing to his left.

Juno had crumbled in on herself and was sobbing brokenly into her knees.

He knew he should be focusing his attention on their enemy, assessing their positions to see if there was a way to drive them back but all he could do was stare at Willard where the poor boy lay on his back, his head turned to look towards his brother as his blood flowed freely from the gaping mess that had once been his neck, pooling around his body.

One arm was outstretched towards where Leroy was fighting against Eugene, inhuman screams escaping his lips as he tried desperately to get to his brother despite the danger.

As if sensing that something terrible was about to happen the sky had begun to cloud over, plunging the battlefield into a semi-darkened state just as the Peacekeepers stopped firing.

“Let me go to him…” Leroy begged hysterically. “Please…they're not firing any more…”

“They just want to trap us out in the open when we move,” Eugene growled, tightening his grip on Leroy as the hysterical boy continued to struggle against him. “Leroy! Stop!”

Leroy couldn't stop.

The other members of the squad, Mikhail included, watched in unconcealed horror as the teenager slipped free of Eugene’s hold and darted out towards his brother’s prone body.

A single shot echoed through the chilling silence.

Leroy crumpled as though he were a puppet whose strings had been cut, slumping down across his brothers chest seconds after his head had exploded in a mess of blood and bone.
Witnessing the brutal deaths of her boyfriend and his little brother was too much for Ella, not that anyone could blame her, and she began to scream from where Felyx held her against his strong chest, his hands forcing her to look away from the intermingled bodies.

“Ella!” Eugene called out, scrambling across to kneel in front of her. “Ella!”

A burst of gunfire forced Mikhail to duck back down behind the piece of rubble they were hiding behind after one impacted the brickwork a couple of inches from his hand, a sharp piece of rubble flying up to strike his cheek just as he allowed his body to drop out of sight.

“Mikhail!” his father called out frantically from where he had ducked down himself. “Mi–”

“I'm fine,” he called out in response, swiping his hand across his injured cheek to check how much damage had been done, finding only a little smear of blood. “It's just a scratch…”

Ella’s scream cut off abruptly.

Crawling around Misha who was frantically attempting to un-jam his rifle with hands that were trembling almost too much to function properly Mikhail pressed himself to his fathers side so that both of them could peer around the corner of their makeshift shelter without exposing themselves, the position of the various pieces of rubble allowing them to see into where Eugene, Belle, Felyx and Ella were hiding behind the almost completely intact wall.

Ella was cradling her cheek, blinking at Eugene in shock as the older man lowered his hand.

“As you were,” Eugene murmured in a tone that left no room for argument, confirming why he had been made Squad Leader. “I need someone to run and get help. We can't hold out for long if they continue to attack us like they did just now. There's too many of them. I need to you to fetch the reserves.”

“I can't…” Ella gasping, still sobbing slightly as she shook her head. “I can't…”

“Yes, you can,” Eugene told her firmly. “You are one of our fastest runners.”

“I can't…”

“Ella, if you don't do this then we're all dead!” Eugene snapped, his voice sharp enough to make both Ella and Belle flinch away from him. “Now you are going to do you, you are going to fetch the reserves and then you are going to report to headquarters that the Peacekeepers have amassed in Echo and will likely try to push through soon. Understand?”

“I…”

“Nod your head if you understand, Ella,” Eugene ordered, smiling tightly when she nodded automatically, her body trembling from head to toe. “Run fast. We're counting on you.”

It was obvious that her speed was only part of the reason that Eugene had chosen to send her given that having someone that hysterical in a combat zone was not a good idea.

“Covering fire on three,” Eugene called out as he primed his rifle, prompting both Mikhail and his father to scramble back to their previous positions. “One…two…three! Run, Ella!”

Almost as soon as they opened fire the Peacekeepers were returning it, their superior numbers making it easy for them to drive the various members of Squad 16 back into their hiding places sporadically but they all kept popping back up to fire when they could.
Whilst hiding from a hail of bullets which had gotten far too close to him for his liking Mikhail glanced across to where Ella was sprinting away from them, her body hunched over so as to make her as smaller target as possible as she weaved from side to side.

She had almost reached the next available piece of shelter when a single shot rang out louder than all the others, similar to the one which had killed Leroy, and she let out a scream of pain as a bullet passed through her right thigh, clipping the bone on its way.

“Ella!”

Felyx was up and running before anyone could stop him, his huge frame making an obvious target but somehow he managed to avoid everything they aimed his way until he reached her, grabbing her by her arms so that he could drag her towards the nearest piece of rubble.

“Shit!” Eugene hissed, knocking his head back against the rubble as he paused in reloading his weapon, assessing the situation they were now in. “Felyx! Get her out of here! Send in the reserves and then get her to the hospital! Bring back as much help as you can!”

“They’re pushing through!” Nate called out suddenly, his voice tight with panic and Mikhail could understand why when he stood up to open fire once more and found himself gazing out at a sea of white uniforms as at least a hundred Peacekeepers hurried across the expanse of “No-Mans-Land” in almost perfect lines. “We need to fall back!”

“We can’t fall back!” Eugene snapped sharply. “We can’t let them break through the line!”

Firing at the advancing horde Mikhail became aware of movement beside him as Juno finally recovered her senses enough to stand beside him and open fire for the first time, tears rolling down her cheeks as she aimed as best she could, trying to avoid the body armour.

Another single shot rang out above the others, causing Mikhail to wonder if they didn't have a crack shot hidden away somewhere with a superior vantage point so as to take them out.

Juno crying out in pain put an end to all of his thoughts for a long moment as he dropped his rifle in order to catch her body as she slumped towards the ground, dropping down to his knees with a fearful cry as he saw the bloodstain growing larger and larger on her jacket.

“No…” he gasped, cradling her body with only one arm so that he could press his hand against the wound, desperately trying to halt the blood flow. “No…no…no…Juno…”

She sucked in a shaking lungful of air, the colour rapidly draining from her skin, her eyes flickering wildly from side to side just as Mikhail was struck by the sensation of something warm trickling down his forearm where it was wrapped carefully around her back.

It took him only a quick glance to realise that the bullet had passed straight through her chest and that while the entry wound was relatively small the exit wound was anything but.

“No…” he whimpered, his own body going cold as she grasped weakly at the front of his jacket, blood trickling inexplicably from the corner of her mouth. “You can't…Juno…”

“M…Mik…” she trailed off, her eyes fluttering closed for a long moment before flying open as he hands clenched against his chest. “Love you! Love you…so much…don’t…don’t…”

She gasped suddenly, choking loudly before he body went completely limp in his arms, only his hand on the back of her neck holding her head in place as the life drained from her eyes.

“No…” he sobbed brokenly as he realised what had happened, leaning down to press a gentle kiss
against her unresponsive lips. “Juno…you can’t…you can’t leave me…please…”

He received no response.

She was gone.

“No…”

Gazing down into her lifeless eyes he felt something snap with him, something which he knew
without a doubt had something to do with his sanity as before he even realised what he was doing
he had lowered her body to the ground, taken up both her rifle as well as his own and had stood
tall, almost completely exposed as he'd opened fire with both weapons.

His reckless method was quite effective, Peacekeeper after Peacekeeper falling under his chaotic
spray of bullets as he let out an inhuman scream of rage and pain, one which lasted almost as long
as the rounds of ammunition in the automatic rifles did and left him gasping.

Misha grabbed him by his ankles, sweeping his legs out from underneath him just as a bullet sized
through the air right where his head had been before gravity had dragged him down.

“Are you completely fucking insane?!?” his friend bemoaned sharply, punching him in the centre
of his chest for good measure. “You're going to get yourself killed firing like that!”

“I don't ca–”

Mikhail's choked voice was cut off by an explosion, dust and debris flying up into the air as Nate
and Donovan let out simultaneous cries of pain before going worryingly silent.

Now it was Misha's turn to let out a horrified scream seconds before a second explosion went off,
this one larger than the first as it tore Leroy and Willard’s bodies apart, throwing different parts in
different directions whilst peppering Eugene and Belle with shrapnel.

“Donovan?!”

Misha abruptly released his hold of Mikhail, scurrying towards the edge of their shelter only to be
grabbed by Brandon and held tight against the older man’s chest just as something thudded against
the top of the rubble above Mikhail before rolling towards them.

“Move!”

Brandon’s panicked cry came too late the grenade exploded just before it could drop down on top
of Mikhail, sending fragments of rubble and shrapnel thudding into their bodies.

Dazed by the force of the explosion and in more pain than he'd ever experienced before Mikhail
could only reach weakly for the rifle closest to him when their position was suddenly overrun by
Peacekeepers who quickly set about restraining their prisoners whilst securing their newly
acquired position with the kind of military precision that the rebels often lacked.

Almost as soon as they’d set up their new line of the defence the Squad manning the rebel line in
the Delta sector opened fire on them having seen everything that had happened.

“Get these prisoners back to the forward command post,” one of the Peacekeepers ordered
sharply, his voice distorted by the full helmet he wore but still full of authority. “And send word
for Varro and Duro. Let them know that their services will be required after all.”

Despite having their arms bound behind their back all five of the prisoners struggled as they were
hauled to their feet and dragged away from the bodies of their friends and lovers, none more so than Mikhail and Misha, the older boy letting out a broken cry when he caught sight of what was left of the young man he had loved following the first explosion.

It didn't take much to overpower them, wounded as they were, and all too soon they found themselves in Peacekeeper territory being led into what remained of an apartment block.

They were dragged into what had once been someone's home, the interior walls mostly intact unlike the outer wall which had been blasted open at some point leaving a jagged hole where the window had once been, the tattered remains of the curtain fluttering wildly.

Eugene, by far the worst injured of the first of them with a large piece of metal sticking out of his side, was pushed to the ground first and his hands, bound behind his back as they were, were connected to the thick tube of the old-fashioned radiator connected to one wall.

He was the closest to the exit, probably because they doubted he would be able to escape even if he did get free, and Belle was placed next to him, her body wracked with loud sobs.

Mikhail was pushed down next and he couldn't help but hiss loudly as his hands were tied to the radiator, the uncomfortable position pulling on a wound he'd suffered to his shoulder.

His father was pushed down next to him, stifling a cry of pain, and then finally Misha was tied to the end of the radiator farthest from the door but nearest the large hole in the wall.

They were left alone then, the Peacekeepers vacating the small apartment although they made a big show of stationing two of them outside the door before firmly pulling it shut.

“What…what are they going to do to us?” Belle choked out through her sobs as soon as they were alone and Mikhail wanted nothing more than to put his arms around the obviously terrified girl but could do nothing but press his shoulder against hers. “Oh God…what if…”

“They're going to interrogate us,” Eugene muttered firmly, his words coming out clipped as he struggled to cope with the pain. “They'll want information…numbers…locations…that sort of thing…we can't…we can't give it to them…we can't give them anything…”

“And by interrogate you mean torture…”

Mikhail turned to stare fearfully at his father who had spoken the words so apathetically, so emotionlessly that anyone who didn't know him could have thought him completely unaffected by the terrifying statement which had slipped past his own lips.

He wasn't unaffected.

Mikhail could see the fear in his father's eyes but it wasn't fear for himself.

It was fear for his son.

“We have to…stay strong…” Eugene gasped firmly, the fear in his pain filled eyes contradicting his statement. “Anything we give them will lead…to more lives being lost…our friends…our families…we can't give them anything…no matter what they do to us…”

“I can't…” Belle whimpered. “I can't…”

“You have to…”

It was then that the door swung open, the handle smacking into the wall with a loud thud as two
figures dressed in the familiar white Peacekeeper uniform strode inside calmly.

They were followed by four more Peacekeepers, their frames much smaller, and these four moved to stand in the corners of the main room of the small apartment while the first two Peacekeepers laid their rifles down on the battered dining table to the left of the radiator.

What followed them was an obvious show of dominance from their interrogators, the two of them taking their time to strip off their helmets and moulded body armour until they wore nothing but their undershirts, trousers and boots which were all white, of course.

Unusually for Peacekeepers they both had facial hair, the larger of the two actually sporting a full beard which was obviously very well cared for while the smaller had a moustache.

“So these are some of the fearsome rebel fighters,” the smaller one chuckled as he dropped casually down into the dust-covered armchair. “I must say I am yet to be impressed.”

“I don’t know, Duro,” the larger one countered as he dropped down onto the equally dusty sofa, bringing his feet up to rest on the small table upon which sat a holo projector as he laughed across at the prisoners. “The girl seems absolutely terrifying, don’t you think?”

“Oh, yes, Varro,” Duro agreed with his own cruel laugh. “Absolutely terrifying.”

Belle’s response was to hide her tear-streaked face in her knees which unfortunately only served to make the two Peacekeepers reclining on the sofa and chair laugh even harder.

“Which one’ll break first, do you reckon?” Duro wondered, pointedly looking each of the prisoners up and down before settling his gaze on Eugene. “I reckon it’ll be him on the end.”

Varro snorted.

“Are we talking about my method or yours?” he asked, leaning back and casually placing his hands behind his neck as he took his turn studying the five of them. “If we’re talking about your method, my friend, I think you’d be right. If we’re talking about my method…”

Mikhail found himself flinching inexplicably as the Peacekeepers gaze became hard and emotionless and he had to look away, unable to meet the cold gaze any longer.

“…then I’d have to go with the boy in the middle,” he finished, his voice filled with so much confidence that Mikhail felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. “I’ll leave him till last.”

“Who do you want first, then?”

Finally he looked away from Mikhail, humming thoughtfully, before a cruel smirk appeared on his face as he nodded towards where Belle still had her face pressed against her knees.

“I’ll take the girl.”

Belle’s head snapped up, her fearful eyes meeting his.

One of the Peacekeepers who had been waiting silently moved forwards, releasing Belle from the radiator and dragging her up to stand in front of Duro who made a big show of looking her up and down, sitting forwards with his hands resting on his thighs.

“Take her into the bedroom,” he eventually ordered, nodding towards one of the two doors inside the apartment, his words bringing forth both verbal and physical protests from the four men still bound to the radiator. “No need for that. You’ll all get a turn later on…”
Rising from his seat Varro made a big show of unbuckling his belt as he slowly followed them into the bedroom, smirking back over his shoulder before kicking the door shut.

Belle began screaming only moment later.

“Now who should I play with first?” Duro murmured softly, completely unaffected by the screams and sobs coming from inside the bedroom as he rose from his seat and loomed over the men still protesting loudly, pulling at their bonds and kicking their feet in protest.

Had Mikhail not been so unbearably angry he would have been terrified by this man because of his sheer size alone, the man’s shoulders twice as wide as his own while his arms, bulging underneath the long sleeves of his undershirt, were as think as Mikhail’s thighs.

“I'll start with him,” he finally announced, nodding towards Eugene before moving out of the way so that two of the Peacekeepers left in the room could retrieve the struggling man. “See if I can break him down during our first little chat. Strip him and tie him to a chair.”

Mikhail watched in horror as Eugene was stripped naked by the two Peacekeepers despite fighting back as best as he could while the last Peacekeeper grabbed the sturdiest looking chair from the dining table and dragged it into the centre of the room for them to tie him to, his ankles and shins tied to the front legs while his arms were hooked over the back of the chair and a length of rope was used to connect the bonds on his wrists to the back legs.

While all this was going on Duro had stripped off his undershirt leaving him completely bare to his waist, the muscles of his chest looking complete obscene under a thick layer of hair.

Eugene maimed a string of verbal protests whilst glaring up at the monstrous man right up until the moment said monstrous man reached down and yanked out the shaft of metal from his side, reducing him to moaning, gasping wreck as he writhed in pain.

Duro examined the piece of metal.

“Wasn’t too deep,” he announced, dropping it carelessly to the floor. “Means you won't bleed out before I've finished having my fun. Now, how many rebel fighters are there?”

Eugene gasped loudly, still reeling from the pain but still managed to mutter his response,

“Go to hell…”

Duro’s terrifying smirk grew.

“I was hoping you'd say that…”

What followed was a beating the likes of which Mikhail had never imagined let alone seen.

At first he struggled, rubbing his wrists raw, but eventually his body just slumped back against the radiator as he desperately tried to block out the desperate screaming, the sickening thuds, the pain filled gasps, the sharp moans and the repeated questions.

Beside him his father had remained completely passive, staring silently at the torture going on across the room from them but Mikhail could see the anger and fear swirling in his eyes.

“I'm sorry…” he found himself gasping softly, leaning towards his father who slowly turned to look at him. “I'm sorry…I dragged you into this…if I hadn't…if I'd just listened to you…”

“We'd have still be swept up in this revolution,” Brandon murmured firmly in response to his
son’s choked apologies. “Things may have played out differently to begin with but once this revolution started there was no way we wouldn't have ended up exactly where we did.”

“Dad…”

Their hushed conversation was cut off abruptly by the bedroom door swinging open suddenly to reveal Varro who was also shirtless and in the process of doing up his trousers.

“Put her back with the others,” he barked over his shoulder as he calmly strode past the bloody mess that his colleague had made to get a glass of water from the little kitchenette in the far corner of the main room. “I’ve got all I need from her for the moment.”

Mikhail couldn't be blamed for losing control of his stomach when he saw the state that poor Belle was in when they literally dragged her out of the room, retching sharply as her bruised and bloody form was dump down beside him before her restraints were reattached.

She was completely naked, her hair had been pulled out of its braid and now hung loose concealing her breasts from view but it was painfully obvious what had been done to her.

“…fucking…bastards…” Eugene somehow managed to choke out. “…I'll…kill you…for this…”

Duro laughed loudly, grabbing a fistful of Eugene’s hair and yanking his head back.

A knife was pressed against Eugene’s throat.

“I'd like to see you try,” he sneered down at the man now struggling to suck enough air into his bruised lungs thanks to the restriction on his airway and the broken ribs he'd suffered. “All you have to do is tell us what we want to know and we'll stop hurting you. All of you.”

Eugene’s pain filled gaze flickered over to Belle’s trembling form, the poor girl thankfully unconscious following her ordeal and slumped uncomfortably against the radiator.

Ever so slowly he licked the blood from his lips.

“Don't you dare!” Brandon snapped suddenly. “Don't you fucking dare!”

Duro released his hold of Eugene so suddenly that the man’s head actually dropped further back for a moment before he pulled himself up, spurred on by Brandon's defiant words, and glared at his interrogator who had crossed the room in order to backhand Brandon with enough force to knock his head back in the metal pipes of the radiator with a sharp clang.

“Are you so anxious to take your friends place?” he sneered down at Mikhail’s father who, to his credit, merely shook his head to combat the ringing in his ears caused by the impact with the radiator. “You'll get your turn soon enough, old man, and then you'll be begging for me to listen to everything you've got to say about your pathetic little revolution.”

“If it's so pathetic and little why are you so desperate to learn everything about it?”

For a long moment Mikhail didn't recognise the voice which had spoken as his own but when he found himself the focus of Duro's burning gaze he realised that, yes, he had been to one to scoff loudly and belittle the absolutely terrifying man in control of their fates.

Well done, Mikhail, he silently berated himself as he found himself grabbed by his throat and pulled up and away from the radiator, the rope connecting his wrists to the metal pipes causing his arms to stretch painfully behind him even as he found his airway almost completely cut off, antagonise the man who could quite literally snap you like a twig.
He thrashed weakly as his head began to ache, his body protesting the lack of oxygen.

“I’m going to have fun breaking that smart mouth of yours…” Duro eventually hissed menacingly in his ear, leaning forwards to press his cheek against Mikhail’s, inhaling deeply before dropping him back down to the floor. “Oh, yes, I’m going to have fun with you…”

Shit.

Coughing weakly, his throat already aching, Mikhail met his father’s worried gaze and tried to smile reassuringly but sadly it came out as little more than a grimace due to the pain.

“I’m done with that one for the moment,” Duro announced as he crossed the room, patting Eugene on the shoulder in a patronisingly cruel way before making his way to the kitchenette so that he could wash his hands in the sink. “Who shall I play with next?”

“I want the quiet one,” Varro announced from where he was munching on some sort of oatmeal bar, nodding towards Misha who flinched visibly. “I want to make him scream.”

Duro chuckled.

“I’ll have the older one, then,” he announced calmly, drying his hands with a dirty rag before producing his own oatmeal bar. “That way I can have more time with that little idiot…”

Varro pouted childishly.

“I wanted to play with that one too,” he whined loudly. “He'll be no fun if he's all broken…”

Mikhail’s breath seized inside his chest, his body stiffening of its own accord as Duro chuckled in response to his colleague’s words, shooting an appreciative smirk across at him.

“We could always share…”

“What a fantastic idea…”

~ * ~ *

They were held and tortured for a total of nine days during which time Mikhail and the others suffered through worse torture than any of them could have imagined, their interrogators delighting in finding out which of their methods worked best on each of them.

Belle had broken first, sobbing weakly as she confessed everything she knew which thankfully wasn't all that much given that she had never been part of the command circle.

They left her alone after that.

Misha broke next but all he could talk about was his lover and his mother, about what had happened to them, repeating the same thing over and over again no matter what question he was asked until it became obvious that his mind had shattered under the constant abuse.

They left him alone after that.

Eventually it had reached a point where Eugene couldn't have revealed any secrets even if he had wanted to, almost every bone in his body broken or fractured including his jaw.

By then every breath was an obvious struggle, blood bubbling on his lips in a rather alarming way and both of his eyes were completely swollen shut while his nose was completely black.
They left him alone after that.

Mikhail had almost broken the first time he had been dragged into the bedroom by his hair, when his clothes had been ripped from his thrashing body so that Varro could...could...and then when he'd had his fill Duro had stepped forwards and literally thrown him around the small room with the force of the beating he'd delivered, using anything he had to hand to make it more entertaining before either of them had even asked for a shred of information.

It was only the fact that he was in too much pain to think properly which had stopped him from drilling every single thing he knew about the rebels and the revolution then and there.

He wanted to believe that if it had just been physical torture that he would have coped with it better, would've kept his silence for longer, wouldn't have told them everything he knew.

After all he knew he could handle pain, the way he had handled the whipping he'd received had proven that, but perhaps they'd known that and that was why they'd sent Varro.

Varro, who specialised in extracting information through rape, who took great delight in performing his duties, in humiliating his victims, in causing pain so deep it seemed impossible, in making their bodies respond unwillingly to his touch, in forcing them to

They never left him alone even after he'd spilled everything he knew to them.

Only Mikhail's father had managed to hold out against them.

Brandon had retreated into the safety his mind just like he had when he'd lost his wife and daughter to the first bombing meaning that while his body was present and responsive to their torture, his eyes were unseeing and his mind was somewhere else entirely.

“We'll get nothing more from them.” Duro announced as the sun set on the ninth day, turning away from Brandon who he had been working and addressing one of the Peacekeeper guards who had been present for the duration of the torture. “Inform HQ that the prisoners have been successfully interrogated and will be dealt with in the morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mikhail watched through half lidded eyes as the Peacekeeper hurried out of the room, never glancing back even as Duro and Varro congratulated each other on a job well done.

So that was it.

It was finally over and come the morning they were going to be dealt with.

They were under no illusions as to what this would mean for them given the amount of executions of suspected rebels that they'd witnessed in the run up to the revolution.

He should be frightened.

He should be trying to figure out a way to get away.

Instead he was just...tired...

Mercifully they were left alone that night due to the fact that the Peacekeeper had returned with orders for the two interrogators to report to HQ in order to present any and all information they had succeeded in discovering but none of them had had the energy to do anything but lean against each other and contemplate what the morning would bring.
He dreamed of his mother when he finally slept that night, that she was stood on the other side of the river with Sasha, Juno and all the others they lost, becoming to him with a beautiful smile on her face and because of this he’d woken up with a smile on his own lips.

They’d be together soon.

Mikhail was hauled to his feet by Duro himself and dragged out of the building, his feet struggling to find purchase on the ground but slipping more often than not, the jagged rocks and pieces of glass cutting up the already abused soles of his feet as he and the others were led back towards “No-Mans-Land” under the watchful gaze of hundreds of Peacekeepers.

Once upon a time he would’ve been ashamed of his nudity but now he barely gave it a passing thought as he and the others were led to a point opposite the Delta sector.

Apparently Echo was still under Peacekeeper control but they hadn't made it and further.

“Kneel.”

He didn't so much as kneel as collapse when Duro released his hold on him, his body crumpling to the ground between Belle and Misha, but he did eventually manage to push himself up onto his knees with his bottom resting uncomfortably on his injured feet.

As he watched Varro pacing back and forth in front of them, calmly checking the amount of ammunition he had in his pistol, movement in the distance drew his attention to the rebel lines where he spotted at least four different people changing positions to get closer.

“You have been found guilty of the act of treason,” Varro announced calmly as he walked to the end of the line, taking up a position directly behind Eugene. “The punishment is death.”

He pulled the trigger even before he'd finished speaking, sending Eugene’s broken body crumpling forwards onto the dirty ground, a pool of blood growing around his head.

As Varro moved into position behind Brandon there was more movement from the rebel lines as the reserves arrived, pressing forwards using what little cover there was available.

Mikhail expected the Peacekeepers to open fire at any moment but the silence stretched on and he realised, to his surprise, that they were all focused on the execution taking place directly in front of them rather than on the rebel lines where they should have been looking.

A single gunshot rang out and a pain-filled groan escape Mikhail’s blood stained lips as he watched his father's body join Eugene’s on the dirty ground, his eyes and mouth closed, his expression remarkably peaceful despite the circumstances leading up to his death.

Belle began to weep softly, her petite frame trembling uncontrollably.

“I'm coming, my love…” Misha whispered weakly, his own body trembling as he clenched his eyes shut, waiting for Varro to move into place directly behind him. “Wait for me…”

His final words had barely passed his lips when the gunshot sounded clearly, his body collapsing down rather than falling forwards leaving him draped over his own thighs.

Mikhail felt rather than saw Varro moved to stand behind him and he knew that his time was almost up and as such he decided to go out with as much honour as he possibly could.

“You're not going to win, you know?” he muttered as clearly as he could, his spine straightening of its own accord as he faced his end as bravely as he could. “You can't win. Not really. You
might win this battle but you'll never win the war. And do you know why?"

He noticed movement in front of him but pressed on quickly, knowing that he had to get what he wanted to say out into the open before Varro’s finger could pull the trigger.

“Because no matter what you do the people will never stop fighting, not now that they have tasted freedom for the first time in their lives. It doesn’t even matter how many of us you torture, how many you kill,” his voice had risen in volume until he was almost shouting, each word laced with the pain ransacking its way through his system. “There will always be someone who is willing to fight and, if need be, to die for freedom. You cannot win.”

He flinched as he felt the tip of the gun press against the back of his head.

Closing his eyes he forced himself to remain perfectly still.

This was it…

A gunshot rang out.

**A/N** Don't kill me! Of course I'm not going to leave the story there which might give you all a little bit of a value to the conclusion I have planned for thud cliff-hanger but I still have the rest of Mockingjay to get through so there's plenty more to come. I'll try not to leave the update too long but I'm pretty busy in real life at the moment so I can't make any promises. As always comments and suggestions are more that welcome. X
Chapter Eleven

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Eleven

He flinched as he felt the tip of the gun press against the back of his head.

Closing his eyes he forced himself to remain perfectly still.

This was it…

A gunshot rang out.

His eyes flew open in shock as his body was knocked to the ground by the force of a heavy body collapsing across his back, eventually rolling off of his left shoulder to sprawl on the bloodstained ground between himself and Misha’s body, vacant eyes staring up at the sky.

Varro.

Gunfire erupted all around him and Belle cried out as she was hit in the back of her shoulder, the force knocking her down onto the ground beside him even as he blinked out across “No-Mans-Land” to where the majority of the gunfire was coming from.

It seemed as though his fellow Rebels, lead as ever by Commander Paylor herself, had used the distraction caused by his impromptu speech to push across the rest of “No-Mans-Land” and were now only a couple of metres away from the surviving members of Squad 16.

“Come on!”

Hands beckoned towards them even as the gunfire continued, gesturing for them to come towards them and when asked later in his life Mikhail wouldn't be able to explain where he found the energy he needed to grab hold of Belle and drag her along with him as he crawled across the uneven ground towards them, sharp pieces of rubble aggravating his wounds.

More and more bullets flew back and forth, some of them thudding into the ground around them as the Peacekeepers attempted to finish of the job they had started earlier but missing every time due to the fact that they were, for once, pinned down by a superior force.

It was a painfully slow process for the two naked figures crawling towards their friends, both of them whimpering as their bodies trembled uncontrollably from the vast amount of pain.
“Covering fire!” a voice boomed out suddenly. “Covering fire!”

Glancing up from the ground in front of him Mikhail watched in shock as a group of brave souls darted out from behind the shelter they had previously been firing from behind, hurrying towards where they'd got to although within a few steps one of them went down.

He didn't get back up.

Hands grabbed hold of his arms, hooking under his shoulders, and then suddenly his upper body was being lifted, his legs trailing behind him on the ground getting even more cut up as the three rebels who had reached him dragged him towards the safety of their own lines.

Two more had grabbed hold of Belle, managing to lift her much smaller form completely off of the ground by her shoulders and ankles so as to save her from further injury as they sprinted back the way they had come as best they could, her body hanging between them.

With his safety now in the hands of others his mind began to drift back and forth, his experiences over the last few days flooding his mind each time his eyes drifted shut, until he suddenly became aware of the fact that they'd stopped and he was being carefully placed on something which was blissfully soft; a blanket which was quickly wrapped around him.

“Mikhail?” a soft voice called out gently as his head was lifted up off of the ground only to be placed down on something soft, tilted so that a canteen of water could be pressed against his painfully dry lips. “Small sips….that's it….small sips…you're safe now…”

He knew that voice…

Blinking up at the person upon whose lap he was resting he found himself face to face with Commander Paylor herself, her deep brown eyes twisted with pain and grief even as she reached to push his bloodstained hair back off of his forehead with gentle fingers.

“C-Com-m-mander…” he groaned weakly, turning his head ever so slightly to show he didn't want any more water even as the rest of his body was locked up from the pain. “B-Belle…?”

“Your friend is right here, Mikhail,” Commander Paylor reassured him, her hand gently tilting his head until he could see Belle being treated similarly to how he himself was being cared for. “We've got to wait for the worst of the fighting to pass and then we’ get you both to the hospital. You just need to hold on for a little bit longer, just a little bit longer…”

He hadn't noticed that the air was still filled with the sounds of gunfire but now that she'd pointed it out it was all he could hear for a long moment, bullets flying through the air, impacting with brick and dirt and rubble and flesh, people crying out in pain, going silent…

“Misha…” he groaned, rolling his eyes towards her as his mind, even as overwhelmed as it was, reminded him that his friend had in fact been her nephew. “M'sorry…”

“It wasn't your fault,” she hurried to reassure him even as a single tear rolled down her cheek at the thought of her nephew’s death, of losing the last link she had to her baby sister. “We couldn't get a clean shot until we were close enough. It wasn't your fault…”

No, it wasn't his fault but that didn't make the guilt churning in his gut lessen as thoughts of Misha's final moments naturally led to thoughts of his father’s final moments, tears spilling out of his eyes and making their way painfully down the open wounds covering his face.

Commander Paylor never left his side even when the time came for them to move, the gunfire
lessening enough for the stretcher bearers to get through, the strong woman weeping openly yet completely silently as she walked through what remained of her District between the two stretchers containing an unconscious Belle and a barely conscious Mikhail.

Mikhail had no idea what happened during the course of the first few hours he was inside the crowded hospital building, the medication they had given him finally forcing him all the way down into the blackness which had been beckoning him for some time, but when he finally awoke it was beginning to get dark outside and he was on a bed beside Ella.

“Hey…” she called out softly in response to his startled groan as the pain returned. “S’ok…”

Even in his confused state he could see that something was wrong with her, both in the expression on her pretty face and the way the blankets settled around her legs…leg…

“…wha?” he gasped, weakly gesturing towards her missing leg with a hand that felt as though it were made of lead, the limb barely wanting to respond to his command. “Ella?”

“It got infected,” she explained softly, smoothing the creases from her blankets as she shifted awkwardly on her narrow bed. “They had to…get rid of it…or I would have died…”

No one could have missed the way she flinched at the final word of her soft explanation.

“Ella?” he gasped once more, turning his head on his thin pillow to stare directly across at her, watching as tears rapidly built up in her haunted eyes. “What…what is it?”


“What about Bella?” he demanded as firmly as he could, attempting to push himself up onto his elbows so that he could stare across at her more easily but his body was too weak from a combination of his injuries and medication he’d been given. “Ella? What about Bella?”

“She didn’t make it…”

*She didn’t make it…*

The words echoed through his mind as though she’d screamed them at him rather than whimpered pitifully, her hands covering her face in an attempt to muffle her pathetic sobs.

*She didn’t make it…*

Felyx had visited the following day, dressed for combat, the only sign of the horror they’d been though the pain and guilt shining through his eyes as he’d knelt beside Mikhail’s bed.

“Hey…”

“Hey…” Mikhail responded weakly. “M’sorry…about Belle…I tried…it tried to…”

Felyx and Belle’s relationship may have started as a way for her to annoy her parents but it had quickly become something more, the two of them planning a future together despite the rebellion going on around them and Mikhail couldn’t imagine how his friend was feeling knowing as much as everyone else did about the horrific events leading up to her death.

He hadn’t been asked for details but the evidence of their torture was plain to see.

“I know,” Felyx murmured, his voice thick with emotion as he reached out to gently take his
friends hand. “I know what you did to bring her home. I was there. I saw… I saw the…”

Mikhail flinched.

“I wish I could say she didn't suffer but…” he gasped, finding himself at a loss of what else to say about the situation, unable to conjure up the comforting lie. “Who are you with now?”

“I was with Squad 12 but I've just been transferred to Commander Paylor's guard,” Felyx answered, obvious grateful of the change in subject. “I wasn't... I wasn't handling being in a new Squad as well as I could have been so... so they had to move me but I don't mind...”

Given that it was technically a promotion to become a member of what had been nicknamed the ‘Honour Guard’ he definitely shouldn't mind but Mikhail guessed that his friend had struggled with being in a situation so close to what he had lost, same tasks but different faces, different voices so he couldn't blame him for finding it too difficult to adjust.

Being part of Commander Paylor's guard meant a completely new set of duties.

Mikhail’s recovery proved to be slow going, the combination of his various injuries making it difficult for the untrained medics to get the amount of medication he needed right so he was always suffering a little from the pain, either from the deep cuts covering 85% of his body including his face, the countless broken bones or the almost impossibly deep bruising.

Ella, on the other hand, was recovering nicely following the amputation and they were preparing to transfer her out to one of the forest camps when none other than Katniss Everdeen strode into the hospital, dressed in black body armour which seemed to contour to her body, a quiver full of arrows on her back and a deadly looking black bow in her hand.

“What are you doing here?”

Shaking his head in anger Mikhail forced himself to sit up, cradling his aching side with his arm as he glared across at the unmistakable young woman staring around her in horror.

He couldn't believe she had the nerve to come here, here of all places.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you…”

He wasn't the only one to scoff in response to her mumbled answer, shaking his head once more as he twisted his body so that his legs emerged from underneath the blanket as his bare feet dropped down to the floor, his legs clad in the ill-fitting trousers he'd been given.

“What about the baby?”

What was he doing?

He didn't know, all he knew was that if he stayed in the same room as her for much longer he was going to do something stupid, something he might regret so he needed to get out.

“What about the baby?”

Gritting his teeth in anticipation of the pain he forced himself to rise to his feet, turning his back on the face of the Mockingjay even as she answered the question softly and simply.

“I lost it.”
“Mikhail!” Ella hissed frantically as he reached down to pick up his blanket, wrapping it around his shoulders before taking an unsteady step towards the exit. “You're not supposed to be out of bed yet and certainly not on your own! You know what the Doctor said…”

“I cannot stay here,” he muttered over his shoulder. “Or I'll do something I'll regret…”

Like punching Katniss *fucking* Everdeen in the face for everything she had done, for making his gentle friend suffer, for everything she had caused by openly defying the Capitol…

Every single step felt like someone was stabbing him in various parts of his body but he didn’t hesitate, didn't stop in his hurry to get out of the room before he forgot that, unfortunately in his current opinion, Katniss was as important to the rebellion as ever.

“Are you fighting, Katniss? Are you here to fight with us?”

“I am. I will.”

“Too late,” Mikhail muttered, shouldering past what appeared to be an honest to a God camera crew recording every little detail as the people he'd left behind offered her the simple salute she had popularised during her Games. “There's nothing left to fight for.”

“Mikhail!” Felyx hissed, hurrying to his side even as one of the people with the camera crew turned to stare at him in horror. “What are you doing? You're in no fit state to be walking…”

“Well, I couldn't stay and listen to that bitch any longer,” he muttered, feeling himself sway precariously just as Commander Paylor appeared in his vision looking worried. “I'm fine…”

“How is this?” an unfamiliar voice asked just as Felyx wound an arm around his waist ever so gently so as to support him, his own arm moving around his friends shoulders as he looked towards the owner of the voice and found himself facing a dark skinned man who appeared to be armed to the teeth. “Are you going to let him get away with saying that?”

“Saying what, the truth?” Mikhail scoffed, fixing the older man with a strong glare even as the group around them shifted to accept Katniss into their midst. “Oh, this is a bad idea…”

“We don't punish people in District Eight for having an opinion of their own,” Commander Paylor all but snapped in response to the older man’s question, her eyes blazing with a fury which was normally reserved for Peacekeepers. “Especially not someone who has sacrificed as much as Mikhail has for the cause. Felyx, why don't you take him out for some fresh air?”

That sounded like an excellent idea to Mikhail but when it became evident that Katniss and her camera crew were going to follow them outside the temptation was simply too great.

“Actually, I'd like a word with you,” he muttered firmly, planting his feet a couple of feet after they'd exited the building and turning to face Katniss who couldn't hide her flinch, her wide eyes scanning his body taking in his injuries. “How *dare* you come here you fu–”

Something beeped loudly, cutting off his tirade before it had really begun.

“There's a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

Mikhail found it quite interesting that the young man who had spoken had subconsciously moved to place himself between Katniss and the perceived threat of Mikhail, making his feeling for her painfully obvious with his need to protect her from his sheep words.
“Incoming bombers from the north.”

“Fuck…” Felyx hissed angrily. “Haven't they bombed us enough?”

“Apparently not,” Mikhail responded clearly before arching an eyebrow in Katniss's direction. “I'll give you three guesses as to hey they've chosen to start up again…”

She paled at his less than subtle insinuation.

“I wonder how many people you'll get killed this time?”

“We need to find cover,” the dark skinned man hissed as Katniss flinched. “Now.”

“There's a bunker in there,” Commander Paylor announced, indicating the nearest building left standing with a suitable basement before turning and nodding towards Mikhail. “Felyx.”

Just as the siren began wailing loudly, warning everyone of the approaching bomber, Felyx crouched down and pulled Mikhail’s body across the back of his shoulders, holding him in place by an arm and a leg before hurriedly following everyone inside the building.

Mikhail couldn't help but let out a sharp cry of pain as his broken ribs made contact with his friends shoulder, the bones grating together in such an agonising motion that he couldn't stop his entire body spasming where he hung across his much stronger friends shoulders.

“Sorry,” Felyx hissed but didn't slow his pace. “We're nearly there. Nearly there.”

“Straight ahead and down the stairs.”

It wasn't until he was lowered down onto the ground in the shelter that he realised someone was missing, two people in fact – Katniss Everdeen and her faithful defender.

“Where's the bitch and her friend?”

“They took off to have a look at the action like they'd never seen a bombing raid before,” Felyx muttered, dropping down to sit beside him with his back against the sake wall he'd carefully propped Mikhail against. “They got cut off so they're on their own now.”

“Good riddance,” he muttered, pressing a hand against his spasming ribs. “You've got a bloody hard shoulder you know that? These haven't even begun to heal yet, you know?”

“Felyx,” Commander Paylor called out. “We need to head out. Mikhail, stay put.”

He offered her a cheeky grin and a mockery of a salute, turning it into a little fist bump with Felyx as the older boy pushed himself back to his feet in response to her firm order.

“Would you put that fucking thing away?” he grunted angrily once they were gone leaving just him and the camera crew, one of which had for some unknown reason trained their camera on where he was leaning against the dirty wall. “Or maybe, you know, go and film something that's actually important like the destruction of our entire fucking District?”

“What's your name?” the only female member of the crew asked, her accent and the style of her hair giving away the fact that she definitely grew up in the Capitol. “I'm Cressida.”

“I don't care. Turn the fucking camera off or I'll turn it off for you,” Mikhail muttered, confirming the fact that his threat was genuine by picking up a rock and throwing it towards the big guy wearing the camera, striking him on the shoulder. “I mean it. Turn it off.”
“You’re a very angry young man,” she mumbled, all but pouting as she gestured for the cameraman to turn the offending piece of technology away from Mikhail. “We’re just trying to show the rest of Panem what’s really happening, what’s being done by the Capitol.”

“Pretty sure you’re from the Capitol so don’t go trying to pretend you’ve got nothing to do with them,” Mikhail scoffed before flinching, a stab of pain ordering him to calm down before he injured himself further. “I could really do with some painkillers right about now…”

“What happened to you?”

“What do you think happened to me?” he hissed sharply, knocking his head against the wall as his mind happily supplied memories he didn’t want to see. “Your fucking Peacekeepers.”

“They’re not our Peacekeepers…”

Her protests were cut off by the sounds of an explosion coming from almost directly above them, followed a few moments later by another one and another and then one final one.

“We should get back up there,” she announced, abandoning their earlier topic in favour of encouraging her crew to get to their feet. “Could you…could you show us the way?”

Mikhail glared at her.

“Want to see what a body looks like when it's been ripped to pieces, do you?” he sneered, satisfied when she flinched, her cheeks flushing brightly. “I want you, it’s not pretty…”

It was slow progress, his body protesting each and every move he made even with one of them reluctantly offering him a shoulder to lean on, but eventually they emerged from the building to discover exactly which building had been hit during the *surprise* raid.

“No…” he gasped, pushing himself away from the young man Rhodes had been helping him and stumbling towards the burning remains of what had once been the hospital. “Ella…”

“Pollux…” the woman gasped, sounding genuinely upset by the sight in front of her even as she directed the two cameramen where to set up. “Castor, stay…stay here with…”

A portion of the hospital wall collapsed, falling down into the flames bellow.

His vision blinded by uncontrollable tears Mikhail stumbled towards the wreckage, retching as he was assaulted by the putrid scent of burning flesh coming from what remained of the hospital where so many innocent people had just been slaughtered by the Capitol.

Why?

Why had they chosen to target the hospital, the one building they'd left alone until now?

Wait…

They must have found out that Katniss *fucking* Everdeen had visited it.

That was the only explanation that made sense, that somehow her location had been leaked and President Snow had come through on his promise that “*all images of the Mockingjay are now forbidden*” and Mikhail assumed that this included the girl who was the face of the Mockingjay and that “*possessing them will be considered treason, punishable by death*.”

They had bombed the hospital because she had been seen there…
A pair of arms appeared seemingly out of nowhere, wrapping themselves gently around his waist in order to stop him from moving any closer to the deadly flames and he sagged into the firm embrace, his body suddenly overcome with gut wrenching sobs of grief and anger.

“Mikhail…”

“Ella…” he sobbed, sagging in his friends arms and relying entirely on Felyx’s considerable strength to hold both of them up. “She…and the others…they didn't stand a chance…”

During his stay in the hospital he’d learned that the standard procedure during a bombing raid was for those who could move to make their way down to the basement but everyone else remained where they were in the main room, completely vulnerable to an attack.

“She might have made it to the basement in time…” Felyx attempted to comfort him, his own voice lacking its usual confidence. “They might still…might still be alive down there…”

No.

If they’d somehow managed to survive the initial explosions then they were trapped, their would be rescuers unable to combat the flames which would eventually reach them.

Or perhaps the smoke would get to them first.

“Help them!”

Mikhail twisted in his friends grip to watch Katniss Everdeen stumble to a halt beside them, her face pale as she stared at the burning rubble in complete and utter horror, almost as though she cared for someone other than herself, her sister or her precious lover boy.

“Help them! Get them out!”

“Katniss?”

There was something about the tone of voice the Capitol woman had used which finally succeeded in drawing Mikhail’s attention away from the flames, an eagerness carefully concealed behind a display of sympathetic professionalism which made his blood boil.

“Katniss, can you tell everyone what you're seeing right now?”

Relying on his friend to steady him as the pain of his wounds, some of which had definitely reopened, finally registered in his mind Mikhail slowly turned to face the woman a fraction after Katniss did, glaring across the space between them when he noticed that she was using hand gestures to adjust the positioning of the two cameras even as she continued.

“Katniss, what do you want to say?”

“I want the Rebels to know that I'm alive,” Katniss announced after a long moment, her trembling voice gaining strength. “That I'm in District Eight where the Capitol just bombed a hospital filled with unarmed men, women and children. And there will be no survivors.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Thankfully Mikhail’s rough voice was too soft for the cameras to pick up, the words having forced their way past his lips without his minds permission, but it was definitely loud enough for Katniss to hear each and every word, the young woman shuddering noticeably.
“If you think for one second that the Capitol will ever treat us fairly then you are lying to yourselves,” Katniss continued on, physically turning her back on him now as she got stuck into her speech. “Because we know who they are and what they do. This is what they do!”

Yes, Mikhail thought to himself, this is what they do because of you.

“And we must fight back,” Katniss continued passionately, stumbling across until she was stood in front of the wreckage of the Capitol bomber which appeared to have crashed a little way away from its target. “I have a message for President Snow. You can torture us and bomb us and burn our Districts to the ground. But do you see that?”

She paused, pointing over her shoulder at the Capitol symbol also engulfed in flames.

“Fire is catching,” she announced firmly. “And if we burn, you burn with us!”

It was a good speech, Mikhail was forced to admit if only to himself, one that was sure to gain them even more support than they had already had but for some reason only one thing came out of his mouth as he watched her stumble unsteadily back towards what was left of the building they had been using as a hospital, dropping to her knees with an audible sob.

“What the fuck do you know about being tortured?”

Her eyes flew up to meet his, wet with tears and filled with grief and confusion.

Pulling away from Felyx at last Mikhail moved to stand over her, feeling the blood from his reopened wounds dripping down the skin of his back and soaking through his tight shirt.

“Seriously,” he growled down at her. “What do you know about being tortured?”

“I…”

“Have you ever been tortured?” he demanded, his body visibly trembling as he spread his arms wide and laughed in a way which could be described as maniacal. “Because I have!”

He was vaguely aware of the Capitol woman repositioning the cameras so as to best capture the action, of Felyx hurrying to his side in an attempt to calm him down whilst offering physical support but he ignored this in favour of pointing towards the burning building.

“That is not torture!” he spat down at her, an actual glob of spittle striking her on the cheek as his own eyes began to burn with barely contained tears. “That is mass murder! That is…”

“Mikhail…” Felyx murmured firmly, wrapping his arms around his friend and pulling him against his firm body once more, trapping Mikhail’s arms at his sides. “It’s not her fault…”

“It is…they did this because of her… they did this because she was here…don’t you remember?” Mikhail choked out, his tears spilling over as slumped back into his friends embrace despite the sheer amount of pain it caused. “All images of the Mockingjay are now forbidden. Possessing them will be considered treason, punishable by death. They left the hospital alone until she came…they never touched it before she showed her face…”

Katniss had begun to shake, her eyes flickering wildly from his now crumpled form to the remains of the hospital to her friends and then back to him again, tears falling freely.

“How many more innocent people are going to die because of you?”

“That’s enough!” her defender from earlier barked out, glaring across at Mikhail as he hurried
forwards to scoop Katniss up into his arms as though she were child who needed protecting from a scary monster. “Come on, Katniss, we need to get out of here.”

“Wait,” Commander Paylor called out as their group began to move, making her way over to stand in front of Katniss and her loyal protector. “I need you to take him with you.”

“What?” Katniss’s friend scoffed loudly even as Mikhail protested weakly, his head suddenly feeling heavier than it should. “You must be mad! After the things he just said about her…”

“Mikhail was captured and tortured by Peacekeepers for over a week,” Commander Paylor interrupted him sharply, speaking more to Katniss than to anyone else. “Of the five who were captured he is the only one who survived. Those who didn’t included his father and my nephew. His fiancé was killed during the attack in which he was captured. His mother and sister were killed when the Capitol bombed the District in retaliation for the failed uprising.”

Hearing it all explained so simply, so clinically, made Mikhail want to throw up.

Why? Why was he, the one who had dragged them into the revolution in the first place, survived?

“He shouldn't be on his feet,” Commander Paylor continued, her voice softening. “His injuries are too severe for us to treat without any sort of medical facilities. This is why I need you to take him with you. That and I think he's given enough to this rebellion, don't you?”

“Boggs?”

“It's your choice, Soldier Everdeen.”

Mikhail felt her gaze upon him once more and he wished he had the energy to glare at her but all of a sudden with the weight of his grief adding itself to his injuries he could do nothing more than meet her gaze apathetically as Felyx held him semi-upright.

“We'll take him back with us.”

“Katniss!”

“It's what Prim would do,” Katniss defended her decision. “It's what Peeta would do.”

“Thank you,” Commander Paylor murmured sincerely before turning to the Capitol woman and producing something from her pocket. “This was my nephews. If you can recover the data you might be able to find something you can use on it. He recorded almost everything.”

Mikhail blinked in confusion until he realised she was talking about the old camera Misha had found and held onto since the first uprising, filming almost everything just as she’d said.

Where had they found that?

“We do need to get going now,” the dark skinned man, the one Katniss had addressed as Boggs, urged them all before turning to face Felyx. “Do you need assistance carrying him?”

“I got it.”

“Don't I get a say in any of this?” Mikhail grumbled weakly as Felyx shifted his grip to pick him up like a blushing bride being carried over the threshold of her new house. “I…”

“No, you don't,” Commander Paylor informed him as she moved to stand directly in front of him.
“I know you’re angry. I know you feel guilty. I know you want to stay and exact your revenge. But you need more help than we will be able to provide now that…now that…”

Her mask of cool composure slipped and a single tear meandered down her smooth cheek.

“Rest. Recover. Come back to fight another day.”

Mikhail was too exhausted, both physically and emotionally, to protest as he was carried through what little remained of District Eight by his only surviving friend who then proceeded to carefully deposit him down onto a rather uncomfortable seat in the back of a hovercraft, hands quickly helping Felyx to work the many straps need to secure him in place.

“Stay alive my friend,” Felyx murmured once he was finished with the last strap, crouching in front of Mikhail so that their heads were level. “And try not to piss them off too much.”

“No promises…” Mikhail responded with a weak chuckle, his head swimming alarmingly as he both heard and felt the hovercrafts engines come to life. “Don't do anything stupid.”

“Me? Never!” Felyx chuckled, reaching out to clasp hold of Mikhail’s forearm in what could only be describe as a soldier’s handshake. “I'll see you when all this madness is finished.”

Mikhail watched as his friend was forced to hurry towards the back of the hovercraft which had already begun closing, offering him a cheeky salute before jumping down to the ground where he then proceeded to wave towards Mikhail until the door closed with a loud clunk.

It felt as though the bottom of his stomach had dropped out as the hovercraft suddenly lurched into the air, shaking its many occupants with the speed of its rapid ascent and he couldn't help but whimper softly, pressing a hand over his mouth as his nausea increased.

He'd never been in anything that moved so his body was completely unfamiliar with the feelings it was now being put through and he had to squeeze his eyes shut as his head began to feel as though it were in a vice, adding the increased levels of pain coming from his body.

When his body had finally begun to adjust to the horrible sensation he cracked his eyes open and found himself sitting directly opposite Katniss Everdeen herself who met his gaze.

She looked concerned and he couldn't help but scoff loudly.

“What?”

“You know there's no one watching now,” he responded to her soft enquiry, ignoring the way the two cameramen had positioned themselves so as to be able to film both of them, obviously anticipating that he would continue as before. “There's no need to carry on pretending you actually care about anyone but yourself and your precious little sister.”

“How dare you?!!?”

Predictably it was her loyal friend who had reacted rather than Katniss herself, shifting in his seat beside her to glare across at where Mikhail was slumped uncomfortably in his.

“I dare because it's the truth,” Mikhail responded, suddenly overcome with a bone deep exhaustion which left him struggling to keep his head up as he continued to hold her gaze. “Katniss Everdeen. Victor of the 74th Hunger Games. Tribute in the 75th Hunger Games.”

She flinched but squared her shoulders, obviously determined not to look away.
“You are a fake, Katniss Everdeen,” Mikhail announced, his tone deadly serious like he was passing judgement at a trial. “You are a fake and a liar. You are a heartless murderer. But you are the Mockingjay. You are the face of the Rebellion and so we need you. For now.”

He let his final words hang in the air as he leaned his head back against the side of the hovercraft, wincing as a wound on the side of his neck pulled sharply, and allowed his mind to tumble into the welcoming pain free blackness that was unconsciousness.

A/N I wasn't intending for Mikhail to have such a foul vocabulary but after everything I've put him through he just wouldn't shut up. Lol. Comments/Suggestions welcome. X
Chapter Twelve

Stars Look Down

Chapter Twelve

A droplet of liquid struck his cheek, prompting his eyes to snap open and he found himself gazing up at the stormiest sky he had ever seen, dark grey clouds swirling together as they blocked out the light from the sun only to be lit up frequently by deadly bolts of lightning.

Each crash of thunder seemed to rock the world around him, his legs trembling as he struggled to remain upright on the uneven surface he found himself standing upon.

After a particularly loud boom he stumbled and his foot landed on something soft, drawing his eyes away from the violent sky above him and down to the ground where all around him faceless bodies lay, some missing limbs, others seemingly intact but for the bullet holes.

A layer of fresh blood covered the field of corpses and it took a moment for him to realise that it wasn’t coming from them, rather it was falling from the tumultuous sky like rain.

He brought up his own hands and found them to be equally covered in the warm liquid.

Instinctively he turned, his eyes desperately seeking for some sort of shelf but he found none.

Instead he found himself gazing across another field of corpses towards two familiar figures who were standing watching him, their own bodies showing obvious signs of the injuries which had killed them despite the fact that he knew he’d never actually seen them in death.

Belle, naked but for the blood, and Ella who stood calmly on her one remaining leg.

“How did you get to live?”

Belle’s voice was completely lacking in any sort of emotion, each word coming out unusually flat as she slowly tilted her head quizzically whilst regarding him with her cold, dead eyes.

“What makes you so special?”

Ella’s voice was the same.

Flat.

Her skin and clothes were scorched and torn beneath the layer of glistening blood, the majority of
her right side completely blackened with her skin twisted and distorted by burns.

“I…” he choked out, flinching backwards a step. “I don’t know…”

Something latched onto his ankle suddenly, drawing his attention down to the ground directly behind him and he found, to his horror, that it was a human hand which had grabbed hold of him, perfectly formed and connected to the grotesque body of his friend.

Leroy.

His body looked as though he had been lying dead for weeks, parts of his flesh having rotted away to reveal the flesh and bones beneath while his eyes were completely clouded over.

“Why you? Why not him?”

Another hand grabbed his ankle, this one connected to what remained of Willard, and then something slashed at the back of his knee causing him to cry out and twist his upper body around just in time to see Nate and Donovan, both of them missing countless bits of their bodies reaching out for him with what appears to be claws in place of their fingers.

“How could you leave us like that?”

Pain latched down his right forearm as another claw like hand grabbed hold of him, tearing through his vulnerable flesh easily as it attempted to pull him down towards the ground.

Eugene.

“Why were you spared?”

These words were hissed in his ear just as something collided with his back, the sudden weight on his shoulders pulling him off balance enough that he tumbled back towards the ground, landing on the body which was now wrapped too tightly around him.

Misha.

He struggled, finally attempting to fight back but even more claw like hands buried themselves in his flesh whilst one of the bodies he couldn't bear to see like this climbed up over his legs, trapping him in place before two more did the same to his hips and his torso.

Sasha.

His parents.

“Why didn't you die with us?”

And then there she was, her auburn hair hanging about her face, dripping even more blood down onto him as she moved to crouch over his head, a hand coming to rest on his cheek.

Her sunken, sightless eyes seemed to gaze into his very soul as she leaned in close.

“You should have die too.”

The last thing he saw were the claws of her other hand swinging towards his face…

“No!”

Bolting upright in the reasonably comfortable bed he found himself in his arms moved of their
own accord, striking out at the figure which had been looming about him although only one of them made contact as the young woman scrambled backwards with a loud yelp.

He became aware of something holding his legs down and he thrashed, the force of his struggles making the bed rattled as he began clawing at the blankets pulled tightly across his body in a desperate attempt to free himself from the cage they had become in his mind.

Finally his body was free, the blankets shoved to the floor as he rolled his body to the side and actually succeeded in launching himself down towards the cold, hard ground just as the young woman fled the room calling for help whilst pressing a delicate little hand to her jaw.

Within a blink of an eye the small room was flooded with people, hands grabbing hold of him and hauling him back onto the bed even as he thrashed, screaming at the top of his voice, and then there was a sharp prick in one of his arms and the world seemed to soften.

“That’s better…” a soft voice murmured as most of the hands disappeared from his body, leaving only a few working to sort out his blankets. “We won't knock him out unless we really need to as the Doctor wishes to speak to him but this should keep him calm.”

“Thank you.”

The second voice that filtered through to his fuzzy brain was painfully young, prompting him to turn his head on his pillow until he could see the young girl already tidying up the mess he had made of the rest of the room, her blonde hair held back by a complicated braid.

A vivid bruise was blossoming on her jawline.

“D’I do tha…?” he mumbled, his teeth feeling too big for his mouth. “M’sorry…”

“It wasn’t your fault. I'd been warned that patients sometime experiences unpleasantly vivid dreams when they're on the cocktail of painkillers they've got you on,” she murmured reassuringly, offering the older woman a polite nod as she exited the room leaving the two of them alone while her hands continued organising the things on the tray he didn't remember knocking over. “It must have been awful to make you lash out like that...”

They'd tucked the blankets in again and, his arms feeling unusually heavy, he began pulling at them again in a desperate attempt to free his legs, the memory of being pinned in his dream flaring up vividly in his mind and sending unwelcome tears flooding down his cheeks.

She was at his side in an instant.

“What's wrong?”

“S’too tight…” he mumbled, kicking his equally heavy feet as best he could. “I…I need to…”

“Ok, hold still a second,” she ordered him softly before moving in even closer so that she could quickly untucked the blankets from beneath the mattress, allowing them to hang over the edge of the bed instead of trapping him in place. “There. Is that any better?”

He could only nod weakly in response.

“Katniss was the same when she was being treated following her extraction from the Arena,” the young girl murmured, picking up a tissue so as to gently wipe away his tears whilst being very careful of the injuries to his face. “She couldn't stand feeling trapped, especially not with the medication playing with her mind. They might have to adjust your dosage the way they did hers although I suppose it will depend mostly on your pain levels.”
“I'll...I'll take the pain over the...over the dreams...” he muttered as firmly as he could, using up a ridiculous amount of concentration in order to get the words out correctly. “I can't...I can't see them like that...not...not like that...tell them I'll take the pain...please...”

“She?” she asked softly, almost hesitantly, whilst plumping up his pillows.

“My family...my friends...my fiancé...” his voice, already growing weaker, cut off suddenly with a choked sob as his mind supplied an image of Juno as she had been in his dream. “I'm my dream they were dead...but at the same they weren't and... they were coming for me...”

“Katniss has dreams like that sometimes. About the Tributes she killed or saw killed inside the Arena,” the girl mumbled sympathetically as she picked up a glass of water and offered him the straw sitting in it, encouraging him to take just a few sips for now. “Dr Aurelius told us she was suffering from survivor’s guilt and that, with our help, she'd get better in time.”

Mikhail frowned.

It sounded as though this girl was close to Katniss...

And that was when he really looked at her for the first time, taking in more than just the basics about her and instantly recognising her for who she really was – Primrose Everdeen.

Of all the people who could have been assigned to look after him they had to go for her?

“She's your sister, isn't she? Katniss?” he enquired needlessly, visibly grimacing when she confirmed his earlier suspicions with a quick nod and a pretty smile. “Fan-fucking-tastic...”

He was spared the worst of her lecture about the use of foul language and how she didn't find it appropriate no matter what the circumstance by the arrival of a grey haired man, a badge hanging from a lanyard around his neck stating that he was Doctor Artur Greyson.

It was somewhat amusing to see her literally bite her tongue in her haste to cut off what she had been saying, a vivid blush staining her cheeks as she stepped out of the Doctors way.

“Don't look so worried, Healer Everdeen,” the grey-hair man chuckled as he came to stand beside Mikhail. “I happen to agree with your sentiments about the use of foul language so you'd better watch your tongue with me, soldier, or I'll wash your mouth out with soap.”

Of all the things that Mikhail could have responded with his brain chose to go with,

“M'not a soldier.”

“You injuries and service record say differently, Soldier...” here the Doctor had to pause to consult the information listed on a clipboard attached to the bed. “…Warrington.”

“...what service record?” Mikhail mumbled weakly, trying to push himself up onto his elbows so as to better see the clipboard only to have his arms give out. “Oh, for fu–”

“I wasn't joking about the soap, Soldier Warrington.”

Grumbling under his breath Mikhail pursed his lips as the Doctor launched into a detailed explanation of the information that the rebels of District Eight had supplied about him, aka his service record, and the injuries which had been treated by Doctor Greyson and his team.

“You're a very lucky young man,” the grey-haired man ended with a sympathetic smile after having reassured him that he wouldn't be left physically impaired. “It could have been much
worse. Now I'd like for you to speak to my colleague, Doctor Aurelius, at some point…”

“He’s the head doctor, right?” Mikhail snorted loudly, thinking back on what Primrose had briefly mentioned about him. Doctor Greyson nodded. “Yeah…I think I'll pass on that…”

Apparently he didn't have a choice.

He also didn't have a choice about his primary care giver so he was stuck being looked after by Primrose Everdeen, the coveted younger sister of the Mockingjay he hated so much.

This should have warned him that he wouldn't be allowed to get away with not seeing said Mockingjay for long but he genuinely hadn't expected her to walk into his room completely unannounced whilst her younger sister was carefully changing the dressings on his legs and feet, followed by her infamous Mentor, an rotund older man with pale blonde hair, a petite woman wearing an extravagantly fashioned turban and the entire bloody camera crew.

“What the…” he trailed off, glaring across the small room as he caught sight of the way their eyes were scanning his body in undisclosed horror as they took in the countless number of cuts and bruises although the worst of them were hidden by the dressings which were being carefully changed twice a day and the paper thin boxer shorts he had been given to wear. “What the fuck are you looking at? No, what the fuck are you doing here?! Get out!”

A hand slapped the back of his lightly.

“Language!”

Strangely enough it wasn't just Primrose’s familiar voice scolding him but the unfamiliar voice belonging to the woman wearing the turban on gee head, her accent confirming the fact that she was definitely from the Capitol and prompting him to shoot her a sharp glare.

“Trust me, sweet pea, that was nothing,” he snorted loudly as she adopted a thoroughly scandalised expression, her hand moving to cover her mouth. “Now, answer the question.”

“My name is Plutarch Havensbee. I'm…let's just say I'm in charge of everything that is to do with publicity regarding the Rebellion and I must be honest, I am very excited to learn your story and share it with the people,” the blonde man explained, gesturing towards the camera crew who quickly moved into appropriate positions around his bed so as to capture him from different angles at the same time. “Everyone wants to know more about you.”

“…I beg your pardon?” Mikhail choked out incredulously. “And what do you mean more? As far as I'm aware the people as you so delightfully put it don't know a damn thing about me!”

Plutarch harrumphed loudly.

“Cressida?”

So that was her name, Mikhail thought as the female leader of the camera crew stepped forwards with a smile, holding a sophisticated looking tablet in her hands.

“I’m not sure if you remember but as we were preparing to leave your District Commander Paylor handed me her nephew’s camera to see if we could recover any of the footage,” she explained, her fingers moving across the screen of the tablet with practised ease. “Unfortunately despite our best efforts we weren’t able to recover all of the footage due to the damage to the camera but we were able to recover a couple of interesting moments.”

“Still not seeing what this has to do with me…”
Cressida smiled brightly at him, swiping her finger across the screen to start a video playing.

“We combined it with some of our own footage and created this...”

It began with some archive footage of District Eight, making its way throughout the District before arriving in the loading bay using footage from Cecelia’s triumphant return however it wasn’t long before the image faded out only to be replaced by an image of the loading bay as it had been moments after the rebels had succeeded in taking it during the first uprising.

“We’re prepared for this.”

His mouth dropped open in shock as he recognised the voice overlaying the image.

That was his voice.

“We've been waiting for this day to come for weeks, no, months, ever since the Games ended. And it's not just us any more, dad…” Mikhail couldn’t help but flinch as the image of the small screen changed to show not only himself as he had been but his poor father as well. “…not just our small group of Rebels – we have students, workers, everyone, anyone!”

It was almost predictable as the screen was suddenly dedicated to footage showing the Rebels of District Eight both in the heat of battle and in their downtime around the District although the footage was very careful never to show the locations of the forest camps.

He was pretty sure that had been Misha’s doing rather than the Capitol woman’s.

When the image returned to the loading bay it was obvious that they’d skipped a chunk of their conversation and Mikhail had a horrible feeling about exactly where they had cut to.

“It's different this time. We have someone to follow this time,” his image on the screen announced as soon as the focus was back on him, instantly confirming Mikhail’s suspicions. “A symbol of hope to rally the people, to call them to arms and to bring them in line!”

“If you're talking about that silly girl…”

He let out a choked gasp at the sound of his father’s voice.

“I'm talking about the Mockingjay. The people will follow the Mockingjay!

“You've change your tune…” Mikhail winced as he realised that this was the last time he had heard his father speak with such emotion in his voice, the subsequent deaths of his mother and sister affecting him. “You couldn't stand Katniss Everdeen a couple of months ago.”

Haymitch snorted.

“I don't follow Katniss Everdeen. I follow the Mockingjay.”

“I don't know if it's escaped your notice, son, but they're one in the same.”

Katniss shifted uneasily and Mikhail got the feeling that this was the first time she'd seen this footage, same as him, and was understandably confused by what was being shown.

“All of you are mad, blindly following a little girl towards your deaths!”

“They are not the same!”
Mikhail winced as the image changed to show just his face.

It wasn’t the same one he saw in the mirror now.

It was youthful, innocent and full of hope.

“Katniss Everdeen might be the face of this rebellion, the spark that started it all but the Mockingjay is its soul, its heart. We are all the Mockingjay!”

He couldn’t hold back the disappointed groan when he saw that they’d altered the image so that the wall behind him had been replaced by a flaming Mockingjay.

“We won’t force you to join this fight,” his voice sounded out from the screen, confusing Mikhail for a second until he realised they must have cut to another part of the recording so as to get the ending they wanted. “We’re not like the Capitol. But make no mistake my dad’s right, there is going to be a fight. It may not be today, it may not be tomorrow but it will happen. And the Capitol will not be kind. We’ve all seen what they’re willing to do to our innocent children in the name of entertainment. We know exactly what they are capable.

A brief flash of one of the past Games flared up on the screen.

“The question you have to ask yourself is do you believe that freedom in worth fighting for?”

“No…” he gasped, trembling as he realised what they were about to show him, as he remembered what happened next that day. “No, no, no, no…turn it off…turn it off…”

“I’ll fight.”

“Turn it off!”

“I’d like to live the rest of my life free.

“Turn it off!”

“No matter how long or short a time that might be.

“Freedom.”

“Turn it off…” he begged, tears flooding down his cheeks as he watched Juno tilting her face up towards his on the screen to accept his kiss. “Please…I’m sorry, Juno…I’m so sorry…”

Thankfully it seemed that was the end of the video anyway as the image faded out to show the burning Mockingjay symbol once more with the word ‘Freedom’ emblazoned across it.

“We broadcast it this morning,” Plutarch announced once the video had come to an end, apparently oblivious of the fact that Mikhail was a breath away from completely breaking down as he shared an almost secretive smile with Cressida. “And it was very well received.”

Mikhail frowned.

“So this afternoon we broadcast the second video.”

Mikhail’s stomach dropped as Cressida once again swiped her finger across the screen of the tablet and activate the aforementioned second video, her smile firmly fixed in place.

It was instantly noticeable that this video was going to be far darker than the first due to the fact that it began with a blank screen and just the sounds of an explosion before fading into what
appeared to be one of the worst bombing raids the District had been put through.

This was followed by unsteady footage of the day they had cleared out the last of the civilians and the intense fighting which had led to the creation of “No-Mans-Land.”

It was upon “No-Mans-Land” that the video finally focused on.

“Shit! Is that Squad 16?!

“What's left of them anyway…”

“No…” Mikhail gasped fearfully as the image shuddered and shifted, the camera obviously being adjusted too quickly to create a smooth transition, until finally it zoomed in on a group of white uniforms surrounding five naked people on their knees and covered in blood. “You…you fucking bastards! Why did they…why did they film this? Turn it off! *Turn it off!*

They didn't turn it off.

He screamed and spat at them as he watched the executions which had haunted his sleep since he was rescued, as he saw the way that his father kept looking towards where he knelt in the line in obvious fear before his skull eventually exploded in a mess of blood and brains.

“Stop it!”

“Plutarch…” Haymitch murmured worriedly, pulling Katniss further away from the side of the bed as Mikhail began to thrash and scream as much as he could. “Maybe we should…”

Misha’s head exploded on the screen and he crumpled to the ground.

“Please! Stop it!”

“Wait.”

Plutarch’s voice was cold and firm.

“*Forwards!*” a voice hissed from the tablet. “*Move forwards! Commander Paylor's orders!*”

Once again the image shook and shifted as it followed the Rebel soldiers as they pressed into “No-Mans-Land” before finally the screen showed him on his knees once more, his head tilted back, only now the camera was close enough to pick up what he was saying.

“You can't win. *Not really. You might win this battle but you'll never win the war. And do you know why?*” Mikhail couldn’t remember half of what he’d said in what he believed were to be his final moments and was surprised to hear how coherent he had been, how firm his voice had been despite his copious injuries. “*Because no matter what you do the people will never stop fighting, not now that they have tasted freedom for the first time in their lives.*”

The image pulled back to show Varro snarling down at him.

“Turn it off! Turn it off!”

“It doesn't even matter how many of us you torture, how many you kill,” his destroyed voice echoed loudly instead, as though they had enhanced it somehow. “*There will always be someone who is willing to fight and, if need be, to die for freedom. You cannot win.*”

Varro’s finger visibly tightened on the trigger.
“Fire!”

“He could remember the way the rough ground had felt against his bare skin as he’d grabbed hold of Belle and forced her to crawl away from the Peacekeepers who were too busy scrambling for cover to notice their painfully slow escape, could remember how the air had been thick with the smell of the decaying flesh of those left to rot in “No-Mans-Land.”

He didn’t remember looking so fiercely determined.

“Covering fire!” a voice boomed out suddenly from the tablet. “Covering fire!”

The camera panned back to show the brave souls who had risked their lives to help them, one of whom paid the ultimate price before both he and Belle were dragged to safety.

“Fucking hell…”

“What did they do to them?”

It seemed as though the camera was able to pick up every cut, every bruise, every welt, every broken bone on his body as his head was gently guided to rest in someone’s lap.

He couldn’t believe how sunken his eyes had looked, how hollow his cheeks had been.

“We’ve got to wait for the worst of the fighting to pass and then we’ll get you both to the hospital,” Commander Paylor’s voice was heard before the image pulled back to reveal the fact that she was the one comforting him, heedless of the way his blood was staining her hands and clothes. “You just need to hold on for a little bit longer, just a little bit longer…”

“Misha…”

He flinched as he heard his pain filled voice, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“M’sorry…”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she reassured him, the screen zooming in on the tear rolling down her cheek. “We couldn’t get a clean shot until we were close enough. It wasn’t your fault…”

He pressed his fist into his mouth, biting down on his knuckles to stop himself screaming as his body trembled so violently that the bed beneath him actually began to shake loudly.

When the image faded out once more his hopes that this was the end of the video were quickly dashed as a much clearer image of him filled the small screen, showing him in his ill-fitting clothes with dirty bandages and dressings poking out from underneath them as he sat strapped into the chair in the back of the hovercraft, his hollow eyes fixed on the camera.

"I want to speak to you…"

Wait…

That…that wasn’t what he’d said then…

“The world is finally changing and I'm not going to sit by and let someone else fight for me…”

That definitely hadn’t been what he’d been saying at that particular moment as that had been when he was passionately chewing Katniss out for pretending to care about them all.
“I've made my decision.”

The image around him began burning away to reveal a flaming Mockingjay just like it had during the first video, the special effect only serving to make his injuries look even worse.

“Now it's your turn.”

Katniss’ infamous whistle echoed throughout the oddly silent hospital room as his image disappeared leaving only the flaming Mockingjay with the words ‘Join The Fight’ across it.

The silence only lasted a couple of seconds after the screen finally went blank.

“What the fuck gave you the right to…” he trailed off, flinging his blankets off of his legs much to Primrose’s vocal disapproval so that he threw himself towards the startled man who’s smile hadn’t slipped once until that moment. “You…you…I…just…what the fuck?!”

Plutarch actually let out a squeak as Mikhail succeeded in grabbing hold of the front of his overalls and using his recovered strength to slam the older man back against the wall.

“We needed a voice of the people,” Cressida spoke up quickly, hurrying to his side even as everyone else moved away from the display of violence, Katniss hastily reaching out to grab hold of her sister when the young healer made to hurry towards him. “Most people are willing to follow Katniss but there are still a few who believe that she, as a Victor, is part of the Capitol machine. We needed to give them someone they could relate to, someone they could see themselves fighting alongside. A man of the people, as it were, and the footage of you and your particular… circumstances were too good of an opportunity to pass up.”

A cold chill ran up and down his spine, his hands automatically tightening their hold on the front of Plutarch’s uniform even as the man’s hands came up to take hold of his wrists.

“My…circumstances…” Mikhail repeated slowly, his voice emotionless.

“Yes,” Cressida continued quickly, her hands clutching the tablet nervously. “We don’t know everything, of course, which is why we wanted to interview you today so as to get our facts straight for any future videos that we make with you. The plan is to have you and Katniss work alongside in order to gain as much support for the Rebellion as we possibly can. We believe it’s the best chance we have of turning all of the Districts against the Capitol.”

Mikhail pushed himself away from Plutarch in order to face off against Cressida, his gaze finding Katniss over her shoulder where the young Victor stood with her Mentor as sister.

“I’m not going to work with her,” he sneered loudly. “She’s a cold-blooded murderer.”

“Mikhail!” Primrose snapped, forcibly tearing herself out of her sister’s hold so that she could hurry forwards to stand between him and Cressida. “How can you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s true,” Mikhail sighed, looking down at the teenage girl who had been working her way underneath his skin for the last few days. “She is responsible for so much death…”

Primrose sighed sadly, shaking her head before reaching out to usher him back towards his bed, ignoring the way her sister protested loudly as she placed herself so close to his side.

“He won’t hurt me, Katniss,” she snapped in her sister’s direction as she began tucking him in underneath his blankets. “He’s upset, just like you were when you were recovering.”
“You heard what he said…”

“Everyone is entitled to their own opinion,” Primrose announced wisely, carefully checking on one of the dressings covering a wound on his side which was currently refusing to heal and as such was causing him a great deal of pain. “Perhaps we should all discuss these things in a calm and controlled manner. Mikhail, do you want to help aid the Rebellion?”

“Of course I do,” he answered instantly. “You know I do.”

“And we both know there’s no way you’re going to be re-joining the fight any time soon,” she continued, smiling at him as he huffed and wiped the tear tracks from his cheeks. “So why don’t you give what Mr Heavensbee and Miss Cressida are suggesting a try, help in whatever way you can and then if it doesn’t work out you can just go back to the fight?”

“…how did you get so smart, little girl?”

Primrose offered him a tired smile.

“Easy,” she answered, batting his hands away when he tried to touch the wound she was checking on before gesturing over her shoulder with her chin. “I had Katniss as a sister.”

Whatever spell she had put on his was over the minute his attention shifted back to Katniss.

“I still won’t work with her.”

Plutarch reluctantly agreed to his singular condition, however Mikhail noticed the look he shared with Cressida and Haymitch promising that they would revisiting the subject later.

“Fine,” Mikhail sighed once Primrose had finished fussing. “What do you want to know?”

Cressida gestured to her two cameramen to adjust their positions before turning her attention to the tablet in her hands, her fingers flying across the screen to bring up the camera feeds as well as the list of questions she had prepared with Plutarch to ask him.

"Why did you choose to follow Katniss Everdeen?"

"Seriously?” he scoffed, shaking his head against the pillows beneath him. “That’s your opening question? After everything you just heard? You don't want me to answer that."

"It’s the same opening question I’ve used in all my interviews with supporters of the Rebellion,” Cressida answered simply, glancing back and forth between him and the screen. “As young Primrose said everyone is entitled to their own opinions. However I also believe that should a person hold such an opinion they should be willing to explain themselves.”

"…isn't the point of this to get people to like her?"

"Well…yes..."

"Then you don't want me to answer that, at least not on camera."

Cressida merely smiled firmly across at him.

"Humour me."

Fine.

If they wanted him to explain his reasons to them then he would.
“Short answer?” he muttered, fixing his gaze on the cameraman standing beside Katniss. “I don't follow Katniss Everdeen and I never will. She's nothing more than a cold blooded murderer. I fight for my District. I fight for freedom. But I don't...I won't fight for her.

Katniss flinched.

“We can use some of that,” Cressida decided softly, nodding her head in approval before meeting Mikhail’s gaze once more as she continued softly. “Dare I ask for the long answer?”

“Ok, but just you remember that you asked for it,” he chuckled ruefully, shaking his head once before squaring his shoulders and beginning his tale. “Growing up in District Eight I had a good group of friends but there was one boy I was always close to, right from when we were small. We were practically inseparable to be honest. His name was Adya Kaminski.”

He paused, just waiting to see if Katniss reacted at all.

She did not.

He huffed out a self-depreciating because, honestly, what did he expect?

Still, he had to check…

“I don't suppose that name means anything to any of you…”

“Should it?” Cressida enquired innocently.

"No. Not really although it does sort of prove my point,” he muttered sadly, wiping away a single tear which was threatening to fall. “You see Adya lost his parents during a fire which decimated one of the apartment blocks. He lost his sight as well. He dropped out of school and I didn't see him again for nearly three years. Until Reaping Day last year, actually.”

Here he paused, shifting his gaze across the Katniss.

“Anything sound familiar yet, Miss Everdeen?”

Watching her as he was he saw the exact moment she realised who he was talking about, saw the way the colour drained out of her cheeks as her eyes went ridiculously wide.

"...the blind boy from District Eight..."

He offered he what could only be described as a nasty smile.

“Yes. The blind boy from District Eight. Also known as Adya Kaminski. My friend,” he explained simply, locking his gaze with hers. “You killed him, Katniss Everdeen. You triggered an explosion that filled his body with so much shrapnel he was barely recognisable. You left him there, stricken with pain and struggling to breathe as his lungs collapsed, drowning in his own blood until the boy he'd fallen in love with and who loved him in return found him.”

“I...”

Her stunned expression did nothing to deter him from laying into her once more.

“He was blind and helpless and you gave him a slow and painful death for no other reason than you didn't care enough about him to show him mercy.”

“You don't understand,” she protested. “It's...it's different inside the Arena...I had to…”
“I’m not angry that he was killed in the Games!” he snapped, clenching his fists in his lap. “He knew going in there that he wouldn’t be coming back. No, I’m angry that it didn’t even cross your mind to make his passing as quick and painless as possible. You could have, you know? You could have put an arrow in his heart before triggering the explosion. I’ve seen you. It would have taken you less than a second. But you didn’t. You left him to suffer.”

Once again he could pinpoint the exact moment she realised the truth behind his words.

“I’m sorry...”

“Your apologies are worthless,” he spat towards her, the words tumbling out of his mouth as quickly as they formed in his mind. “You are a cold, heartless bitch and no matter how they dress you or teach you to act that is what you will always be. You’re selfish. You don’t care about this rebellion. You don’t care about the hundreds of people dying every day for a cause that you supposedly stand for. No. I see you for who you really are, Katniss Everdeen, and I know that you can count the number of people you truly care about on one hand.”

Holding up his hand he demonstrated his point by counting them off on his fingers.

“Your sister. Your boy with the bread. And yourself.”

“I...”

Seeing her floundering, unable to contradict his statement, Mikhail offered her one last pointed smirk before turning his attention back to the other people in the room all of which were staring at him in undisguised shock, none more so than Cressida herself.

“There it is. My answer to your question. I told you that you wouldn’t like it,” he concluded with a shrug, calmly smoothing out his blankets. “So, what else do you want to know?”

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**A/N** So...Mikhail came across a lot angrier than I had originally intended but given that he’s a little bit emotionally unstable at this point in the story I suppose we can’t really blame him. Some of this chapter was written a while ago which actually proved to be more challenging as it took major editing to get the sections to go together and I’m still not 100% happy but it’s as good as I’m going to get it at the moment. Comments welcome. X
“What's up with you?” Mikhail found himself asking as Primrose set about checking on his various wounds, her face lacking its usual smile and not a single word passing her lips. “Must be important for you not to be regaling me with a story about your cat or something…”

She sighed, pausing with her hands hovering over one of his persistent wounds.

“They’ve sent Katniss back to District Twelve,” she whispered, tears welling up in her eyes as she bit down on her bottom lip hard enough to make him wince. “To make another propo.”

“I thought there was nothing left of District Twelve…”

“That's the point, I think,” she murmured, a single tear slipping down her pale cheek as she finally began unwrapping the wound she had paused over. “This is starting to look better…”

Mikhail could recognise a deliberate subject change when he heard one.

For the next hour or so their conversation remained firmly centred on the safe subject of his injuries and how well most of them seemed to be healing, leading on to a discussion about the proposed physical therapy they wanted to put him through to help his overall recovery.

He was wheeled over to his mandatory psychiatric evaluation shortly after lunch where he found the only surviving Victor of the Hunger Games he could actually stand waiting for his own session, rope in hand as he fashioned a ridiculously complicated looking knot.

Finnick Odair was broken.

Anyone could see that and yet it was this human reaction to the trauma he had suffered which had succeeded in erasing the image Mikhail had built up in his head of the playboy Victor, particularly after he’d overheard the Victor discussing his relationship with the only woman he had ever truly loved, Annie Cresta, the equally broken Victor of District Four.

The fact that she was currently a prisoner of the Capitol was doing nothing to help Finnick.

His wheelchair was placed beside the chair Finnick was perched on the edge of and the two shared a greeting of barely perceivable nods before settling into a comfortable silence.
Sometimes they talked when they were waiting for their sessions with Doctor Aurelius, compared their lives and told stories of their home Districts, but other times they were happy to keep the relatively peaceful silence going for a just a little bit longer.

They never talked about what had happened to them.

They left that particular subject for their mandatory sessions with the psychiatrist.

Finnick was called in first, his hands never pausing in the motions required to create whatever knot it was he had chosen to work on today, and he was in there for a good half an hour before finally he was allowed to leave and Mikhail was wheeled into the room.

“You know you could just send for me later rather than leave me sitting outside like an idiot,” he pointed out before the psychiatrist could speak. “Then I wouldn't be so bored.”

“Ah, but then you'd never have a chance to communicate with Mr Odair,” the older man pointed out as he took his seat behind his desk, picking up his tablet and opening up the file he used to make notes during the sessions. “And I know for a fact that the conversations the two of you have out there are as valuable as your sessions with me at healing your minds.”

Mikhail huffed disbelieving lay.

“So what do you want to talk about today, Doc?”

“We touched on the deaths of your mother and sister towards the end of yesterday's session,” Aurelius recalled, consulting his notes quickly. “Perhaps we should pick up where we left off and you can tell me all about them? Your sisters names was Sasha, correct?”

“Yes…” Mikhail confirmed reluctantly, his gut twisting painfully. “Well, it was Aleksandra, really, but we always called her Sasha ever since she was small. It's was just…easier…”

“How old was she when she died?”

Mikhail snapped his gaze away from the sympathetic expression on the doctor’s face, instead staring at the bland grey wall of the small compartment he used as his office.

“Fourteen,” he finally answered, his voice noticeably choked. “She was only fourteen...”

“And how did her death make you feel?”

“How did it make me feel?” he couldn't help but repeat the question somewhat incredulously as he turned to glare at the older man. “How do you think it made me feel?”

The urge to throw something came out of nowhere and he had to clench his fists on the armrests of his wheelchair in order to stop himself from grabbing the nearest breakable object and hurling it across the room with a scream of rage as he answered the question.

“How old was she when she died?”

“Angry!” he all but bellowed, lashing out verbally as he had during a couple of previous sessions and just as he had then the middle-aged man sat on the other side of the desk barely reacted, only moving to jot down some notes with his stylus. “Horrified! Gui–”

He bit down on his lip in his haste to silence himself as his mind ran away from him.

“What?” the psychiatrist pushed, latching onto his reluctance. “What did you feel?”

“Guilty…” he gasped, sagging into his chair as though someone had cut his strings. “I felt guilty,
“all right, because if we hadn't done what we did then the Capitol wouldn't have…”

Aurelius hummed thoughtfully.

“If you could would you change what happened?” he finally asked, his stylus constantly moving. “Would you go back and refuse to be part of the original rebellion in District Eight?”

“No,” Mikhail responded. “No, the rebellion needed to happen. Things needed to change.”

A solitary tear fell down his cheek.

“If I could got back and change one thing it would be to make sure that my mother and sister were nowhere near that building when the Capitol retaliated,” he admitted softly, wiping the tear away with a somewhat jerking motion. “I wouldn't change my involvement in a cause I believe in but I would save their lives. If I could. But I can't so what does it matter?”

“Oh, it matters, Mr Warrington,” Aurelius reassured him with a soft smile. “It matters a great deal. I would be concerned if you didn't feel angry at the situation however I would be even more concerned if you didn't feel guilty about everything that happened to the people you loved and cared for. Feeling guilt about their deaths is healthy, Mikhail, so long as you don't let it fester and become something more. You were not responsible for their deaths or for any of the deaths that followed. Those who dropped the bombs or fired the bullets are.”

Once more Mikhail was forced to look away from the older man’s earnest expression.

“Sadly this is all we have time for today as I've been informed you are required in a meeting with President Coin,” the psychiatrist sighed apologetically. “We’ll continue tomorrow but I want you to remember that it's only human to feel guilty so long as you remember who is truly responsible. You did not kill them, Mr Warrington. President Snow and his regime did.”

“Look, I don't need you to patronise me…wait…no one told me anything about a meeting…”

Doctor Aurelius smiled as the door behind Mikhail slid open to admit an unfamiliar figure in the unpleasantly familiar grey uniform citizens of District Thirteen were expected to wear.

“Perhaps because they knew you'd find some way not to attend if you knew about it in advance,” Aurelius suggested as the figure took hold of Mikhail’s wheelchair and began to pull him backwards towards the door. “I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, Mr Warrington.”

He was dropped off at a large conference room on the command level with little fanfare, the room as grey and dull as all of the others, and he found himself placed beside Cecelia at one end of the long table while Katniss had been placed at the other end with her fan club.

President Alma Coin, the seemingly emotionless leader of District Thirteen was seated in the centre of the long table between them facing the large screen which dominated the wall.

“Do you really need me here?” he sighed deeply, shifting uncomfortably in his chair and making it creak loudly. “Only I've got much more important things to be doing with my time…like watching paint dry or, you know, counting the ceiling tiles in my room…”

“Soldier Warrington, you have been brought here for a private viewing of the latest promotional videos created by Mr Heavensbee and his team before they are broadcast this evening,” President Coin announced coldly, her gaze never once leaving the screen. “That you are here is nothing more than a courtesy. Please refrain from speaking until spoken to.”

Mikhail stared at the woman incredulously before snorting loudly.
“Ok…” he chuckled deeply, reaching out to snag a paperweight from the table. “And here was me thinking the whole emotionless robot thing was just an act for the cameras…”

Several guards around the room shifted noticeably while President Coin finally turned to look down her nose at him before nodding to Plutarch to begin playing the first video.

And there he was, reclining back against his hospital bed on the overly large screen.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Start by introducing yourself,” Cressida’s voice came from off camera and he realised that this was some of the additional footage she’d filmed that morning after breakfast. “People want to know who you are, how old you are, where you’re from…that sort of thing…”

“Uh-huh…”

Absentmindedly he reached up to pat the top of his head as he caught sigh out how unkempt his hair looked in the video, finding it sticking up around his head and definitely in desperate need of a trim, the strands significantly longer than he was used to them being.

“Ok. Names Mikhail, Mikhail Warrington and I’m eighteen years old,” he announced on the screen, the camera slowly zooming in until only his face and neck could be seen. “And I’m from District Eight. That enough or do you want to know when I lost my virginity as well?”

Katniss let out a shocked gasp.

“I think we’ll skip that, if it’s all the same to you,” Cressida's amused voice countered his offer. “I’m sure people will recognise you from the previous videos we’ve made about you but perhaps you could explain a bit about growing up in District Eight? About your family and friends? Maybe explain how you came to be involved with the rebellion?”

His loud exhale echoed around the room, covering the similar noise he uttered just then.

“You sure you got enough tape for all that, sweetheart?”

“I’m sure.”

They’d spliced his story, recorded a couple of days ago, with footage of some of the various things he mentioned including archive footage of District Eight and Adya’s participation in the 74th Hunger Games although mostly it was recent footage of his part in the rebellion.

Eventually the video came to an end, Plutarch obviously having decided to reuse his passionate speech from the loading bay, fading the image out into a flaming mockingjay.

The only sign that President Coin approved of the video was a minuscule nod she offered Plutarch who reacted like it was the highest form of praise before starting the second video.

He hadn't truly appreciated how utterly decimated District Twelve would look, the scorched building and blackened husks of what were once human beings making his stomach lurch.

If he could go through the rest of his life without seeing another burned corpse he would be eternally grateful having seen more than his fair share of them in District Eight, so many that the image on the screen managed to trigger a vivid memory of the scent of burning flesh.

“We were all standing right here watching the Games when you fired that arrow,” the deep voice of Katniss’s friend accompanied the image on the screen changing to show both him and the girl
in question surrounded by corpses and pieces of rubble, both of them visibly upset. “The screens just went dark. Nobody had any idea what had happened.”

More images of what remained of District a Twelve were played as his voice continued.

“The Peacekeepers forced us back into our homes. For maybe an hour the town was dead quiet and then, at a little past nine, we heard their trucks pulling out. All of them. Every single Peacekeeper. And I knew what that meant.”

A close-up of her friends face suddenly dominated the screen and Mikhail recognised the look of pain and anguish in the other boy’s eyes as the same one he saw in the mirror.

“Me and a couple of guys from the mines, we started pulling people from their houses and tried to get them to the fence line but a lot of people were scared of the forest,” he explained on the screen, a brief image of the fence line and the dense woodland beyond it flashing up before the screen showed his anguished face once more. “So they headed up onto the road, made a break for it that way. 915 of us made it to the fence…”

Slowly the camera panned away from his face to show the image of the long road spanning out in front of him as he continued to speak, the ground littered with hundreds of corpses.

“Then we watched as Capitol bombers circled back towards the road,” his voice was becoming more and more choked by the minute. “They firebombed them as they ran away.”

A brief shot showed Katniss reacting to his words, tears in her eyes and upon her cheeks.

“915 out of 10,000…” the deep voice cracked painfully as the camera showed his own tearful face once more, following him as he crouched down unsteadily. “I should've grabbed people. I should've dragged them with me. Some of the kids I could have carried.”

“You saved so many people, Gale,” Cressida voice came from behind the camera once again and Mikhail found himself inexplicably relieved to finally know the other boys name. “Without you, there would be no District Twelve. Not even the memory of it.”

For a long moment there wasn’t any sound to accompany the images of Katniss and Gale walking around what remained of their District, occasionally stopping to look at something, but then all of a sudden the footage became devoted to Katniss and her voice was heard.

“Are you, are you,

Coming to the tree?

They strung up a man,

They say who murdered three.

Strange things did happen here,

No stranger would it be.

If we met at midnight,

In the hanging tree.”

Mikhail found himself comparing her voice, with its slight crackle and earthy tones, to the effortlessly lyrical, almost ethereal voice that his friend had inherited from his mother.
“Are you, are you,
Coming to the tree?
Where a dead man called out,
For his love to flee.
Strange things did happen here,
No stranger would it be.
If we met at midnight,
In the hanging tree.”

He'd never heard this song before, or anything like it, so it was a safe bet to believe that it was unique to District Twelve which left him wondering if all their songs were as depressing.

“Are you, are you,
Coming to the tree?
Where I told you to run,
So we'd both be free.
Strange things did happen here,
No stranger would it be.
If we met at midnight,
In the hanging tree.”

He tried not to let it happen but his attention was starting to waver, the repetitive nature of the song causing him to lose interest even as the images on the screen became ones of people joining the rebellion and standing alongside a battle ready Katniss and Gale.

“Are you, are you,
Coming to the tree?
Wear a necklace of hope,
Side by side with me.
Strange things did happen here,
No stranger would it be.
If we met at midnight,
In the hanging tree.”

Predictably the image of Katniss firing an arrow towards the sky burned away to reveal a mockingjay, the whistle sounding loudly as the words ‘JOIN THE MOCKINGJAY’ appeared.
“Excellent work, Heavensbee,” President Coin murmured, actually voicing her approval this time much to the preening idiots delight. “The altered lyric is seamless and most fitting.”

Katniss wasn't the only one frowning in confusion.

“Altered lyric?”

“We decided to change ‘necklace of rope’ to ‘necklace of hope’ so as to inspire the people,” Plutarch answered happily. “Shall we begin broadcasting the videos immediately?”

“Inspire people to do what?” Mikhail snorted, interrupting whatever President Coin had been about to say as everyone present turned to stare at him. “I mean, seriously, that is quite possibly the most depressing song I've heard. I mean, yeah, it's pretty poignant but seriously do you want people to hang themselves? I thought we were meant to be getting them to join the fight not making them so depressed they off themselves to get away.”

“Your opinion has been noted, Soldier Warrington,” President Coin finally broke the silence which had followed his outburst. “Begin alternating transmissions immediately.”

Huh.

Noted and subsequently dismissed, apparently, not that Mikhail really cared.

He'd just been trying to point out that not everyone would interpret that particular song the way they had, the way they wanted people to and it might actually make things worse.

“Please return to your scheduled activities.”

~ * ~ * ~

“This is a Code Red Alert. Please, remain calm and begin evacuation protocol. Proceed to your nearest stairwell and descend to Level 40. Blast doors will be sealed in six minutes.”

“What the…?”

An unfamiliar nurse hurried into his room with a wheelchair and all but dragged him out of his bed, ignoring his protests and demands to know what was going on in favour of hurrying along the corridor towards the nearest lift where a couple of other patients in wheelchairs were being loaded on board whilst those who could walk were being sent down the stairs.

“I can walk, you know?”

It was a couple of days since the meeting with President Coin and he'd been attending physical therapy whenever he wasn't with Doctor Aurelius having his mind studied.

“You haven't been signed off yet so, no, you can't,” the nurse snapped as she forced his wheelchair into the last bit of space available in the lift. “Emergency evacuation override.”

This last statement was said into the voice box by the controls of the lift and suddenly they were hurtling down at a significantly faster rate than the lift usually travelled at, making some of the other patients cry out as they dropped down into the bowels of the District.

“This is a Code Red Alert. Please, remain calm and begin evacuation protocol. Proceed to your nearest stairwell and descend to Level 40. Blast doors will be sealed in six minutes. This is a Code Red Alert. Please, remain calm and begin evacuation protocol. Proceed…”
The lift came to an abrupt and unpleasant stop at the bottom of the structure but they weren’t given any time to recover from the unpleasant journey before they were being wheeled briskly into a large room filled with row upon row of metal bunk beds.

Down here the annoying klaxon still sounded but the voice message was slightly different.

“Continue to the Supply Station and claim one pack for each member of your compartment. Please keep all personal items within your assigned area. Be courteous to your fellow citizens. This is a Code Red Alert. All citizens should be inside the bunker.”

It turned out that all of the patients were assigned to the same area and Mikhail was “helped” up onto the top bunk of a bed almost in the centre of the enormous room.

Strangely though no one was assigned the lower bunk but as soon as the “mobile patients” arrived it became apparent that they’d decided to partner him up with Finnick Odair.

“Continue to the Supply Station and claim one pack for each member of your compartment. Please keep all personal items within your assigned area. Be courteous to your fellow citizens. This is a Code Red Alert. All citizens should be inside the bunker. Continue to the Supply Station and claim one pack for each member of your compartment. Please keep all personal items within your assigned area. Be courteous to your fellow citizens. This is a Code Red Alert. All citizens should be inside the bunker. Continue to the Supply Station and claim one pack for each member of your compartment. Please keep all personal items within your assigned area. Be courteous…”

“I swear if I hear that announcement one more time I won't be responsible for my actions…” Mikhail growled, grabbing the pillow which had been resting on his bunk and jamming it over his head. “Seriously, if they haven't got the message by now they're not going to!”

Below him Finnick let out an involuntary chuckle.

Just then the doors sealed with a loud thud, the lights flickering momentarily before strengthening although even then they were still barely enough to illuminate the room.

“What do you thinks going on?” someone, a refugee from District Twelve who had been injured during their escape, asked from her own bunk. “You don't think the Capitol…?”

Mikhail pushed himself up into a seated position as he heard the familiar sounds of an explosion, far off and muffled but an explosion which shook the ceiling none the less.

Some people cried out in fear, mostly the women and children, but Mikhail found himself counting the time between the explosions as he had been taught to back in District Eight.

“Fifteen seconds…” he murmured softly. “They're blanket bombing over a large area.”

“How…how do you know that?”

“They did the same thing in District Eight,” he explained softly, lying back down on his bunk. “If they're targeting a specific area the explosions are closer together. They did that too.”

Dust was shaken loose from the ceiling above them but it was nothing compared to what it had been like during a bombing back in District Eight when they’d been using inadequate shelters which had had a habit of collapsing on top of them in they were weakened.

They were safe down here.
“So what knot are you tying at the moment, Finnick?” Mikhail found himself enquiring as he twisted his body until he could lean down over the side of the bunk, holding onto the metal bars in strategic places so as to keep him locked in place and steady. “It looks…interesting…”

“It's a monkeys fist,” Finnick answered softly, tugging on the length of rope which he had formed into a compacted looking ball. “It’s a heaving line knot, used for weighing down the end of a piece of rope when you want to throw it across a significant distance.”

“…a monkeys fist?” he repeated the name with a chuckle. “Interesting name.”

“I didn't name the knot,” Finnick pointed out. “I was just taught how to tie it.”

Eventually the frequency of the explosions lessened before finally ceasing altogether leaving them in the semi-darkness, waiting in silence for someone to tell them what to do.

Only no one came.

No one except Katniss Everdeen who appeared out of the darkness intent on speaking with Finnick although she obviously wasn't expecting to find him chatting with Mikhail.

“What do you want?”

“Mikhail…” Finnick muttered in disapproval, glancing up from his knot. “Don't…”

“Can I sit?” her question was blatantly directed towards Finnick who agreed silently, gesturing to the bed and shifting to give her room. “Snow’s using Annie to punish you.”

She chose to sit directly below where he was hanging down which made it difficult for him to see her face but it only took a little bit of careful rearranging until he was able to lean down and watch both of their expressions at the same time without hurting his neck.

“I didn't understand until just now watching that stupid cat.”

It was odd.

She actually looked genuinely upset by her realisation.

“After your first Games, I thought the whole romance was an act,” Finnick admitted softly, fiddling absentmindedly with the complicated knot he had just finished tying an hour or so before then. “We all expected you to continue that strategy but it wasn’t until Peeta’s heart stopped and he nearly died that…I knew I’d misjudged you. You love him. I'm not saying in what way, maybe you don't even know yourself, but anyone paying attention can see it.”

“How do you live with it?”

For the first time Mikhail felt almost guilty for intruding so obviously into the private conversation but he remained perfectly still despite the way the blood was rushing to his head making him feel rather unsettled, curious as to what Finnick's answer to her question would be given the fact that Mikhail had seen how he struggled to cope some days.

“I drag myself out of nightmares and there's no relief waking up,” the painfully handsome young man admitted seriously, giving the knot a particularly sharp tug which almost succeeded in ruining it altogether even though he'd untie it soon go start a new one given that they would only let him have one piece of rope to work with. “But…it's better not to give in to it. Takes ten times longer to put yourself back together than it does to fall apart.”
Mikhail couldn’t stop himself from grunting in agreement with that particular statement, recognizing the phrase as one that Doctor Aurelius was fond of repeating when he struggled to cope with the difficult emotions his mandatory sessions dredged to the surface.

It looked as though Katniss wanted to say something in response to Finnick's heartfelt words but the arrival of Boggs, perfectly presentable in his military uniform, to escort her up to the command level where her “presence has been requested” by President Coin herself.

Thankfully it wasn't long after she was called away that the “All Clear” was broadcast and the nurses and orderlies returned to escort the patients back up to the medical level.

“Seriously, I can walk!” he grumbled deeply as he was forced into a wheelchair once more whilst Finnick was lead towards the stairs. “There is no need for this stupid thing…”

“Until you get signed off by your physical therapist I'm afraid you have no choice,” the male nurse pushing him into the lift responded calmly. “You might be able to walk short distances but I doubt very much that you'd be able to manage all the stairs you'd need to climb.”

He glanced across at the stairs surrounding the lift and grimaced.

“…fair point.”

That was a lot of stairs.

He had just been settled back into his room, the blankets tucked in too tightly around his legs in the way that everyone but Primrose insisted on doing, when the girl in question burst into the room with an ear piercing squeal and a look of pure excitement on her pretty face.

“They're going to rescue Peeta and the other Victors!”

“When?”

“Now!” she exclaimed loudly, frowning briefly as she spotted his blankets and quickly losing them without being asked to. “Rumour is that District Five took out the dam which powers most of the Capitol so they've just launched a rescue mission. Isn't that wonderful?”

He frowned at her in confusion, given the previous conversations they had on the subject.

“I thought President Coin was against rescuing the Victors?”

“That was before they managed to get through to Peeta and he was able to warn them about the bombing,” she explained once she had finished working on his blankets. “Apparently he's the reason we were able to get everyone to the shelters in time. President Coin couldn't come up with a good enough reason not to rescue them any more after that.”

No.

He doubted anyone could come up with a valid reason to not stage a rescue after all of those facts and circumstances were laid before them given how perfect the timing was.

“Gale volunteered to go on the mission,” Primrose continued. “As did Boggs.”

“Not Katniss?”

Now that did surprise him.
He'd been pretty sure that she would have insisted on going the rescue mission...

“No,” Primrose sighed sadly, fiddling with her long braid. “She had a breakdown when they were trying to film a propo about how we survived the bombing and they had to sedate her. They've asked Finnick to record it instead as they need it as part of the rescue.”

Huh.

He had no idea why a propo would be needed for the rescue but what did he know, he was just a fabric dyer from District Eight who had accidentally become a face of the rebellion.

“Did you get any sleep in the shelter?” Primrose enquired with a slight frown although she was obviously still buzzing with excitement. “We were down there most of the night.”

“Did you?”

“No,” she admitted, rubbing at her tear ducts in the universally recognised *I'm really tired* motion. “I've been told to go and get some sleep before my official shift starts in four hours. You should do the same. They won't be back from the Capitol until the morning.”

Admittedly he was starting to feel the lack of sleep.

Perhaps a nap might be a good idea…

He didn't even remember Primrose leaving before suddenly all he could hear was shouting and the sounds of people running overlapped with the sounds of doctors barking orders.

Something told him that the rescuers had returned.

Pulling off the blankets loosely covering his legs he swung them over the side of the bed and pushed himself up to his feet, grimacing as the cold immediately seeped into the soles of his bare feet, before slowly making his way towards the door and out into the main room.

“Finnick!”

It seemed he had arrived just in time to witness a happy reunion as a flaming haired young woman dressed in a white hospital gown literally threw herself into Finnick's arms.

“Annie?” the Victor in question gasped loudly. “Annie!”

“Finnick!”

“Annie!”

If he wasn't so pleased for the older man Mikhail would have been making a comment about the disgusting display of affection given how it was like something out of a movie.

Instead he remained perfectly silent.

“You're safe!” Finnick cried out tearfully, holding her close to him. “You’re safe!”

He noticed Katniss standing on the other side of the room, seemingly as absorbed in the happy reunion as he was, but his attention was soon dragged away by the fuss being caused by an emaciated and bald young woman who had been placed on the bed closest to him.

"...you look almost as bad as we do…” she muttered, physically pushing the nurses away from her as they once again tried to make her lie down on the bed. “Get lost!”
He couldn't hold back a loud snort, his fingers absentmindedly tracing the worst of the healing wounds on his face which would soon turn into a rather menacing looking scar.

"Almost," he conceded before running his fingers through his hair in an attempt to tame the messy state it was in and failing miserably as his fingers only got caught in the tangles. “Although at least those bastards left my hair alone when they tortured me...”

She grinned back at him in response.

"Johanna," she introduced herself. "Johanna Mason, District Seven."

That explained why she looked and sounded somewhat familiar to him.

"I know," he responded. "I’m Mikhail, Mikhail Warrington of District Eight."

"Nice to meet you. Now, where are the drugs I was promised?"

An alarm suddenly started blaring, prompting almost every single nurse, doctor and soldier to sprint towards the opposite end of the medical level where the treatment rooms were.

“What the…”

“Send word to President Coin! Peeta Mellark just tried to kill Katniss Everdeen!”

“…shit…”

A/N This ended up being written a lot sooner than I had intended as I was trying to work on my other Hunger Games stories for a couple of days but, no, this wanted to be written. Hope you enjoyed it. Comments & Suggestions are always welcome. X
Chapter Fourteen

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Fourteen

The day he was finally cleared to leave medical was something of a mixed blessing.

On the one hand he was thrilled to finally get out of the sterile environment, to get away from the pester ing nurses visits and the sympathetic doctors but on the other hand he was sad to be leaving his friends, even if he was only being moved to a different level.

It had surprised him how easily it had been to befriend both Johanna and Annie, the two young women apparently opening up more to him about their time in the Capitol than anyone else after someone, Finnick most likely, had explained what had happened to him.

They'd been tortured, just like him, although Johanna had suffered significantly more than Annie had as she'd been an active part in bringing down the Arena and helping Katniss escape whilst her fellow captive had literally been taken as a means to hurt Finnick.

“You have to come back and visit us,” Annie ordered him surprisingly firmly as he dressed in the drab grey uniform he'd been handed. “I need...I need to tell you things…”

“Considering you three are the only people who actually like me in this whole place I would like to see you try and stop me from coming back,” he laughed deeply as he grinned across at the three Victors standing in what had been his room, flinching in an over-exaggerated manner when Primrose slapped him on the arm. “Oh, all right, you too Mini-Mockingjay.”

“Where are they putting you?” Finnick enquired, sliding his arm around Annie's waist. “Are you near any of the others? I know they put Haymitch and Beetee in the same section but…”

“No,” Mikhail interrupted him. “I've been placed into necessary military training by President Coin as apparently my time spent fighting in Eight doesn't count as combat experience so I'm being housed down in some place called the single male refugees block.”

“That sounds fun…” Johanna muttered with blatant sarcasm. “Aren't you lucky?”

He snorted loudly.

Johanna's no nonsense attitude and penchant for sarcasm had made her something of a kindred spirit for Mikhail who had already been accused of taking nothing seriously by various people,
particularly those who had grown up in the bland world of District Thirteen.

Humour, particularly sarcasm, was their way of coping with everything that had happened.

They had lost everything, their families, their friends and their homes.

They'd been tortured in unimaginable ways.

By rights they shouldn't be anywhere near as sane as they were.

“Still here, Soldier Warrington?”

The sneering voice of one of the orderlies drew his attention to the door where the older man, someone he'd never gotten on with during his stay, stood with his arms full of sheets.

“Only I need to get this room prepped for its new occupant.”

“Looks like I really am being kicked out, guys,” Mikhail chuckled, picking up the bag of personal belongings he'd been issued with. “Try not to be broken-hearted once I'm gone.”

“Broken-hearted?” Johanna scoffed. “We're having a party. Finally, some peace and quiet. No more camera crews pushing their way in to interview the hero of District Eight…”

He grimaced as he heard the title which had been awarded to him by some people.

Annie giggled into Finnick's shoulder.

Picking up the sheet of instructions on how to get to his new quarters Mikhail made a big show of saying goodbye to everyone, pretending to be overcome by tears as he hugged the still giggling Annie, before offering them a wave and a cheeky wink and heading out.

“Take the East stairwell down to level forty-eight,” he read aloud as he shoulder his pack in order to give him the best freedom of movement in the crowded corridors. He sighed deeply. “That's great but which one is the East stairwell? They all look the same to me…”

In the end he was forced to, grudgingly, stop a passing native of District Thirteen and ask for directions which were given somewhat reluctantly and almost too quickly for him to follow.

“Thanks for nothing…” he muttered once the native in question had continued on their way, trying to remember what the other man had said about finding the East stairwell. “Blue. The East stairwell entrance is blue. West was…red. North…green and South…um…never mind…”

The first stairwell he came across was yellow.

“Guessing this must be the South stairwell then,” he muttered to himself. “Ok.”

Fifteen minutes later he found the blue stairwell he had been searching for and began to descend it solely and carefully, his injuries technically healed but still a little bit tender, until he reached the level with a large black ‘48’ painted on the wall by the exit of the stairwell.

The only difference between the hallway he stepped into and the hallway up on the medical level was that up there everything was white or light grey whilst down on level forty-eight everything was either a depressing looking dark grey or a grey so dark they might as well have saved time and used black paint instead as no one would have noticed the difference.

“Proceed along corridor fourteen until you reach compartment one-seven-three-nine-two,” he
read aloud from his instructions once more before looking left and right. “What did he say about getting around down here? Left, right, right, left? Or was it right, left, left, right?”

He couldn't remember.

Grimacing in annoyance he dropped his bag to the floor, took a step away from it and began to spin on the spot with his eyes closed, arms flailing wildly when he finally came to a stop.

“Right, left, left, right it is!”

Waiting for the world to settle around him he picked up his bag and set off as quickly as he could manage…only to have to back track half an hour later when he discovered that he had chosen the wrong direction and that his first guess of left, right, right, left had been correct.

He was much relieved when he finally came across the compartment labelled 17392 and was able to slip inside after using the code he’d been given to unlock the door, a code he had had to have the nurse write on the back of his hand in order for him to remember it.

“You must be Mikhail,” one of the three young men relaxing inside commented as he stepped into the ridiculously cramped compartment. “You're on top I'm afraid.”

It took him a moment to realise what he meant.

“Seriously? How much space is there between your bed and mine?” he chuckled, shaking his head as he crossed to look at the bed he’d been left. “And between mine and the ceiling?”

“No enough,” was the reply he received. “I'm Niall Harris, originally of District Six. That's Artur Bezhani, District Ten and Higgs Mattheson all the way from District Three.”

“Attention! Lights out in five minutes! Attention! Lights out in five minutes!”

Mikhail huffed.

“I know I took longer than I anticipated getting down here but that's ridiculous,” he grumbled, dumping his bag down on the floor as the other three men set about stripping down to their boxers and jumping into their bunks. “Do you ever get used to this place?”

“No,” Higgs snorted deeply. “No, you don't really get used to it. You just deal with it.”

He had only just climbed awkwardly into his narrow bunk when the lights cut out.

“So how did you guys get here?” he found himself asking after a long moment. “If you don't mind my asking. I mean, I'm pretty you've all seen those awful videos they did of me so…”

“Oh, yeah, we all know how you got here…” Artur chuckled from the other side of the narrow compartment making Mikhail grimace. “And as for how I got here…my family and I were ranchers on one of the remotest farms back in District Ten. We'd use horses to round up the cattle so when we made the decision to leave, just after the announcement for the Quarter Quell, we packed up our things into our saddlebags and set off for the coast.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Artur confirmed, shifting into a more comfortable position on his bunk. “I told you we were on one of the remotest farms. We had a grand total of four Peacekeepers to avoid and they'd been there since I was a little boy. To say that they were predictable would be a huge understatement. It wasn't difficult to get away without being seen. Once we'd made it to the coast
we started heading North, skirted around the edges of Districts Eleven, Eight and Twelve which wasn't easy, I'll admit, but eventually we made it to District Thirteen with only the loss of one horse, sacrificed to fill our bellies when our food ran out.”

“What happened to the rest of the horses?”

“We turned them loose in the woods,” Artur answered as he settled down. “Poor things deserved to be put to pasture after all the hard work we’d put them through.”

“I've been here since I was a kid so I'm more adjusted to this place than the rest of you although being underground still gets to me,” Niall announced softly from his own bunk below Mikhail’s. “My parents got me and my sister out before we were eligible to be Reaped. All I can remember about District Six is how noisy it always was, hovercraft taking off and landing almost constantly, trains coming and going at all hours of the day.”

“How did you get out?”

“We walked,” Niall responded with a deep chuckle. “And, yes, I can remember complaining the entire way here. I was only nine, I think, and it seemed like ever such a long way.”

“What about you, Higgs?” Artur asked, his voice carrying over the noise Mikhail ended up making as he struggled to get comfortable on what had turned out to be a ridiculous thin and very uncomfortable mattress. “You've never said. How did you get to District Thirteen?”

For a long moment Higgs was silent.

“I had an Aunt,” he announced softly, his voice heavy with obvious grief. “She was a wonderful lady. Kind. Caring. She was Reaped for the Hunger Games when she was fifteen.”

Higgs broke off with a deep sigh, one of pure sadness.

“My mum always said it would have been kinder for her to have died inside the Arena,” he continued softly, his voice slowly taking on an almost numb quality. “But she didn't. She was clever, you see, too clever and she managed to win. Only she wasn't the same.”

A heavy silence fell on the small room as he paused once more.

“She was Reaped again for the Hunger Games when she was forty-three,” Higgs pressed on, his soft words confirming the suspicions which had been forming in the back of his mind that the Aunt he spoke of was none other than Wiress. “She was killed on the second day of the Games by one of the Careers who has since been brought here as a supposed Rebel and that evening my parents decided it was time for us to leave. We took whatever we could and just started walking. It wasn't easy. We weren't used to the terrain. We tired easily.”

He took a deep shuddering breath.

“Eventually we came across…we came across what was left of District Twelve…”

Mikhail grimaced.

He'd seen the video they'd made of District Twelve a couple of times now, just like everyone else, and he couldn't even imagine coming across that with no prior knowledge of what had happened, of just walking out of the woods and finding nothing but death and destruction.

“There were so many bodies…nothing but burnt husks…” Higgs choked down a sob and none of them could blame him. “It was…the worst thing I've ever seen in my life…but there was nothing
we could do. It would have taken us weeks just to find all of the bodies let alone give them a
decent burial so we just…left them there and continued our journey…”

“I'm sorry…” Mikhail found himself apologising softly, attempting to make out the features of his
new roommate in the strange green haze caused by the emergency lighting. “I shouldn't have
asked. I can't even begin to imagine how horrible that must have been…”

As he spoke, however, he realised that that wasn’t exactly true.

He could imagine the state that District Twelve had been reduced to, not just because of the
footage he'd seen but because he'd seen first hand what fire bombs could do to buildings and
bodies, seen the wild flames destroy everything in their path and leave nothing behind.

“I didn't have to tell you,” Higgs mumbled in response. “I just…wanted you to understand why I
volunteered to fight once I got here. The Capitol have a lot to answer for, not just to everyone
which is admittedly more important but to me and my family. To my Aunt.”

“Yes,” Mikhail murmured in agreement. “The Capitol certainly do have a lot to answer for.”

Sleep didn't come easily to any of them following their conversation but eventually there was
silence in the small compartment, broken only by soft whimpers and gasps as all four of them but
Mikhail especially were tormented by vivid memories and twisted dreams.

He was woken from a particularly twisted version of the bombing of the hospital, one where all of
the patients had been standing in the windows and doorways screaming for him to help them and
cursing him when he didn't, their bodies slowly being consumed by flames.

“Mikhail!”

His eyes snapped open and he found himself staring up into Niall’s concerned face.

“It's time to get up. We've got a strict schedule to keep.”

“You ok?” Higgs asked from where he was donning his uniform. “You were begging…”

Yes, he had been reduced to pleasing with the people he'd seen killed to forgive him towards the
end of the nightmare, sharp shards digging into his hands and knees as he crawled towards the
uncontrollable flames, tears flooding freely down his cheeks.

Reaching up he found them mercifully dry now that he was awake.

“M'fine…” he mumbled, swinging himself out of his bunk and starting to get changed. With his
back to them he didn't realise they'd frozen in place, staring at the mess of scars which was his
back. “Just some unpleasant memories mucking me around. What's training like?”

When they didn't answer he turned to face them, giving them a chance to see his chest which
wasn't quite as bad as his back but still bore numerous signs of obvious torture.

“…what happened to you?”

He glanced down before quickly pulling on his undershirt, the white fabric stretching tightly
across his broad shoulders as he leaned down to pull his overalls up his scarred legs.

“Peacekeepers,” he answered shortly. “I've got a bit of a knack for pissing them off.”

Thankfully they let the subject go, all of them finishing getting ready in an almost comfortable
silence and then they reported to the station where their daily schedules were painted onto their right forearms, every minute of their day carefully arranged for them.

Mikhail snorted as he read through his personal schedule.

There was no way he'd be sticking to all of this given that it didn't allow him time to visit his new friends up on the medical level or to have any time to himself, something he valued.

“You get used to it,” Niall sighed as he caught sight of Mikhail’s expression, touching his own schedule absentmindedly although his tone of voice negated that statement. “Come on.”

Breakfast was disgusting, worse than the food he'd been given up on the medical level, and he didn't feel at all fuelled for the day ahead when he left the cafeteria with the others.

They arrived at the training rooms with five minutes to spare and it was only thirty minutes later that Mikhail came to his first conclusion regarding combat training in District Thirteen.

It was, to put it bluntly, hell on earth.

Despite his previous experience with weapons and combat in general he was a deemed a ‘reckless liability’ until he had learned to handle them according to what their grisly instructors so delightfully called ‘the proper operating procedure’ and had transferred him into a group of beginners, all of whom were about fourteen years old and utterly clueless.

They made him run the same drills over and over again until he was ready to scream.

What did it matter if he couldn't perform a smart “shoulder arms” or “slope arms” with his rifle, both strictly timed manoeuvres to change the weapons position, when he was perfectly capable of firing a rifle just like this in a combat situation with deadly precision?

He'd been one of their squad’s best shots, only Misha and Eugene beating him.

After he'd snuck away from the scheduled “uniform maintenance” he complained bitterly to Finnick, Annie and Johanna, all of whom sympathised with him but suggested riding it out.

“After all if you drop out they won't let you take your fight to the Capitol,” Johanna pointed out, her voice a little breathless as she rode out the beginnings of her latest dose of morphling. “And that would be just a shame. I want to see what you can do, pretty boy.”

“You think I'm pretty?”

His instinctive response had been paired with a flirtatious smirk, the same one he had used on Juno in years past and the same one that he hadn't even thought to use since her death.

“Don't let it go to your head,” Johanna snorted in response. “It's the drugs talking. I swear.”

He wasn't over Juno, not by a long shot, but this just felt…normal.

It wasn't outright flirting, he definitely wasn't ready for that, but the playful banter he'd entered into with Johanna since they met danced easily back and forth across the knife edge that represented the divide between friendship and romantic attraction in his mind.

Johanna was nothing like Juno, who has been sweet almost to a fault, but perhaps that was one of the reasons he felt comfortable participating in their not quite but close to flirting.

He was reprimanded for going off schedule but made no attempt to hide the fact that he intended
to do so again, actually waving to his various instructors whenever he left whatever piece of utter boredom he was meant to be doing with them to visit his friends.

Annie was horrified to learn that his visits weren't strictly permitted.

Finnick was amused, admitting that he'd have done exactly the same thing.

Johanna supported his decision to “stick it to the man” wholeheartedly, particularly when the doctors began weaning her off of her regular does of morphling which meant she had had to find creative ways of getting her hands on the drug when she needed a bit of peace.

He was visiting with the three of them, Annie forcing him to braid her hair as he had done for his sister in years long since passed, when the holo-projector in the room whirred to life and an image of Katniss Everdeen in her distinctive armour appeared on the far wall.

“Great,” Mikhail sighed. “What's she been up to now...”

“That's live,” Finnick murmured with a frown. “She only left for District Two this morning.”

“This is Katniss Everdeen speaking to all of the loyalists from the heart of District Two.”

“Survivors!”

“Inbound!”

These unfamiliar voices accompanied a strange light appearing in the smoke filled darkness behind Katniss, a light which was growing in size as figures appeared on the edge of the screen taking up positions with their rifles trained on the opening she'd been in front of.

Katniss turned to face the approaching lights but, wisely, began walking backwards towards the camera just as a figure appeared on the screen, jogging over to take hold of her arm.

“We need to get you back.”

“Who is that?” Annie enquired softly. “He was one of the ones who rescued us. I've been meaning to say thank you but I haven't been able to discover who he is or how to find him.”

“That's Boggs,” Mikhail answered just as a train unlike any he'd seen before came to a slow stop on the screen, the metal brakes whining loudly. “He's part of Katniss’ security detail.”

It was chaos on the screen for a long moment, men and women jumping down from the train, all of them looking a little worse for wear as the uniformed soldiers of District Thirteen and their Rebel counterparts screamed at them repeatedly to put their weapons down.

A young man pressing a hand to a nasty looking head wound began stumbling towards Katniss and Boggs reacted as he had been trained to do, bringing his rifle up and demanding sharply that the young man drop the gun Mikhail hadn't even noticed he'd been holding.

Then someone opened fire.

“Stop!” Katniss screamed, launching herself forwards without any concern for her personal safety, hurrying towards the young man who had dropped down to his knees. “Stop!”

“Hold your fire!”

“He needs help!”
In the blink of an eye the young man had grabbed hold of Katniss's long braid, pulled her head back and jammed the business end of the pistol he held up underneath her chin.

Mikhail felt himself leaning forwards in anticipation, his hands dropping to rest against Annie's trembling shoulders as the camera shifted in order to get a better view of the scene.

“Drop it!”

“Give me one reason why I shouldn't shoot you.”

The soft demand had come from the man holding the gun to Katniss's head, the ridiculously sensitive microphones picking up each and every single word as though he'd been shouting.

“Drop the gun!”

For a long moment the only sound in the small hospital room was that of Katniss breathing, first the short, sharp gasps of panic which then faded into a sort of resigned calmness.

“I can't…” she responded honestly, her own voice painfully soft but remarkably unshaken as she met his wide eyes. “I guess that's the problem, isn't it? We blew up your mine. You burned District to the ground. We each have every reason to want to kill the other.”

Annie whimpered loudly, prompting Finnick to slide out of his seat and join her on the floor where she'd been happily sat between Mikhail’s legs having her hair braided only moment ago, gathering his notoriously unstable girlfriend into his arms which left Mikhail’s hands floating in the air for a long moment before he dropped them to rest on his own knees.

“So if you want to kill me, do it,” Katniss told the young man, her voice becoming firmer with each word she spoke. “Make Snow happy. I'm tired of killing his slaves for him.”

“I'm not his slave.”

He was obviously trying to sound confident but he failed, his voice sounding more than a little bit desperate to have his belief that he mattered confirmed rather than denied.

“I am.”

It was amazing how two little words could shake so many people to the core, even Mikhail, but it did although the one who appeared to be most affected by her statement was the man she was facing off with on the screen, the one threatening to shoot her in the head.

“That's why I killed Cato,” she pressed on, her voice trembling ever so slightly as she fought to control her strong emotions. “And he killed Thresh. And Thresh killed Clove. It just goes around and around and who wins? Always Snow. I am done being a piece in his game. District Twelve…District Two…we have no fight except the one the Capitol gave us.”

She paused, frowning across at him.

“Why are you fighting the Rebels?” she demanded softly. “Your neighbours? Your family?”

Flinching away from her the young man dropped his pistol, the weapon striking the ground with an audible thud as he pressed his now empty hand to his mouth, his eyes haunted.

“These people are not your enemy. We all have one enemy and that's Snow,” Katniss
announced firmly as she stumbled to her feet, addressing both loyalist and Rebel alike. “He corrupts everyone and everything. He turns the best of us against each other. Stop killing for him. Tonight, turn your weapons to the Capitol. Turn your weapons to Snow.”

Three distinct shots echoed loudly through the speakers and Annie let out a loud scream as Katniss dropped like a sack of potatoes, her back striking the ground as the rebels opened fire on the loyalist who had kept up from the ground in a desperate attempt to kill her.

And then the screen went blank.

“Huh…”

Katniss had been shot, possibly killed, and Mikhail wasn't sure how he felt about that.

He'd thought he'd be filled with joy when someone finally managed to eliminate the Mockingjay, thought that seeing her killed would eliminate the need for vengeance burning in his chest but…it didn't, it just served to remind him that she was only a human being.

A selfish one, yes, who didn't truly grasp the pain and suffering she'd caused but a human being nonetheless, and a painfully young one at that given that she was what, seventeen?

It took mere seconds for Annie to become inconsolable, sobbing into Finnick's shoulder even as he attempted to reassure her while Johanna sat oddly silent on her bed.

For a long moment it looked as though they'd have to get someone to sedate Annie but then someone began shouting out in the main section of the medical level, ordering that the operating theatre be prepped ready for the hovercrafts arrival in twenty-five minutes.

“…they would be prepping the operating theatre if she'd been killed,” Mikhail sighed deeply, finally breaking the silence in the room. “Fucking hell, that girl has more lives than a cat!”

He was pulled out of his training the following day in order to film an impromptu propo, one designed to reassure the people of the rebellion that their Mockingjay was alive and well without actually having to feature the poor young woman currently dosed up on morphling.

As if it wasn't already bad enough that they wanted him to film a propo in the first place they insisted on dressing him up in an “appropriate outfit” which turned out to be a slightly roughed up black combat uniform with a fake rifle slung over his shoulder by the strap.

He was led into a strong looking room and told to stand on a round platform.

“Nope.

He would not be saying that…drivel…and they'd just have to put up with whatever came out of his mouth or find someone else to read their psyche tic little script out for the cameras.

Something clicked loudly and then a slightly distorted voice called out,
“Action!”

“I take it that means you want me to talk?”

Another loud click.

“Yes!”

Mikhail huffed loudly.

“No need to snap…” he muttered as he turned to face the camera, looking just above the complicated looking device as he’d been instructed to. “Not like I’ve ever done this before…”

Clearing his throat he chuckled to himself as he came up with an idea for what he was going to say, or rather how he was going to say it that would annoy some but cheer up others.

“People of Panem,” he called out, giving his best impression of Caesar Flickerman complete with a blatantly face smile. “Welcome! I’m your host, Mikhail Warrington of District Eight reporting to you live from…well… I’m in District a Thirteen but I’ve got no idea what they’ve put up behind me so I could look like I’m on the moon for all I know…”

“You’re not on the moon,” Cressida's distorted voice sounded following another click. “We've got you in front of an image of the burning Mockingjay for the moment.”

“Good to know,” he responded cheerfully before dropping the smile and the Capitol accent he’d adopted. “Now I’m pretty sure some of you are wondering what the hell I’m doing making this little film and trust me when I say I am right there with you. I’m nothing special, just your average guy from District Eight, but apparently around here that makes me special. Go figure. Anyway to get to the point of this delightful video…you all saw Katniss Everdeen, the face of the rebellion, take two shots to the chest last night,” he pressed on, shooting a wicked smirk towards the cameras. “I know I did. Heck, I'm waiting for them to replay it as it's definitely worth a second viewing. Bang! Bang! Crash! Cut!”

He even did a little impression of what Katniss had looked like when she got shot.

“However, I'm sure most if you will be relieved to hear that it's going to take a lot more than a couple of poorly aimed bullets to take out Katniss Everdeen,” he continued, accidentally drawing out the end of her surname like he always did, knowing that the mispronunciation of ‘Everdeeeeeeen’ really pissed her off. “Especially not when she's wearing body armour. Yeah, go figure, that moulded thing which I genuinely thought was just there to enhance her figure was actually designed to save her life, not just to give her a bigger pair of tits and a teeny tiny waist. So instead of being, you know, dead as a door nail she's just really bruised, more than a little bit medicated and really, really pissed off.”

He heard someone snort loudly from the shadows and he had a feeling it was Haymitch.

“So...yeah...give her a couple of weeks and she'll be back to kicking butt and taking names but until then you'd better not give up or it'll be your names she'll be taking,” Mikhail chuckled. “And take it from me, she is one terrifying woman when she's pissed off.”

This time it was definitely a chuckle he heard coming from Haymitch who had apparently snuck in to lean against the wall beside the door of the small room, watching him perform.
“Oh, and one final thing,” he spoke quickly before they could turn off the cameras, shifting his stance as another impromptu idea came to mind that might help cheer people up. “I remembered this the other day and I thought you might appreciate it as much as I did.”

Clearing his throat once he winked towards the booth where Plutarch Heavensbee looked like he was about to have a heart attack and began to sing the words he and Adya had sung together as children when they played make believe within the safety of their bedrooms.

“Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the songs of angry men.
It is the music of a people,
Who will not be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart,
Echoes the beating of the drum,
There is a life about to start,
When tomorrow comes.”

It was so quiet, even inside the recording booth, that Mikhail could hear a pin drop.

“Will you join in our crusade?
Who will be strong and stand with me?
Somewhere beyond the District bounds,
Is there a world you long to see?
Then join in the fight,
That will give you the right to be free!”

He could remember singing this at the top of his voice with Adya, both of them stood on his bed with their fists raised high as though they were addressing their imaginary troops.

And so, in honour of his friend, he clenched his fist and raised it high.

“Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the songs of angry men.
It is the music of a people,
Who will not be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart,
Echoes the beating of the drum,
There is a life about to start,
When tomorrow comes.”

Plutarch was frantically gesturing to several of the people in the booth, gesturing to the area behind Mikhail whilst obviously barking out orders which he couldn't hear.

“Will you give all you can give,
So that our banner may advance?
Some will fall and some will live,
Will you stand up and take your chance?
The blood of the martyrs,
Will water the Rebels advance!”

His smirk was back as he caught sight of Finnick and of all people Johanna sneaking into the room to join Haymitch where he was watching him silently from the shadows of the room.

They looked genuinely surprised and, even though his voice wasn't the best and definitely nowhere near the level that Adya's had been, impressed by the performance he was giving.

“Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the songs of angry men.
It is the music of a people,
Who will not be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart,
Echoes the beating of the drum,
There is a life about to start,
When tomorrow comes.”

He chuckled softly to himself after he'd finished the song.

“That worked,” he chuckled deeply, addressing the trio rather than the booth. “Changed a couple of lyrics, you see, so as to better suite our current situation but it actually worked.”

“We're still recording,” Plutarch’s less than amused voice announced. “Are you done?”

“Is there anything else you want me to say?”

“I don't suppose the script I gave you would be an option?”

“You suppose correctly,” Mikhail snorted. “Your script was shit.”

The promo was broadcast less than an hour later whilst Mikhail had been enduring the bland mess they called lunch in District Thirteen alongside his three friends and he was surprised to note that
they hadn't cut anything he'd said, not even the bit at the beginning or even the moment where Cressida had reassured him that he wasn't “on the moon.”

He was slightly concerned that the serious people of District a Thirteen wouldn't approve but, much to his surprise, responded to his propo by cheering loudly and echoing the song he had sung, their strong voice punching out the phrases that they particularly liked.

“At least yours isn't quite as depressing as The Hanging Tree…” Johanna muttered, stabbing her fork into a piece of potato that he'd left on his plate and popping it into her mouth. “I swear if I hear one more person whistling that tune I won't be responsible for my actions…”

He was informed, a couple of days later, that his propo had helped the rebellion gain what momentum it had lost following the attack on Katniss, that they were now in a stronger position than ever and that they were “very grateful to him for the part he had played.”

“That's nice to know…” he mumbled in response before turning his back on the young man who had supposedly been sent by President Coin herself to deliver the message and facing Finnick once more as the Victor fussed nervously. “Stop worrying. Everything has been arranged to last possible detail by that Capitol woman so nothing can go wrong. You're dressed. Johann is ensuring that Annie is dresses. You both have your vows and your rings.”

Finnick let out a deep breath.

“This isn't how I pictured marrying the girl of my dreams,” he admitted, alluding to the way their joyous day had been taken over by Plutarch and his cameras. “I always thought we'd get married on the beach where we first met, maybe at sunset with candles floating on the water for when night fell. Barefoot in the sand with our families around us. No cameras.”

“You can always renew your vows once all of this chaos is over for good,” Mikhail pointed out as he fixed Finnick's collar which had had fussed with a little too much. “Do it your way.”

He and Juno had just begun to discuss their wedding when the rebellion had flared to life.

They'd wanted to wait until they were old enough not to require their parents permission at which point they'd planned on having a small service followed by a celebration with their friends and family, dancing long into the night before disappearing for their wedding night.

None of that would ever happen now.

But Finnick and Annie's dream could one day be a reality.

“We should probably get going,” he murmured, determined not to let his own lost dreams to ruin his friend’s special day. “Can't have the groom being late to his own wedding.”

President Coin had graciously allowed the, to use one of the gardens where vegetables were grown deep under the mountain for their wedding ceremony and chairs had been arranged in rows on top of the freshly planted soil which had been covered in a protective sheet.

Shaking Finnick’s hand one last time Mikhail turned to find a seat whilst Finnick made his way along the aisle to where the District Thirteen official waited to perform the ceremony.

“We've reserved you a seat at the front, Mr Warrington,” a voice interrupted his search, drawing his attention to the young man who quickly indicated the empty space directly in front of none other than Katniss Everdeen and her sister who had been relegated to the second row. “As you are friends with both parties it was deemed appropriate.”
Really?

His new friendship put him in front of Katniss, the *Mockingjay*, who was also friends with them and beside Johanna who had known the bride and groom for a number of years?

Really?

Annie, when she finally walked slowly down the aisle, looked utterly radiant in an actual wedding dress complete with delicate looking veil and Mikhail wasn't the only one wondering where on earth they’d found such a thing in a place like District Thirteen.

They hadn't understood the need for a ceremony at all, preferring an official signing of the paperwork over the “unnecessary fanfare” but the opportunity for a propo was too good.

A delicate hush fell over those gathered to watch the ceremony.

“We are gathered here today to join this young man and this young woman in matrimony,” the official announced with a broad smile, his accent giving away that fact that he was not a native of District Thirteen. “Finnick and Annie will now exchange rings to symbolise their commitment to each other. Rings are derived from humble beginnings of imperfect metal to create something striking where there was once nothing at all. It is customarily worn on the ring finger as it is the only finger with a vein running directly to the heart. The wearing of the rings is a visible, outwards sign that they have committed themselves to one another.”

Finnick had traded half his foot rations for a week to an elderly couple of refugees in order to obtain the rings they were about to exchange, altering their sizes himself with a little help from a metalworker originally from District Six who had even helped him to engrave them.

“Finnick, please take Annie's hand in yours and repeat these words,” the official instructed, smiling when Finnick eagerly obeyed. “I give you this ring as a symbol of our love.”

“I give you this ring as a symbol of our love.”

“For today and tomorrow and for all the days to come.”

“For today and tomorrow and for all the days to come.”

“Wear it as a sign of what we have promised on this day and know that my love is present, even when I am not.”

“Wear it as a sign of what we have promised on this day and know that my love is present, even when I am not.”

“Thank you, Finnick,” the official murmured as Finnick carefully slid the ring onto Annie's trembling fingers, his voice more than a little choked towers the end. “Annie, please take Finnick’s hand in yours and repeat these words. I give you this ring as a symbol of our love.”

“I give you this ring as a symbol of our love.”

“For today and tomorrow and for all the days to come.”

“For today and tomorrow and for all the days to come.”

“Wear it as a sign of what we have promised on this day and know that my love is present, even when I am not.”
“Wear it as a sign of what we have promised on this day and know that my love is present, even when I am not.”

Annie’s voice had never sounded stronger even though she was already crying ever so slightly by the time that she had finished sliding the second ring onto Finnick’ finger.

“I believe you have prepared your own vows for each other,” the official murmured with another soft smile which only grew as the couple nodded. “Then please, continue.”

“I, Annie Cresta, take you, Finnick Odair as my husband,” Annie spoke up first with a slight tremble in her voice, her eyes never once straying from Finnick’s. “From this day forth, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer. I promise to love and cherish you each day.”

“I, Finnick Odair, take you, Annie Cresta, as my wife from this day forth,” Finnick responded, bringing their joined hands up so that he could press a loving kiss to the tops of her delicate fingers. “Together or apart we will always be united. One life. One purpose. One destiny.”

The silence which followed their heartfelt vows was finally broken by the official.

“You may kiss the bride.”

Mikhail couldn't stop himself from picturing himself and Juno in their place as they shared their first kiss as a married couple, picture dipping the woman he loved over dramatically as she laughed against his lips, their friends and family cheering wildly as they applauded.

Only when he righted his imaginary bride he found himself facing not Juno but Johanna.

“What?”

“I didn't say anything,” the woman in question piped up from beside him, frowning at him as he turned to stare at her with wide eyes. “I'm going to go and see if there's a buffet table.”

He couldn’t say a word as she rose from her seat and followed the rest of the audience as they relocated to the cavernous room where more hardy vegetables were grown in raised beds which had been decorated for the wedding celebration, too caught up in his thoughts.

Johanna.

Why had he pictured his friends face instead of that of the girl he still loved?

Why had he imagined kissing her?

Marrying her?

All too soon he was the only one left sitting in his seat, his wide eyes fixed on nothing at all as he came to the sudden conclusion that perhaps what had thought was “harmless friendly flirting” was something else entirely, something much deeper, something more significant.

“…fuck…”

A/N The song I used, if you didn't recognise it, was an ever-so-slightly altered version of ‘Do You Hear The People Sing’ from the musical Les Miserables which is amazing and, no, I don't own that any more than I own the Hunger Games. Hope you enjoyed the latest instalment in this story which actually gave me a bit of trouble which is why it took so long for me to Finnish it and get it
posted. Comments & Suggestions more than welcome. X
Chapter Fifteen

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Fifteen

“So…” Johanna exhaled loudly as she dropped down into the seat beside Mikhail as he struggled through the bland sludge which passed for breakfast in District Thirteen. “What would you say if I told you that I may or may not have been the one who helped Katniss Everdeen to slip the noose and hitch a ride to the front line in District Two last night?”

Mikhail’s instinctive response was to snort into his glass of water.

His fellow trainees who were gathered around the same table as they were sat at stared at her in open mouth shock, a couple of them even going so far as to choke one their food.

“What?” Johanna demanded, grinning around at their shocked faces as she shrugged and reached over to steal the slice of toast from Mikhail’s tray, taking a bite out the slightly burnt and now cold piece of bread. “I was bored and it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Do they know?”

“That Katniss snuck into District Two or that I was the one who helped her?”

“Both.”

Her smirk was all the confirmation he needed.

“I wish I could have seen the look on their pompous faces when they realised she'd gone rogue,” he snorted, much to the annoyance of several of the District Thirteen loyalists sat at their table. “I bet Coin looked like she’d swallowed a lemon! D’you reckon she swore?”

“You shouldn't disrespect your President like that!”

It was both amazing and creepy that their response to the sharp scolding was exactly the same; turning slowly to look at the old woman who was blatantly Thirteen through and through, sucking their lips back over their teeth loudly before smirking as they shrugged.

“I didn't vote for her.”

Their voices were perfectly in sync, tone, pitch and speed all exactly the same.
Mikhail laughed.

Johanna snorted.

“Jinx.”

Their eyes met as their voices blended together for a second time.

“…jinx again!”

Neither of them spoke for a long moment, ignoring the people around them who were finishing up their meals before dispersing as per their schedules, the two of them settled into an impromptu staring match to see who would break first – the “Hero” or the Victor.

“Ha!” Johanna cried out, thumping her hand down on the table. “You blinked!”

“But you spoke!” Mikhail crowed, pointing towards her. “So you just jinxed yourself.”

Johanna went to argue but caught herself as she realised he was right.

For a long moment she merely glared across at his smug smile before moving so quickly he had no hope of stopping her, snatching up his almost full glass of water and throwing its contents into his shocked face, laughing manically as the cold water splashed all over him.

If the room had been emptying quickly before that people were all but running now.

Keeping eyes locked hers he slowly and deliberately reached out for the bowl containing the last of his breakfast sludge, offering her a smirk before he scooped up most of the remaining food and wiped it down her face, her laughter replaced by his and her own surprised shriek.

What followed was the most fun either of them had had in weeks, both of them grabbing leftovers from the trays stacked by the kitchen hatches and throwing it at each other not to mention having a full on water fight by refilling the various glasses of water at the fountain.

By the time the kitchen workers came in at their scheduled time to begin breakfast clean-up they found the room covered in stray buts of foot and puddles of water, some of it even on the ceiling, and in the midst of the chaos were Mikhail and Johanna, filthy and hysterical.

“What the…?”

Giggling like naughty schoolchildren who'd been caught playing truant by their teacher Mikhail and Johanna abandoned their playful war and hurried towards the exit, slipping unsteadily thanks to the mess beneath their feet before eventually tumbling out of the room and into the blissfully deserted hallway as everyone else was already hard at work.

“I can't be bothered with training today,” he grunted when they finally skidded to a stop, leaning against the bland concrete wall of an unusually deserted corridor, their breath coming in sharp pants even as their laughter continued “Not to mention I'm filthy…”

“And who's fault is that?” Johanna responded, reaching up wipe a large piece of sludge from her scalp, grimacing as she flicked it off of her hands so that it splattered on the floor. “I was just minding my own business, completely innocent, and then you attacked me, you brute!”

“Oh, yes, completely innocent,” he muttered sarcastically as he pulled the soaking wet front of his overalls away from his skin with a grimace. “You'd never strike first, would you?”
“No. Never. I'm just a girl, after all, a pathetic little weakling…”

Her grin was reminiscent of the maniacal expression she'd worn inside the Arena which, when combined with her simpering words, caused him to snort so loudly it actually echoed.

“Weakling. Right…” he muttered, shaking his head as he brushed the remains of a slice of toast off of his shoulder. “We should clean up. Fancy playing hooky with me for the day?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I heard there's a river up top,” he explained, thinking back of the conversation he'd had with Primrose about her sisters hunting excursion with her loyal companion. “Fancy breaking out of here and going for a swim? I tell you what I wouldn't mind seeing the sky…”

“A prison break?” she hummed softly, leaning back against the wall as she attempted to conceal her excitement. “Well, my last one was quite fun. Let's see if this one lives up to it.”

Making their way up to the surface turned out to be significantly easier than they had anticipated as the access shaft which had been damaged during the bombing raid was guarded, only covered with a series of ‘WARNING – DANGER!’ signs high no doubt would keep the obedient citizens of District Thirteen from using the stairs but did nothing to deter to the two of them, hurrying up the creaking metal frame until they arrived at the surface.

There was a single guard posted there but he was looking out towards the horizon rather than back into the darkness of the tunnel so it was once again all too easy from them to make a break for the woods without being noticed in spite of their continued giggles.

“I hope they're better at keeping people out than they are at keeping them in,” Johanna laughed once they were far enough away not to be heard, following the sounds of flowing water. “I was hoping for something of a challenge but a child could have managed that.”

Her words made him snort softly but her actions, the way her finger tips trailed over the rough bark of every single tree she could reach as she passed them by, made him smile.

Being above ground in the fresh air was doing wonders for him already and he had grown up in a painfully urban environment so he could only imagine how much of a relief it was for someone who had grown up surrounded by trees to finally be amongst them once again.

Eventually they came across what appeared to be the ruins of a group of buildings, only the stone walls remaining which included a strangely beautiful arch set apart from everything else which led them through to the gently flowing river they had been heading towards.

“They used water to torture me, you know,” Johanna's soft announcement came out of nowhere as they moved to stand on the rocks at the water’s edge. “First they took it away, dehydration and all that, but then they tried drowning me. Not long enough to kill me, just enough to make me black out. Then they left me in freezing cold water for over a day.”

Mikhail flinched.

Sharing horror stories of their “interrogations” wasn't anything new for the two of them, even Annie had joined in sometimes, although they hadn't gone into so much detail before then in case they “triggered” each other, nor had her voice sounded so empty and hollow.

“Then they used water to enhance the electrical shocks they were already giving me;” she mumbled, rubbing at various spots across her torso. “That's what broke me in the end…”
“We all have a breaking point,” he murmured, pulling the communicator he was required to carry from his pocket and dropping it onto the ground before stepping down into the water which was only ankle deep at that point. “And you lasted significantly longer than I did.”

Extending his hand towards her he kept his expression blank, masking whatever pity he felt as he knew she wouldn’t appreciate it in favour of waiting patiently for her to place her hand in his, holding on so tightly his knuckles cracked as she followed him into the water.

It was cold but not unbearably so.

“They didn’t use anything nearly as fancy as water and electric shocks on me and my friends,” he shared with her as they walked towards the centre of the river. “Pain and humiliation, that’s what they used on us. The latter was worse, I think. I’m like you, you see, I can handle pain. But the humiliation of being so utterly helpless, so degraded, so…”

“I know.”

All too soon he was forced to come to a halt, fighting against the pressure of the gently flowing water, as it finally came up to his neck with Johanna already floating beside him.

She definitely knew what she was doing, holding her body in place with movements of her arms and legs, and hadn’t been at all concerned when she could no longer touch the bottom of the river a couple of paces before he himself had stopped due to her shorter stature.

In fact she seemed to be enjoying the challenge if her smile was any indication, no sign of her earlier apathy when faced with something they had systematically used against her.

He cleared his throat loudly, flinching as a stone moved underneath his foot making him stumble and bringing the water up to his chin for a moment before he secured his footing.

“…would this be a good moment to mention the fact that I can’t actually swim?”

“Seriously?” Johanna demanded somewhat sharply. “Didn’t think to mention that before walking into the middle of a river with a woman who has emotional scars due to water?!”

“Emotional scars?”

“That’s what the doctor called it,” she shrugged self-consciously as she moved her body through the water until she was behind him. “I freaked out in the shower a couple of times but this…this isn’t so bad…probably has something to do with the fact that they used a shower for the electrocuting part…plus I used to go swimming in rivers as a kid back home.”

“There was only one river in District Eight and the only people who jumped into it were people who wanted to kill themselves,” he responded without thinking. “It wasn’t like this one, all gentle and calm. It was a…a swirling vortex of terror…so no, I never learnt to swim.”

Her felt her hands on his shoulders.

“First step to learning how to swim is learning how to float,” she explained calmly, her hands a comforting pressure. “Now lean backwards, I won’t let your head go under, and clench your bum cheeks together. It’ll help the rest of you float on the surface of the water.”

“…clench my bum cheeks?”

“Yes.”
Offering her a dubious look over his shoulder he slowly and hesitantly did as she'd instructed, flailing as soon as he felt his feet leave the bottom of the river but she grabbed hold of him under his arms and kept his head from going under, just as she'd promised.

“Try again. Slowly. Less flailing around.”

He couldn't believe how utterly terrifying it was to do something as simple as leaning backwards and lifting his feet up, especially considering what he had been through, but it felt as though his heart was pounding in his throat as his body slowly floated to the surface.

“Clench your bum and pull in your stomach.”

Seriously?

Feeling both ridiculous and fearful he obediently did as she'd instructed, his body shifting until he was actually floating across the surface of the water in an almost straight line.

He felt one of her hands move from his shoulder to the back of his neck, squeezing gently so as to encourage him to relax and ever so slowly he allowed his head to fall back into the water until it covered his ears with a strange rushing sound leaving only his face uncovered.

Oh…

Now he could understand why swimming appealed so much to people now that he had experienced the peacefulness that accompanied the odd weightlessness of being suspended in the water afforded him, had experienced the strange almost silence created by the continuous muffled sounds of the water flowing around him blocking out the world.

Sadly the peacefulness didn't last as long as he would have liked due to the fact that as soon as he felt Johanna pull her hands away from his body he panicked, forgetting all of the advice she'd given and sunk below the surface with a shocked cry which only survey to fill his mouth and nose with water, causing him to panic all the more until she pulled him up.

“I think that's enough for now,” she panted, holding onto his arms as he coughed and spluttered, stepping closer to the shore so that the water came up to his chest. “You were doing well but it does take some getting used to and more time to practise than we have.”

Still coughing uncontrollably Mikhail could only nod in response.

She patted him on the back for a long moment, laughing at his misfortune and he couldn't help but smile, taking comfort that his performance in the water seemed to have snapped her out of her earlier mood, helping her to move past her fear of water if only a moment.

Working together they set about cleaning the evidence of their earlier food fight off of their clothes, some of the stains proving more difficult to remove than others, as well as cleaning their hands, arms, faces, necks and anywhere else that the food had managed to reach.

Climbing out of the river Mikhail unashamedly stripped himself down to his utilitarian underwear and set about stretching the soaking wet uniform across a large rock, very much aware of the fact that Johanna's eyes had become fixated on the disfigured skin on his back.

“Peacekeepers?” she asked softly as she climbed out to stand beside him, slowly stripping out of her own uniform in order to copy him and in doing so revealing a smaller collection of scars that were no less noticeable on her milky white skin. He nodded. “Fucking bastards…”

He snorted, helping her stretch out her uniform.
“You can say that again,” he muttered, unable to stop himself from staring at the strange patterns decorating her torso like spiderwebs under the skin. “But, hey, it could be worse…”

“…how?”

“We could actually give a shit about what we look like. I mean, just think how Finnick would have reacted if his dazzling good looks had been spoiled? Can you imagine the tantrum?”

He wasn't serious, not about Finnick who had been completely open about the fact that his good-looks were a product of the Capitol's careful grooming and controlling regime and had on more than one occasion expressed a desire not to look so “picture perfect” all the time.

And he wasn't even serious about himself.

He cared, he cared a great deal about the damage that had been done to him and the scars that had been left behind as a constant reminder of all that he had suffered, of all that her had lost, but he knew that if he allowed himself to break down about it he wouldn’t stop.

Johanna snorted but there was an edge to it that confirmed just how similar the two of them were, how much she actually cared but needed to keep it under lock and key for now.

Dressed in just their underwear the two of them returned to the water, splashing each other as they allowed themselves to act childishly once more before finding a large flat rock under the surface of the water that they could sit on, similar to the one they'd put their clothes on.

“I needed this…” Johanna sighed deeply as she lowered herself down until she was stretched out across the rock, the water so shallow there it didn't even touch her ears and left her body completely on display in the translucent material. “A day to just be…free…”

Mikhail was struggling not to stare at her nipples, mostly because once he'd made the conscious decision not look at her nipples that was all his brain seemed to want to fixate on.

Eventually he was forced to turn his back on her, literally removing the temptation and gazing out across the river towards the opposite bank where a majestic animal was drinking.

Johanna huffed loudly.

“Spoil sport,” she muttered. “I was enjoying that view…”

“What view?”

“The one afforded to me by the fact that your underwear has gone just as see through as mine,” she snorted, reaching out to pat his hip and drawing his gaze down to where his privates were significantly less concealed than normal. “Cheap fabric. You've got to love it.”

“You little pervert…” he snorted in response even as his cheek flushed with embarrassment.

“Takes one to know one,” she responded with a shrug, removing her hand from his hip. “Not like either of us has got anything to be ashamed of, anyway. Plus it's nice to be stared at by someone…nice…for a change and not just lecherous Capitolites and Peacekeepers.”

“Not ashamed, no, but I'm just not ready for…anything…” Mikhail mumbled, covering himself with one hand even as he brought the other up to his mouth so that he could bit at the skin surrounding his thumbnail. “My fiancé was killed…fuck, was it only a month ago?”

This time when she reached out to touch him it was to place a comforting hand on his back.
“I know, I’m sorry,” she murmured, her fingers stroking across the uneven skin, even going so far as to follow the line of some of the longer scars and he was surprised by how nice it felt, if a little bit numb due to the damage which had been done to his nerves. “I watched all of your propo’s, you know? Would it…would it help you talk about her? About all of them?”

“Would it help you?” he asked softly, twisting around just enough so that his eyes could meet hers, the water rippling around them as he moved. “You've lost people too…”

Her answer was to pull him down to lay beside her, their arms and legs pressed against each other and to begin talking in an emotionless voice about her life before she was Reaped.

As she spoke about her family and the events leading up to their deaths Mikhail gently linked their hands together, squeezing hers gently as she told him all about the “duties” President Snow had demanded of her and how her family had died as a result of her refusal.

His heart ached for her.

Then it was his turn to talk about his family, his friends and most importantly about Juno.

It didn't make it hurt any less but it helped to know that someone else who knew about them, who would remember them if he was killed during the oncoming climax of the war.

“You confuse me, Mikhail…”

“Why? What did I do?”

“Nothing,” Johanna sighed, smiling sadly as they tilted their heads to gaze at one another, water muffling the sound in one ear but not the other for both of them. “I… I haven't struggled with my feelings in a long time. I was angry. That was it, that was what got me through each and every day. But you…you make me happy and sad and excited and… and I think I could… I think I am falling in love with you which is something I swore never to do…”

Mikhail was completely stunned by her soft addition, his heart thumping wildly in his chest.

“I'm not ready,” he mumbled quickly, clutching her hand tightly in his as she lay perfectly still watching him. “It's too soon after… after Juno but… I think I'm falling in love with you as well… no, I know I am but I just… can't… not until this war is over and… and I can think…”

“I understand,” Johanna murmured sincerely. “Trust me, I totally understand not being ready for… whatever this is right now. But I couldn't not tell you about… it… just in case…”

“Yeah…”

Just in case something happened to either one of them.

“How about… how about we wait and see if… if we both survive this war and then, if we still feel the same way about each other, we can see where this takes us?” he ended up suggesting softly after a long moment. “And until then we just stay as we are. Friends.”

Johanna nodded.

“A relationship brought about by the prospect of our imminent deaths or the destruction of our homes wouldn't be fair on either one of us,” she agreed softly, reaching out with her free hand to touch his lips. “And I don't want to ruin things before they've even begun…”

“Neither do I…”
Whatever else they might have said in that moment they shared on the rock in the river would remain a mystery thanks to the communicator he'd abandoned earlier beeping loudly, demanding that he answer the incoming call which he very reluctantly did so.

“Soldier Warrington, report your position.”

It was Boggs, the District Thirteen soldier who had been assigned to guard Katniss.

He didn't like Mikhail and, to be honest, the feeling was mutual.

“I'm with Johanna Mason,” he answered, smiling across at where she had rolled onto her front on the rock and was gently splashing her hands in the water. “Is there a problem?”

“No you're not, we already checked her quarters and neither of you are there.”

Mikhail snorted loudly as he waded back into the river and returned to the rock, making sure to splash loudly as he moved through the water so that the radio would pick it up.

“Never said anything about being in her quarters.”

“Warrington...”

“Was there something you wanted, sir?” Mikhail enquired calmly, cutting off the soldier while Johanna bit down on her thumb in order to control her laughter. “Only we’re busy…”

“We’re being deployed to the front line,” Boggs announced sharply, barely containing his anger. “Report to the Hangar Bay in fifteen minutes, full kit. We'll talk about...this...later.”

“Fifteen minutes? That might not be possible but I'll try…”

“Warrington, so help me–”

Turning off the communicator before Boggs could finish threatening him Mikhail turned to face Johanna who was gazing sadly down into the water they had spent most of the day in.

“Time to head back to the real world, huh?”

“I'm afraid so,” Mikhail sighed, unable to resist placing a gentle hand on her back which bore the same spiderweb scars as her front. “I've been ordered to report for deployment to the frontline so it's a good thing that we decided to do this today or we'd have been too late.”

Johanna huffed, pushing herself up in order to give him an unexpected hug.

“Don't you fucking die.”

“Wouldn't dream of it…”

Their return to District Thirteen was much less secretive than their break out had been, waiting for their skin to dry before dressing quickly and actually waving cheerfully at the stunned guard as they approached the damaged entrance, chuckling as they slipped inside.

Splitting up once they reached the bottom of the damaged staircase Mikhail jogged back down to his quarters, not overly rushing as the fifteen minute deadline had already passed, and set about changing into the various layers which made up his official combat uniform.

“I think that's everything…” he muttered to himself as he surveyed himself in the pathetic excuse
of a mirror which was apparently the standard size in District Thirteen. It was so short it chopped off his entire head unless he crouched down. “Let's go do this thingy…”

Stepping into the hangar bay it was immediately obvious that he was the last one to arrive.

Boggs was stood at the bottom of the loading ramp, arms folded across his chest as he glared across at Mikhail who did nothing to quicken his pace. If anything he over-exaggerated the casualness of his walk, smiling at the generic District Thirteen worker who hurried forwards to hand him a rifle, a pistol and a combat knife. He couldn't resist the temptation to annoy Boggs even more by pausing to attach the pistol and knife to his belt rather than do so once he was on board the hovercraft which would have been sensible.

“You're late.”

“I did warn you that I probably would be,” he responded, offering the older man an apathetic shrug as he made his way up the rather steep ramp. “And trust me, I could've been even later if I'd wanted to be. We weren't exactly ready to return, you know?”

“You disobeyed your schedule,” Boggs snapped accusingly as he followed him on board, the ramp closing behind him. Mikhail nodded, grinning broadly as he dropped down into the empty seat beside Finnick who was trying not to smirk. “You're lucky that you're considered imperative to this mission or you'd be facing punitive measures for your infraction.”

“Is that a fancy way of telling me that I'll be punished for breaking the rules?” he enquired with a genuine frown as he struggled to buckle himself in. “If so, it's not exactly the first time…”

“Where were you?”

If it had been anyone but Finnick held asked he'd have ignored them. As it was he offered his friend a smile, relaxing back in his seat once the buckles were secure, and answered,

“Johanna and I spent the day up on the surface. We were missing the sky, you know?”

“You went to the surface?!” Boggs demanded sharply. “Without permission?!”

“Could've sworn I just said that,” Mikhail muttered, causing Finnick to snort loudly. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Cressida gesturing for the cameras to keep rolling. “We were a bit dirty after our food fight following breakfast this morning, which was awesome I might add although totally unfair as she has wicked aim, so we went swimming to clean off.”

“…you went swimming?!”

“Seriously, do you have a hearing problem? Or do you just like repeating what I say?” Mikhail enquired of the positively steaming Boggs just as the hovercrafts engines roared to life signalling they were about to take off. “How’s your day been, Finnick? How’s Annie?”

“Not happy I'm leaving but getting much better,” Finnick responded honestly. “In fact it was only the fact that you and Gloss are on the team with me that she let me leave our room…”

For the first time Mikhail noticed the figure sat on Finnick’s other side and even if Finnick hadn't mentioned him by name Mikhail would have recognised him immediately. He'd known that the deadly Victor from District One had been rescued from the Arena alongside the others but as far as Mikhail was aware he'd never ventured out of the private medical room he'd been given, not even after he'd been “assessed” by the higher-ups of District Thirteen to make sure that he wasn't loyal to the Capitol. He wasn't, apparently. Far from it.
They nodded to each other in greeting.

“As much as I'm sorry for dragging you away from your wife so soon I must admit to being glad you're here,” Mikhail muttered honestly, glancing around at the rest of the group. “We're being sent to join up with Katniss, right? That's why we've got the cameras with us.”

Finnick nodded.

“Yeah, I'm definitely glad you're here,” Mikhail chuckled loudly, adjusting how his rifle was hanging from the clip on the front of his jacket. “I don't know if you've noticed but I'm not particularly good at following orders…or making friends…or working with the Mockingjay…”

“Really?” Finnick snorted sarcastically. “I'd never have guessed.”

That earned him a thump on the arm which caused someone in the hovercraft to giggle, someone from District Thirteen if he wasn't very much mistaken. A quick glance round found the identical fighters sharing a look as they both fought to keep their expressions as neutral as he was used to seeing them. He'd seen them around District Thirteen, the strikingly beautiful women were hard to miss, but he had never actually spoken to them nor did he know their names despite the fact that they had ended up training in the same group.

It was nice to know someone in District Thirteen had a sense of humour…

“Ok, I think that's enough for now,” Cressida murmured softly to the two cameramen ego obediently ceased filming, checking over their equipment automatically. “We'll get some more footage when we land and meet up with Katniss but the priority is the advance.”

He recognised the three remaining soldiers from the various training sessions he'd attended since being released from the medical unit, one of whom had actually overseen most of his training and had been the one to teach him the correct way to fire a rifle. Her name was Jackson, she was a Lieutenant and she shared Boggs’s less than favourable opinion of him.

He had no idea what the other two were called, only knew that one of the men was a medic.

Time passed slowly on the hovercraft, Mikhail, Finnick and Gloss having a long, drawn out conversation about anything and everything whilst the others sat in complete silence. Well, the soldiers did. Cressida and Messalla discussed possible locations to film in once the advance reached the Capitol while the two cameraman had a detailed conversation with their hands, something which Mikhail found mostly fascinating but a little bit…creepy...

Eventually Mikhail found himself dozing off for the last leg of the journey and only woke up when the hovercraft landed in District Two, the motion of the semi-roughly landing shaking him out of a remarkably pleasant dream about walking in the woods with Johanna and Juno.

The fact that they'd both been there had been weird, the fact that they'd both gotten on with each other had been extremely weird, but the fact that they'd held his hands and all three of them had been surrounded by a feeling of peace? That had been beyond nice.

“Time to go,” Finnick muttered, rising from his own seat and collecting his deadly looking trident from where he'd stashed it along the bottom of the seats behind their feet. Mikhail hadn't even noticed it for the duration of the flight and the start end had been closest to him, practically resting up against his right foot. “Cameras are rolling so try to play nice…”

“I'm always nice…” he muttered, breaking off to yawn uncontrollably. “Where are we?”

“District Two,” Gloss answered, towering over him in an unintentionally threatening manner. He
really was one of the tallest men Mikhail had ever seen, if not the tallest. Not to mention the Victor was also ridiculously broad. Seriously, what did they feed them in District One? “And don't worry about the cameras. Didn't you hear them planning, Finn? They're doing the establishing shots of the District Two Rebels and their camp first. Obviously.”

Mikhail snorted.

He could definitely see himself becoming good friends with the District One Victor.

People stared at them as they were led through the camp, mostly at Finnick and Gloss but unfortunately Mikhail noticed more than a couple people gesturing towards him, not even trying to be subtle about it as they blatantly referred to him as “the hero of District Eight.”

The two Victors took it in their stride, used to fame as they were, but he absolutely hated it.

Because of the fact that they had to work their way through their adoring fans the three of the married at their destination a little late, just in time to hear Jackson begin introducing Katniss and her ever loyal friend Gale something-or-other to the various squad members.

Boggs had disappeared.

“I'm Lieutenant Jackson and I want to introduce you to your squad,” Jackson informed Katniss in the same cold voice Mikhail remembered from his early sessions on gun maintenance. There was nothing soft about her, not her voice, not her eyes, not even her hair which was tied back severely. “This is Second Lieutenant Mitchell, best sharpshooter in Panem. These are the Leeg sisters. First combat division. And this is Corporal Holmes.”

It was good to know their names as last, Mikhail reflected as they joined the group.

“Finnick? Are you with us?”

Katniss definitely sounded happy to see him although she made no mention of Mikhail or Gloss, even going to far as to ignore them when she moved over to give Finnick a hug.

“Looks like it.”

“That was a short honeymoon.”

“Yeah” Finnick agreed regretfully, pulling out of the gentle hug and offering Katniss a smile full of regret. “Well, I guess we're going to have to have one in the Capitol after we take it.”

“Gather round,” Boggs called out suddenly, walking up to the group with Cressida and her crew in tow. They'd stripped down to their grey undershirts like Katniss and Gale in an effort to keep cool. “Squad 451, you're my unit. Lieutenant Jackson is my second-in-command.

Wonderful.

The two people he got along with the worst were now directly in charge of his future.

“Each one of you is elite in some form of combat but we are a non-combat unit,” Boggs continued with his announcement, his calm words taking almost all of them by surprise. A non-combat unit? They were pretty heavily armed, possibly even too heavily armed, for a mere non-combat unit. “So we'll be following days behind the front-line troops.”

Katniss wasn't the only one frowning deeply.
“You're the on screen faces of the invasion,” Cressida announced, trying to sound serious but only managing to sound excited by the prospect of filming them all storming the Capitol. “The Star Squad. It's been decided that you're most effective when seen by the masses.”

“So we're not going to fight?”

This question could have come from any of them but it was Gale who’d actually spoken up.

“You'll do whatever you're ordered to, soldier,” Boggs countered emotionlessly, his strict words reminding Mikhail why he didn't like him. “It's not your job to ask questions.”

Gale shifted uncomfortably but eventually nodded, agreeing softly,

“Yes, Sir.”

“Our instructions are to shoot propaganda footage on the battle-scarred streets of the Capitol,” Boggs announced, looking around at the group. “You were hand slicked to intimidate their forces and inspire surrenders. Even though we'll be working on abandoned streets miles behind the front lines I guarantee you, wherever they put us, it will not be safe. This is a war zone. It is likely that we'll encounter both active pods and Peacekeepers.”

“Bet this is just how you wanted to spend your honeymoon, huh, Finnick? Very romantic…” Mikhail found himself snorting softly, interrupting the briefing by causing the Victor in question to snort, choking back laughter as all eyes turned on them. “Sorry. Carry on.”

Boggs let out what sounded suspiciously like a growl before continuing,

“You're considered high-value targets to the Capitol. In the event of capture you'll be given a nightlock pill. A poison that acts immediately. Lieutenant Jackson, do the honours.”

He wasn't the only one to make a face as he accepted the little capsule, storing it in his jacket pocket whilst silently vowing never to use it. He'd shoot himself before using poison.

“Our unit has been given a holo, a database that contains a detailed map of the Capitol and a list of every known pod,” Boggs announced, holding up the rather chunky device once everyone had been given one of the little suicide pills. “These pods can trigger anything from bombs to traps to mutts. We cannot move without this device. There is no guarantee that our database is complete. There could be new pods that we're not aware of.”

“This getting better by the second…”

It wasn't Mikhail doing the muttering this time but Gloss who seemed less than impressed.

“Because we don't want the Gamemakers to know we have this Intel it has a self-destruct on it. You flip this switch, say nightlock three times and it blows itself and anything within a ten-foot radius,” Boggs pressed on determinedly. “Stay win our unit. Even with the holo it is likely that new pods have been set. Whatever they contain they are meant to kill you.”

Mikhail let out a loud breath of air but it was Finnick who eventually broke the tense silence,

“Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the 76th Hunger Games.”
A/N How could I end this chapter anywhere but there? Now I must apologise for my absence, I took part in a writing challenge to work on some of my writing skills and I couldn't write anything but the challenge material for the whole of July or I'd never have gotten it done. Hope this chapter was worth the weight. Comments/Suggestions welcome. X
Chapter Sixteen

Mikhail huffed deeply, jamming his hands into his trouser pockets as he walked along the raised train track like it was a balance beam and relying on the clip to keep his rifle in place.

“I never thought I’d say this but I really miss my old boots…”

Finnick, walking alongside him, snorted deeply before continuing to spin his trident back and forth between his hands creating a mesmerizing pattern which also looked rather deadly.

They had been walking for a couple of hours, following the train tracks out of District Two until they’d eventually found themselves stepping out onto the elaborate bridge which apparently marked the official outer limits of the Capitol, and already the combat boots he’d been issued with by the clerks of District Thirteen were beginning to seriously pinch and rub.

“I mean, you couldn’t really call them boots anymore, they were falling apart so much but they were really comfortable,” he continued to grumble, not even bothering to try and keep his voice down. “And they were my grandfather’s even before they were my fathers but I wore them all day, every day for years and they never hurt my feet like these ones do.”

Lieutenant Jackson turned to glare disapprovingly at him,

“Didn’t you break them in like you were told to?”

“Er…no…” Mikhail snorted, rolling his eyes towards Finnick who bit back a smile. “It’s all well and good telling us to break them in when you give us these things but if you don’t tell us how to do that well, it won’t happen, will it? Would’ve thought that was pretty obvious…”

“But…it’s just common sense…” one of the Leeg sisters protested with a frown. “You just have to wear them off and on for a couple of days, stretch out the leather and if that doesn’t work get you wear them into the shower and let them dry around your feet…”

“Oh, yes, that’s definitely what I’d call common sense…”

Finnick finally stopped spinning his trident, resting it against his shoulder as he spoke up be,

“I used to make the same mistake back when I first became a Victor. I’d never had new shoes
before then, only hand-me-downs, and it took me several months to figure it out.”

Those who had grown up in District Thirteen or the Capitol looked genuinely confused for a moment, all of them perfectly used to breaking in new shoes, whilst to Mikhail’s surprise both Katniss and Gale grunted softly in agreement as they glanced at their own new boots.

Eventually Katniss surprised them all, Mikhail especially, by echoing his earlier statement,

“I miss my old boots too…”

It wasn’t long after that that they began coming across evidence of the fighting which had taken place ahead of them; damaged building, burnt out cars, bullet casings and bodies.

Bodies in white uniforms.

Bodies in black uniforms.

Bodies in no uniform at all.

Unsurprisingly Cressida had her crew stop filming the “background footage” she’d had them working on for duration of their mission so far, footage that would be used to “add depth or meaning” to the scripted moments which had been planned in advance to include them all.

“No going to film this bit, then?” Mikhail scoffed, stepping over a dead body. “…too grim?”

Cressida glared across at him.

“Thought we were meant to put a face on this? Get people to see what’s really going on in the Capitol?” he pressed on, stepping over another body. This time it wasn’t dressed in a white uniform; it was dressed in a lurid pink and green dress. “What? Is this too real now?”

No one answered him.

Eventually they came across their first active pod, prompting Cressida to leap into action, and Mikhail found himself placed so that he was in the shot but not in such a way as to detract from the impressive image they created of Katniss triggering the elaborate trap.

He couldn’t help but flinch backward as flames appeared out of nowhere, engulfing the road ahead of them with such a ferocity that an abandoned car literally exploded, flipping up into the air as its fuel tanks ruptured in such a way that it land on its roof with an almighty crash.

“Ok, that was perfect,” Cressida announced almost breathlessly, silently gesturing for the cameramen to alter their positions. “Now would be a good time to get the first script done.”

Boggs nodded sharply.

“Make it quick.”

Cressida smiled brightly,

“Mikhail, let’s get you set up in front of the flames again…”

“Seriously?” he groaned, looking up at the sky for a long moment before glaring at the Capitol woman who quickly moved to take him by the arm. “Why can’t she do it?”

“Because I want you to do it. Now, look at me, not the camera and…”
“…and say what?” he demanded even as Cressida proceeded to manhandle him into place before crying out sarcastically, “Hi! We’re in the Capitol. Whoop! Whoop! Don’t die!”

Cressida wasn’t the only one to glare at him in response.

It was Messalla who eventually handed him a card with a copy of what they wanted him to say printed on one side of it in nice and clear letters, the print slightly larger than usual.

“Seriously?” he snorted loudly as he read it. “I like my version better. This is pathetic…”

“Just read it.”

“Ok,” Mikhail muttered with a shrug. “But don't say I didn't warn you…”

Clearing his throat he brought the card up so that he could read from it only to have it snatched out of his hand by Messalla who then proceeded to hold it up for him to see over Cressida’s shoulder, pointing at the first sentence with one of his delicate looking fingers.

“People of Panem,” he began obediently, pitching his voice so that it was significantly more monotone than it usually was as he forced himself, for once, to stick to the truly horrific script which he had been given to read. “Having successfully infiltrated the Capitol, my Squad and I have been making our way towards the Presidential Mansion. The fighting has been hard and the traps left by the cowardly Gamemakers have claimed many lives but still the Mockingjay stands. Fight on, my comrades, for the end is in sight.”

Cressida huffed loudly once he had finished his lifeless speech.

“Try again, this time with a little more emotion,” she instructed him, gesturing for the cameramen to set up their shots again. “You're storming the Capitol. Try and act like it.”

His initial response was a simple look, a raising of the eyebrow in disbelief, but eventually he let out a deeper sigh than before, cleared his throat a couple of times, and started again.

“People of Panem,” he called out, doing his best impression of Caesar Flickerman as he decided to see just how long it would take for her Capitol mask to crack, how much he could push her before she snapped at him. “Having successfully infiltrated the Capitol, the rest of my Squad and I have been making our way towards the Presidential Mansion. The fighting has been hard and the traps left by the cowardly Gamemakers have claimed many lives.”

Here he paused, enjoying the look of panicked fury spreading across Cressida’s face.

“But, despite their best efforts the Mockingjay still stands,” he continued, moving away from the spot he had been placed in until he was stood in front of Gloss who towered over him just like he towered over everyone and between Katniss and Finnick, the latter of which smirked towards the camera after the two men working them had caught up with them whilst Gloss’s expression remained as controlled as per usual although Katniss looked more than a little bit stunned. “No special armour this time, either. She's just hard to kill.”

He punctuated his cheerful statement by patting the shocked young woman on the back with more force than was strictly necessary, causing her to stumble forwards a pace or two.

“We’re here, fighting alongside you so don’t you dare give up. We can win this.”

He paused for a moment before stepping away from Katniss, offering Cressida a smirk as he walked up to Messalla, snatched the card away from him and ripped it up into little pieces before throwing them over his shoulder with as much of a dramatic flair as he could muster.
“And that, ladies and gentlemen, is as good as it’s going to get,” he announced, shrugging his shoulders as he made a show of brushing the dirt off of his hands. “Time to move on?”

Cressida looked as though she were about to explode, as did Messalla, although her two cameramen were sharing an amused smile which immediately endeared them to Mikhail.

An hour later Mikhail was listening to Finnick describing an incident involving a fishing boat, a broken net, and an eight year old Finnick Odair who even he admitted was a “little hellion” when a door opened up ahead of the group, prompting the Leeg sisters who were at the front to aim their weapons towards the figure who emerged hesitantly from the building.

Jackson gestured for the rest of them to take a knee, their weapons automatically coming up and aiming at various points all around them so that if they were attacked they could defend themselves, even as Boggs stepped forwards to draw the figures attention to him.

It was obvious the man was no Peacekeeper, not with the way his hair had been dyed to match his emerald green suit perfectly, but that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous to them.

“Please…” the middle-aged man said, his voice trembling pitifully as he brought his delicate looking hands up into the universal position of surrender. “Please… I need your help…”

“Why should we help you?”

“My daughter…” the Capitolite continued, his voice becoming little more than a whimper. “She's hurt… we've been trying to get away from the fighting but there are these pods…”

Boggs grunted, nodding his head sharply to indicate that he knew of what the man spoke.

“I just want to get my family somewhere safe… please…”

Even Mikhail had to admit that the Capitolite sounded pathetically genuine.

“It could be a trap,” Jackson muttered. “A ploy to get us inside.”

“Can your daughter be moved?”

Worrying his lip between his teeth for a moment the Capitolite eventually nodded.

“Bring her out into the open and our medic will take a look at her,” Boggs ordered sharply, gesturing to Homes who made a show of opening up his pack of medical supplies. “And I want anyone else you've got inside there out in the open too. They won't be harmed.”

Katniss gasped softly to Mikhail's right when the man emerged with his injured daughter in his arms as the girl could be no older than five and appeared to be missing half her face, a terrible burn completely obliterating her young features and stretching down her side.

A woman, probably the girl’s mother, followed.

She was dressed in the tattered remains of a lime green evening gown, her feet completely bare and covered in tiny little scratches, and she carried a whimpering toddler on her hip.

Last to emerge was a girl of ten or eleven dressed only in what appeared to be her nightdress, her long blonde hair falling in two messy braids over her shoulders although even Mikhail could see that there was something unusual about the type of braid.

Homes moved forwards without being prompted to, gesturing for the distraught father to lay his
daughter on the ground before he began treating the burns as best he could with the equipment he had to hand whilst the Capitolite wrapped his arms around his shaking wife.

“Ok, people, defensive positions,” Jackson ordered gruffly. “Let's not be taken by surprise.”

Cressida had already set about getting her cameramen in place to record both the little girl being treated and the reactions of the rest of the squad, most of the focus falling on Katniss.

“…are you her?”

Only the trained soldiers were able to stop themselves from turning to face the owner of the innocent voice, focused on keeping a lookout, whilst everyone else turned to look at the young girl in her ruined nightdress who had moved to stand directly in front of Katniss.

“…are you Katniss?”

“I am.”

A hesitant smile blossomed on the girls face, transforming her from a frightened little thing into a striking beauty who would one day capture more hearts than she could ever need.

“My names Lilith,” the girl introduced herself softly. “I'm glad you're not dead.”

Katniss smiled somewhat awkwardly in response.

“My brother was born during your Games,” the girl explained softly, nodding towards the toddler who was now sucking his thumb. “Mama named him Peeta, after you’re…friend.”

Even some of the trained soldiers couldn't stop themselves from glancing at the baby boy upon hearing this piece of information and Katniss wasn't the only open mouthed in shock.

“Papa says that you're fighting for freedom,” the girl, Lilith, continued and once again all Katniss could do was nod in response. “…our freedom? Or just yours and the Districts?”

Gale scoffed loudly,

“What do you need to be freed from?”

For the first time since meeting the young man from District Twelve Mikhail found himself silently agreeing with Gale as he wondered what they could possibly need to be freed from.

Lilith blinked up at him, frowning deeply.

“Not all of us agree with President Snow, you know,” she announced somewhat haughtily as she tossed owned of her braids over her shoulder. “Papa says that the Hunger Games are cruel and unnecessary but we have no choice but to support them as to speak out against them would result in our deaths, in all our deaths. I'm sure your lives have been awful but don't think that just because we come from the Capitol that our lives were any better.”

Silence, broken only by the toddlers fussing, followed her statement.

“…did you really hate the Games?”

It wasn't Lilith who Katniss eventually directed her soft question to but the girl’s parents.

After a moment’s hesitation both of them nodded, her mother kissing the toddlers forehead absentmindedly as she attempted to soothe him whilst her husband spoke up once more,
“People who openly opposed the Hunger Games didn't last long, nor did their families. They would disappear in the middle of the night, never to be seen again. The same thing happened to people who disagreed with the way the Districts were treated, to people who opposed the Avox system, to people who refused to conform to the Capitol Dress Code…”

“What?” his wife spoke up for the first time. “You think we like dressing up like this?”

“I used to long for a day when my feet would no longer hurt with every step I took,” she responded with a mirthless chuckle, glancing down at her bare feet. “I'm still waiting…”

“I've stabilised the patient as best as I can,” Homes announced, glancing up towards Boggs making it clear whom he was reporting to regarding his actions. “She needs more care than I can give her, however, and I recommend that she be seen by a doctor as soon as possible.”

As one the Capitol family let out a whimper of despair.

“We have a field hospital set up just outside the city,” Boggs informed them tersely, gesturing back towards the direction they'd come from with sharp, militarised motions. “They won't turn you away. All of the pods should have been cleared but keep vigilant.”

Tears flooded down both of the parents dust stained cheeks as the father choked out,

“…thank you…”

“I hope you win, Katniss,” Lilith declared, gazing up at the Mockingjay with hope filled eyes as her father carefully lifted his younger daughter into his arms. “I like the idea of peace…”

They watched the family as they began making their way towards the edge of the city, hugging the sides of the road as much as possible, for the length of time it took Cressida to transmit the footage she had just taken back to District Thirteen so that it could be used.

It was, as she put it, worth its weight in gold.

Nothing else worth filming happened for the rest of the afternoon and eventually it was decided that the group would stop and set up camp for the night in what remained of a café which had apparently been popular with the youth of the Capitol, according to Messalla.

“Either of you ever come here?” Mikhail found himself asking as he, Finnick and Gloss set about clearing a space large enough for the three of them to bed down in. “To the café?”

Gloss shook his head,

“My clients tended to be high-ranking citizens who would never stray this far away from the city centre and certainly not to a place like this, known for its eclectic styles and loud music.”

Finnick, on the other hand, nodded.

“Some of my clients would hire me to spend time with their children,” the handsome young man responded, his eyes taking on a somewhat haunted look as he gazed around at the empty shell of the building. “Mostly there was nothing sexual about it, just publicity as wherever I went so did the cameras, but there were a couple of uncomfortable dates here.”
Mikhail's response, whatever it round have ended up being, was interrupted by the unmistakable sounds of an approaching vehicle, gravel crunching loudly under the tires.

“Is that Peacekeepers?”

Weapons were grabbed, their safeties being knocked off as they all hurried towards the front of the building, adopting a defensive position whilst Jackson radioed command,

“451 to base. We've got a truck coming in from the South. Over.”

A pause.

“Copy that. Over.”

Stepping out from her concealed position she stepped out to join Boggs, Katniss and Gale who had been outside when the alert had been raised and hadn't made their way inside yet.

“Stand down, everyone,” she finally ordered, gesturing for them to lower their weapons which they did so albeit slowly, the safety catches eventually being reapplied. “It's friendly.”

Following behind his friend Mikhail stepped out into the afternoon sunlight, watching through squinted eyes as the armoured vehicle came to a gentle halt in front of them.

A figure jumped out from the rear hatch, landing agile before turning to help a significantly less agile person exit the vehicle although once on the ground they were left on their own.

Finnick gasped.

“Peeta…”

It was indeed the mentally damaged Victor from District Twelve who was approaching their group, hands clenched before him and muttering to himself as he failed to notice that Katniss, his supposed “wife” who he had attempted to kill, was now aiming an arrow at him.

“Stop!”

The sharp order finally seemed to get through to him, his gaze snapping up fearfully as he stumbled to a halt although he never stopped muttering the same phrase over and over,

“My name is Peeta Mellark. My home is District Twelve. My name is Peeta Mellark. My h…”

More weapons were raised, joining Katniss in aiming at the muttering young man, but Finnick rushed forwards to stand between the deadly projectiles at the trembling figure.

“Hold up,” he requested softly, adopting as unthreatening a stance as possible as he turned on the spot to face Peeta who still flinched away from him instinctively. “Everyone relax…”

“…ome his District Twelve.”

Gale moved to stand beside Katniss, his gaze cold as he demanded gruffly,

“What are we doing?”

“Jackson,” Boggs called out, already turning away from the trembling boy. “Cuff him.”

As their squad leader moved to have what appeared to be a rather heated conversation with the men who had just delivered the traumatised Victor to them Jackson stepped forwards, retrieving a
strap which had two loops built into it using a chunky metal clasp.

“Soldier,” she called out, her voice softer than Mikhail had ever heard it, her tone similar to that which he had heard countless people use when they were talking to frightened children. “This is just a precaution until we can get everything straightened out, yeah?”

Peeta’s only response was to start mumbling to himself again,

“My name is Peeta Mellark. My home is District Twelve.”

Moving out of the way so that Jackson could lead the now cuffed young man inside the building Mikhail felt someone's gaze upon him and turned to find Finnick watching him, his brows deeply furrowed with confusion and worry as he gestured after Peeta with his hand.

“What were they thinking, sending him here?” the Victor huffed. “He shouldn't be here.”

“I'm sure there's a perfectly logical, painfully strategic reason,” Mikhail responded, adjusting how his rifle hung from the clip on his jacket. “You know what these District Thirteen people are like. Victory at any cost. Nothing should be left to chance. Utilise every opportunity and skill available to you. Needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Blah. Blah. Blah…”

Boggs stormed past them, gruffly ordering for everyone but Mitchell to follow him.

“Find a suitable vantage spot and keep watch,” he ordered the District Thirteen soldier who hadn't even argued when he had been told to stay outside. “You'll be relieved in an hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

Inside the building Peeta had been placed down by the far wall and sat, staring out at nothing with his legs curled up to his chest and his cuffed arms resting upon his bent knees.

Finnick moved to perch on the remains of the cafés counter, hopping up with an effortlessly graceful movement which Mikhail didn't even attempt to copy when he joined him, climbing up significantly more clumsily than his friend, his gun knocking against the counter loudly.

Gloss snorted, shaking his head at him as the enormous Victor leaned against the counter.

“They want us to add him to the propaganda videos in order to show that he's on our side now,” Boggs announced somewhat gravely once everyone had settled, holding up a hand to silence their protests before they could even begin to formulate them which annoyed almost everyone. “We'll move forward a few blocks tomorrow and shoot the new footage.”

Predictably Gale was the first to speak up once Boggs had finished briefing them,

“He's not in control of himself.”

“I say we schedule and around the clock watch on him,” Jackson interjected next, receiving a nod of approval from their squad leader. “The Leegs till 1700. Homes and Mitchell till 1900.”

Without any further prompting the identical soldiers moved from where they had been leaning against the wall to stand on either side of Peeta, the trouble boy barely noticing.

“Give me a watch.”

All eyes turned to Katniss, startled by both her request and her cold tone of voice.

Jackson frowned.
“And if it really came down to it, you think you could shoot him?”

“I wouldn’t be shooting Peeta,” Katniss responded, her voice even colder than before as she purposefully kept herself from looking across at Peeta. “I’d be killing a Capitol mutt.”

Jackson’s frown deepened.

“I’m not sure that kind of comment recommends you for the job either, soldier.”

“Put her on the rotation.”

It was almost impossible for Mikhail not to snort at the expression of shocked disapproval that dominated Jackson’s features as she was forced to move out of the way so that Boggs, their squad leader who had just given Katniss permission, could stride out of the building.

“Odair and Warrington until 2100,” she barked out after a long moment during which Katniss fidgeted, obviously wanting to follow Boggs out of the building but unable to do so until the briefing had concluded. “Everdeen and Hawthorn until 2300. Castor and Pollux until 0100. Cressida and Messalla until 0300. Boggs and I will take the rest, understood?”

Katniss was on her feet and heading for the door before most people had confirmed in their own individual ways that the rotation made sense to them, hurrying across the room towards the damaged doorway Boggs had exited through which just happened to be less than a metre away from where Mikhail was sat and the temptation was too much to resist.

“Wow…” he chuckled just as she came in line with where he was sat, popping the magazine off of his rifle so that he could make a show of checking it's contents before clicking input back into place. “You must have really pissed off Creepy-Coin for her to put you out here with not one but two people who would gladly watch you die a slow and painful death!”

“Mikhail…”

“What?” he snorted, turning to smile at Finnick. “Don’t tell me you weren't thinking it…”

Glaring across at him Katniss tossed her hair, held in a ponytail rather than her signature braid, over her shoulder and stormed out of the building as father as her legs could take her.

Gloss cleared his throat loudly once she was gone, gesturing to himself with a questioning frown as he silently enquired as to why hadn't been assigned a watch like everyone else.

“Uneven number,” Jackson explained simply. “You'll be on the watch rotation tomorrow.”

The Victor grunted, nodding to show he was satisfied with her answer.

“Not that I agree with how you said it but you might have a point about President Coin having something against Katniss,” Finnick sighed, running his fingers through his hair so that it settled stylishly around his head despite it's dirty state. “It's like she wants her in as much danger as possible. Putting her around active pods. Broadcasting her position during these propaganda videos and it wouldn't surprise me if they ask for live broadcasts at some point which will literally be an invitation for President Snow to kill her. And now Peeta?”

Mikhail frowned, his jovial mood disappearing as he realised the truth of his friends words.

“What's better than a living symbol of the rebellion?” Finnick continued, glancing out to where Katniss was now talking with Boggs. “A dead martyr. Whilst she's alive she has an opinion, a
voice; once she's dead President Coin can use her image however she wants to.”

“…we have to keep her alive, don’t we?” Mikhail groaned mournfully. “Bollocks…”

A/N Sorry for the delay but real life has been a bit difficult recently, with my granddad passing away and my step-mother having to be put into an assisted living house because of her dementia. Hopefully now that things are calming down I'll be able to write more regularly. Anyway I hope you enjoyed this latest install meant. Comments welcome. X

A/N2 I keep forgetting that I saved Gloss and completely forgot to put him in this chapter, hence the re-write to add him in. Whoops. Sorry, Gloss, I didn’t do it on purpose…
Chapter Seventeen

- Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Seventeen

“…do you really hate Katniss?”

Glancing up from the pattern he had been drawing the dust which covered what remained of a table top Mikhail found himself meeting the expressive gaze of the young man he and Finnick were guarding whilst also keeping an eye/ear out for anything going on outside.

Peeta’s cleared his throat, his eyes flickering across to her sleeping form for the briefest of moment even as his hands began to tremble violently where they rested, bound, in his lap.

“Earlier, you said…”

“I know what I said,” Mikhail murmured, turning his head so that he too could regard the sleeping young woman for a moment before returning his gaze to meet that of Peeta Mellark, the deeply troubled young Victor. “My feelings towards Katniss Everdeen are... complicated and while I won't say that I like her... in fact I can guarantee that I never will... I wouldn't say that I hate her... although I reserve the right to change my mind…”

Finnick snorted, shaking his head as he rolled a single coin over and around his fingers.

“Oh…” Peeta mumbled, frowning deeply. “I just... thought…”

“I won't be sacrificing myself to save her, in case you were wondering, but I won't try to kill her,” Mikhail was quick to explain his current feelings upon the matter. “I might have wanted to once... or twice... ok, several times... but I got over it. So as long as she doesn't do something to really piss me off... again... there won't be a problem between me and her…”

“...they made me think I hated her…” Peeta mumbled, his frown deepening. “They told me... they told that this is all her fault... that she was a traitor... that... that she had to die…”

Mikhail grimaced.

At one point or another since his life had been turned upside down he had thought and/said something very similar to the things Peeta had been told on more than one occasion and he still believed that some of the blame for the bloodshed did rest upon her shoulders given how most of her actions hadn't been thought out or planned in advance, just selfish attempts to save the life of
herself or her sister…or Peeta…so what could he say to that?

“Well…” he eventually sighed, deciding not to confuse Peeta further. “…they're idiots.”

Finnick audibly choking this time as he attempted to muffle his laughter.

“They only made you think those things because they know that they're on the losing side of this war,” he continued, unaware that several of their party including Katniss herself had woken up and were listening in on their conversation. “Snow needs her dead because he knows that the people will do anything she tells them to do if they think it'll bring about their freedom from the Capitol. They knew you'd be able to get closer to her than anyone else and they tried to use that to their advantage but would you look at that, it didn't work!”

Peeta’s stare was more intense than Mikhail had ever seen it, fixated on him as he spoke.

“She’s alive. You're alive. Through some minor miracle even I’m alive and trust me I should be dead,” Mikhail continued, snorting softly as he shook his head. “So…yeah…they're all idiots… frightened idiots on the wrong side of the war…so just ignore them and anything they put in your head…Katniss might be a selfish bitch but she's not the enemy. Snow is.”

“…why should you be dead?”

“Of course that's what you picked out from that little speech…” Mikhail huffed to himself although everyone, Peeta included, still heard him. “I'm surprised you don't already know, given they made my life into a propaganda video as while back but short version; I was part of the original rebel movement in District Eight and should have been executed then but I wasn't even picked up. Then when the full rebellion started most of my squad were killed during an attack but I wasn't, just taken prisoner and thoroughly tortured for information, after the other members of my squad were executed but I was somehow rescued. Horrific injuries, blah, blah, blah, should've died but didn't. Noticing a theme yet? And here we are.”

“…you were tortured?”

“Yup,” Mikhail responded, popping to ‘p’ whilst tugging on the collar of his shirt to reveal one of the many scars littering his skin. “Nothing quite as inventive as what happened to you and Johanna, more like good old fashioned beatings with a bit of humiliation and sexual abuse thrown in, but I'm still a certified member of the I-Survived-Being-Tortured club.”

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“Oh, you're certified all right,” Finnick snorted, flinching back as Mikhail retaliated by throwing a small piece of rubble at the Victor's arm. “Oi! I didn't say it was a bad thing…”

Someone chortled softly and it took Mikhail a moment to realise it had come from Peeta and that the troubled young Victor looked more relaxed than he had since brought off with their squad, smiling ever so slightly as his gaze flickered between Mikhail and Finnick.

“Is this club open to new members or is it invitation only?” Peeta enquired, still chuckling softly to himself. “I've been tortured and brainwashed so I'm pretty certified. Can I join?”

“I'd have to speak to the founding member,” Mikhail responded, sucking air through his teeth thoughtfully before grinning at Peeta who looked like a completely different person now that he was smiling. “Oh, right, I’m the founding member…right…welcome to the club! And let me tell you, it is a very exclusive club given that we have a grand total of four and a half members… although that's liable to change the longer this damned war goes on…”

Finnick snorted loudly,
“Four and a half?”

Making a great show of it Mikhail counted the members silently on his hand, nodding.

“…who's the half?”

“You, of course,” he responded simply and once again was surprised to hear Peeta react to his comment, guffawing softly as he took in Finnick's startled expression. “Myself, Johanna, Annie and Peeta are all fully fledged members as we tick all the boxes; captured, held prisoner, tortured, mentally unstable…but you my trident twirling friend are an honour member due to the years of sexualised torture President Snow and his friends put you through. You weren’t captured or held prisoner, hence why you're not a fully-fledged member, but you definitely tick the mentally unstable box even if you won't admit it…”

“…remind me why I'm friends with you again?”

“Oh, that's easy,” Mikhail teased. “Because Annie, your better half I might add, likes me.”

District Four’s handsome Victor conceded that, yes, that was probably true and they talked of Annie for little while, a conversation Peeta actively joined in with as just like everyone else Mikhail had met the District Twelve native had been completely unable to resist Annie’s natural charm and sweet nature, although he only lasted a short while before his eyelids began to droop, body slumping back against the wall as he finally dropped of to sleep.

“He shouldn't be here…” Finnick muttered once they were sure Peeta was asleep. “He should be back in District Thirteen with Annie and Johanna, healing, not out here where anything could happen. It's almost as though Coin wants him to have a break down and –”

Boggs cleared his throat loudly.

"That's enough of that kind of talk, Soldier."

What, Mikhail thought to himself but managed not to make a sound, have independent thought? Or is it that we're not allowed to question our supposedly just and fair leader?

“Consider yourselves relieved. Jackson and I will take over the watch now.”

Mikhail managed to get another hour or so sleep before they were all woken up shortly after the sun had begun to appear in the sky and given a breakfast bar from the rations which most of them ended up eating whilst on the move as Boggs wanted to get going.

As the day progressed the sky above them became overcast, thick grey clouds threatening rain as they blocked out both the sky and the sun, and by the time Cressida eventually spoke up about them being in a “good spot” to film their next propo it was a truly miserable day.

“Through there,” Cressida announced once everyone had obeyed Boggs’ silent hand signal, coming to a halt in a vague representation of an organised squad. “In the courtyard.”

Boggs glanced along the road ahead of them, taking in the rubble lying in clumps, the broken windows and cut away walls exposing the deserted buildings before finally nodding.

“Ok,” he agreed much to the director’s obvious relief. “But let us clear it first.”

Hanging back with Finnick who had been charge with looking after Peeta for the time being, Gloss silently bringing up the rear being them, Mikhail followed the others through the gap which had been purposely left between the elaborate buildings and out into what turned out to be a small
courtyard containing a decorative arch and leading to another alleyway.

Boggs led the way, holo held before him as he scanned their surroundings, but Katniss was right there beside him at the front of the group as they passed through the archway at the bottom of the steps and stayed right behind him as he cautiously approached the alleyway.

A recognisable beep sounded from the piece of technology their squad leader held.

“Got a pod,” he announced unnecessarily as he assessed the situation. “Split. Take cover.”

“Come on, Peeta,” Finnick muttered, pulling the younger Victor along by his arm until they were pressed against the wall to the right of the alleyway, Peeta between him and Mikhail who ended up next to Boggs while Gloss and the cameramen were on Finnick's other side. “Nothing to worry about. It's not the first pod we've come across and had to deactivate.”

Peeta nodded, his body trembling.

Crouching down Boggs selected a medium sized piece of rubble, weighing it in his hand for a moment as he straightened back up and pressed his back against the cold wall behind them.

Nodding across to Katniss who had taken up a symmetrical position on the left side of the alleyway, her bow clutched in her hands as the remainder of the squad crouched beside her.

After a final check to make sure that everyone was clear Boggs threw the piece of rubble into the alleyway and barely had time to throw himself backwards in order to avoid the relentless hail of bullets which literally shredded everything they came into contact with; the stone slabs like the ones beneath their feet, the thick walls of the buildings they were sheltering behind, the decorative archway which was reduced to a pile of rubble in seconds.

Over the top of Peeta's head he shared a somewhat hysterical grin with Finnick as the onslaught continued, struck by the sheer absurdity of the situation he found himself in.

Eventually, though, it was over and the weapons firing upon them fell silent.

Boggs waited a fraction of a second before stepping out into the open, calling out, “Stay back.”

Another long moment passed during which they watched as their squad stood, completely exposed and at risk, and checked the screen of the holo held on his remarkably steady hand.

“All clear,” he finally announced, looking up from the holo so that he could decide upon what to do next regarding their situation. “Gale, Homes, with me. Leegs, take the wings.”

Those selected moved without hesitation, joining him as he made his way along the alleyway strewn with bullet casings, while the rest of them kept themselves out of sight.

A whimper drew his attention around to Peeta, finding the younger man struggling to complete a familiar set of breathing exercises which he had been told by the District Thirteen nurse who'd attempted to teach him them that they would help to keep him calm.

Sadly the exercises didn't seem to be helping Peeta any more than they'd helped him.

“Hey,” he called out softly, frowning as Peeta began knocking his head against the wall with enough force that it had to hurt, his temple catching on the butt of the unloaded rifle they'd clipped to the front of his uniform for the purposes of looking good on camera. “You ok?”
No sooner had he spoken than the familiar sounds of a small, controlled explosion broke through the tense silence which had settled upon their group following the earlier chaos.

Katniss was the first to react, sprinting from her position as fast as she could move.

“Everdeen!” Jackson all but screamed as the rest of the squad moved into the open in order to find out who’d been hit, none of them moving to head down the alleyway just yet. “No!”

Unsurprisingly Katniss completely disregarded the sharp order in favour of throwing herself down to her knees beside Boggs who was silent despite the pain he must have been in given that he’d just had his lower legs amputated by an explosion, her bow dropping almost carelessly to the ground beside her so that her hands were free to comfort him as best she could whilst Homes stumbled to his knees in order to begin treating the horrific injuries.

“Boggs!”

Gale hurried across to lean over Katniss, prompting Jackson to call out for the rest of them to hold their positions although by that point it was only the two Leeg sisters who were likely to move, one of them curled up on the ground with her hands pressed against her own leg whilst her sister gazed fearfully across at her from the other side of the alleyway.

Even with his limited knowledge of emergency medical care Mikhail could tell it wasn’t good when Gale reached out to stop Homes, placing his hands on top of the other man’s, while Katniss leaned back with a dazed expression on her face, shaking her head almost numbly.

“Boggs…”

Mikhail hadn’t particularly liked the man but he’d been a good squad leader, seeming to genuinely care about keeping them safe, and he certainly hadn’t deserved such a fate.

A pitiful moan of pain filled the air, the injured Leeg rolling onto her back as she hands clutched at the bloodied mess that was left of her own leg, and it seemed that this following the unexpected death of their squad leader was enough to cause the uninjured Leeg to disobey the order of a superior officer, hurrying across the open space towards her sister.

Halfway across she faltered, one of the stone slabs depressing beneath her foot with an ominous clunk which prompted everyone to stare at her with a mixture of shock and horror.

Another, significantly louder, clunk sounded, drawing their attention to the space between the building one the other side of the tiered courtyard they had been heading towards, or rather to the enormous panels which were sliding into place to completely block the gap.

“That doesn’t look good…” Mikhail muttered as similar panels began appearing all around them, blocking off every single possible exit from their current location. “How are we–”

He never got the opportunity to finish his question as chaos suddenly erupted in the form of a black oil like substance being pumped out of the building behind them at an alarming rate, creating a tidal wave of the horrible liquid which, of course, was heading straight for them.

“Go! Go! Go!”

None of them needed telling twice.

Gloss had proven himself in the past to be a fast sprinter despite his impressive size and so it was no surprise that he emerged on the other side of the alleyway first but, rather than continuing on as everyone expected, he hurried over to the Leeg sisters and proceeded to haul the injured one up
and across his shoulders as though she weighed nothing at all.

“Let's go!”

Peeta stumbled, prompting both Mikhail and Finnick to reach out and take hold of his elbows so that they could steady him as they sprinted towards the point where there was a small garden wall separating the lowest of the grass covered tiers from the next one up.

“Move!”

“This way! Keep moving!” Jackson screamed from her position already on the third tier, gesturing for them all to follow her with her hand. “Let's go, soldiers! Get to higher ground!”

“Come on!”

“Move!”

It was just as they were about to follow Katniss up onto the third tier that everything went to hell, Peeta shrugging of their hands so that he could grab her by her hair, dragging her back with enough force to send her flying through the air until she landed on the grass with a pain grunt, a grunt which was quickly cut off as Peeta wrapped his hands round her throat.

She managed to push him away so which point he ripped his empty rifle off of his uniform and swung it towards her head, obviously intended to do more than just knock her out.

“Peeta!”

Mitchell reacted first, grabbing hold of Peeta by the back of his collar and dragging him a couple of paces away from the vulnerable young woman which unfortunately put them directly beside the small wall currently separating their tier from the rapidly rising black oil.

Somehow during the struggle Peeta managed to get the upper hand and, with a hard shove, sent Mitchell flying backwards into the oil, the older man disappearing beneath the surface.

“Shit!”

It was Finnick who reached Peeta next, wrapping his arms around the younger man in such a way that he was able to use his trident to lock the struggling Victors arms against his sides.

“Finnick!” Mikhail hears himself call out as he turned to pull Katniss to her feet, shoving her towards Gale who had doubled back from his safer position to help. “Finnick, restrain him!”

“Peeta!”

“Mitchell!”

Jackson sounded terrified as she screamed her friends name, all of them watching in complete and utter horror as a series of metal cables appeared from the foul black liquid with a body like shape pierced by them where they crossed over each other, dripping oil.

“Come on!” Homes called out, bringing his weapon up and shooting out the glass of the nearest elegantly designed Capitol door rather than trying to actually open it. “Come on!”

“Settle down!” Finnick growled at Peeta as he dragged the struggling Victor to safety, eventually lifting the younger man off of his feet in order to move him. “Settle down!”

“Come on!”
“Don't stop! Let's go!”

“Come on! Come on!”

“We've got to move!” Jackson screamed as the tidal wave engulfed another tier of the courtyard just behind them. “Get inside! Everybody, inside! Go! Upstairs! Go! Hurry up!”

“Move!”

Gloss led the way, bouncing up the stairs with the injured Leeg still draped across his shoulders, and the unify jeered Leeg followed alongside Homes and just before Pollux.

“Come on!”

Castor hurried up the stairs next, Messalla and Cressida close behind him which left the stairs clear for Finnick to drag the still resisting Peeta up them as swiftly as he could manage.

“Move!”

“Keep moving! Keep moving to the top!”

Mikhail, therefore, found himself bringing up the rear with Jackson, the rising liquid close at their heels as they took different sides of the winding staircase up to the next floor which, unfortunately, appeared to be as far as they could go given the damage done to the stairs.

“Hey!” Finnick called out, drawing Mikhail’s attention to where he had pinned the still struggling Peeta to the wall next to what remained of a decorative oak door. “I've got you!”

Homes hurried over, holding out a syringe, and Finnick didn't hesitate to inject its contents into the side of Peeta’s neck, the sedative having an immediate affect on the struggling boy.

With nothing else to distract him all he could do then was watched the black substance making its way up towards them, swallowing up the pieces of rubble covering the stairs.

“It's slowing down…”

Cressida was right.

Just as a little wave of oil spilled over onto the level that they had been forced to take refuge on it began, quite inexplicably, to drain away almost as rapidly as it had appeared.

It left behind it a thick layer of what now looked like tar over everything it had touched.

Cressida sighed, obviously shaken,

“Gamemakers are still putting on quite a show…”

Grunting in agreement Mikhail moved to help Finnick get Peeta situated at the base of the wall; his body now completely limp and semi-responsive, his pupils blown wide thanks to the drug being pumped around his system although by some miracle he was still conscious.

Jackson pulled out her radio, depressing the button on the side as she spoke,

“451 to base. Over.”

“Hey, we better move,” Finnick muttered, rising back to his feet and surveying the shell-shocked
group. “If Peacekeepers didn't know where we were they sure as hell do now.”

Castor let out a rather uncharacteristic whimper,

“Those surveillance cameras definitely caught us.”

“451 to base. Come in.”

“This is a bad spot,” Gale muttered, leaning against the tall windows dominating the wall behind them as he scoped out their current position. “We need to move. Now.”

“451 to base. Over,” Jackson tried for a third time before finally giving up, putting her radio away as she turned to face the others. “I can’t get a signal. But I can get us back to base.”

Her cold eyes sought out the holo and she seemed less than pleased when she located it.

“Everdeen, give me the holo.”

Katniss appeared lost in thought.

“Everdeen, what did I just say?” Jackson demanded, gesturing to the piece of technology being held in Katniss's right hand, her bow in her left. “The holo, come on, let’s go.”

Her sharp words finally succeeded in drawing Katniss from her thoughts.

“Boggs gave it to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He did,” Homes announced from where he was busy patching up the injured Leeg sister as best he could, blood on his hands. “He transferred security clearance to her. I saw him.”

Jackson frowned.

“And why would he do that?”

“I'm on special orders from Coin.”

Oh, yes, Mikhail snorted to himself, that sounded so convincing…not…

“To do what?”

Hesitating only a fraction of a second Katniss finally answered their new squad leader,

“To assassinate President Snow.”

“I don't believe that for a second,” Jackson scoffed derisively, stepping closer to the young woman who held her ground even as the older, more experienced woman reached for the holo. “As your new unit commander I order you to transfer security clearance to me. Now.”

Katniss shook her head firmly.

“I can't do that.”

It wasn’t completely unexpected but that didn’t mean that Mikhail didn’t flinch back a step in surprise when Jackson drew her side-arm, raising the pistol up to aim at Katniss’s head.
Gale stepped forwards, bringing his crossbow up to aim at the trembling woman.

Of course his actions caused the uninjured Leeg to bring up her rifle, aiming it at Gale’s torso, and in return Finnick drew his own side-arm which he aimed across at her body.

Finally, after a long moment of tense silence, Gale spoke up,

“Let’s not lose our heads here.”

“I’m not asking you again, Everdeen,” Jackson growled coldly. “Give me that holo.”

Surprisingly it was Cressida who finally moved, stepping forwards until she was directly in the path of all four weapons with Jackson’s aimed directly at the centre of her forehead.

“She’s telling the truth. Plutarch wants it televised,” she announced, her words taking them all by shock including Katniss who blinked across at her. “He thinks filming the Mockingjay assassinating Snow will make the Capitol surrender before the casualties get too high.”

Gale spoke up once more,

“While we’re arguing there’s one hundred Peacekeepers on their way here.”

Stepping forwards Katniss took hold of his crossbow, pulling it down until it was pointed at the floor beneath their feet rather than at the woman currently threatening her with a gun.

“Boggs promised me that, when the time came, you would help me.”

She sounded so genuine that for a moment Mikhail actually found himself believing her…

But no, it couldn’t be true…could it?

Finally, after a long moment where nobody even dared to move, Jackson lowered her gun.

“All right, soldier, holo’s yours.”

It took Finnick and the uninjured Leeg a moment to lower their respective weapons, the former offering the latter an apologetic shrug combined with one of his dashing smirks, and during that time Gale made his way across to where Mikhail was stood near the top of the flight of stairs he had raced up only a minutes earlier and studied what remained of the oil.

He even went so far as place his foot down on the first step to test…something…

“I don’t think we’re going to leave any footprints,” the tall young man from District Twelve announced gruffly, effortlessly explaining exactly what he had been testing the stairs for. “We should move now. And those cameras outside should be covered up by the oil.”

Nodding in agreement Jackson moved to kneel beside the injured Leeg where Castor had taken over from Homes once the smaller man had finished applying the field dressing to her leg, keeping the required pressure on it to aid in stopping the alarming rate of blood loss.

“She can’t move forward like this,” Castor murmured, loud enough for all of them to hear the emotional pain in his own shaky voice. “Her leg is too bad. We have to evacuate her.”

He paused, meeting the injured Leeg’s gaze before whispering,

“I’m sorry.”
Visibly steeling herself the uninjured Leeg reached out to replace his hand with her own, “I'll stay with her.”

Even Mikhail, relatively untrained, knew what that meant…

“As soon as we make contact we will send somebody back,” Jackson told them, her stern voice softening ever so slightly as the identical young women nodded. “I promise you.”

Seemingly unable to speak, fighting to control their emotions, both sisters nodded.

“All right, everybody, move out,” Jackson announced, rising to her feet. “Let's go!”

Gale glared across at the semi-unconscious Peeta, “Get him up.”

Before Mikhail could offer his assistance Gloss was there, pulling Peeta up effortlessly and holding him in place even as the younger man attempted to struggle once more, the sedative he'd been injected with making his movements uncoordinated and very sluggish.

“Can you walk?”

Finnick’s question was certainly a valid one, one which Gloss answered in the end by forcing the troubled Victor to take a couple of steps forwards mid-protest about going anywhere.

“He'll be fine,” the District One native assured them. “So long as we don't have to go far.”

Pausing at the top of the stairs Mikhail turned to look at the Leeg sisters, both of them readying their rifles for the fight which they knew was about to come to them, their expressions devoid of anything but pain as they prepared themselves for their final fight.

“Go.”

He met the gaze of the uninjured Leeg who was looking across at him.

“Live,” she ordered him sharply. “And remember us.”

“What are your names?”

“Diona,” she told him with a sad smile. “I'm Diona.”

“Deanna…” her injured sister groaned softly. “My names Deanna.”

He couldn't help but smile softly across at them.

“Deanna and Diona?” he repeated, chuckling softly as he shook his head. “Did your parents have something against your future teachers giving you practically the same name?”

Diona snorted, obviously against her will, while Deanna let out a choked off chuckle.

“You're the first person to ask us what our names are in a long time,” Deanna murmured, gasping sharply in pain as her wounded leg spasmed. “But you really should be going…”

“Peacekeepers!” Diona hissed, glancing at Mikhail with an expression of regret. “You…”

“Looks like you won't be going out alone, girls…”
As he took up a position on the other side of the large window mirroring Diona, back pressed against the wall and rifle ready to fire through the glass, he couldn't help but kick himself mentally about getting himself into yet another life threatening situation, couldn't help but regret that he'd beaver get to explore his relationship with Johanna Mason…

“Ready?”

“As I'll ever be…”

Diona opened fire first, shattering the glass, with Deanna and Mikhail a second behind.

It was nothing like training, Mikhail thought, as the glass rained down upon him, as flecks of rubble exploded from the walls all around him, as Diona yelped in pain and crumpled, dead.

“She’s!” Deanna screamed, not in response to her sister’s death but to the arrival of another group of Peacekeepers armed with a shoulder mounted weapon Mikhail didn't recognise. “Go! Get downstairs, Mikhail, get downstairs now and when you get there get underneath the bottom flight of stairs! They're about to bring down the whole *fucking* building!”

“What?”

“Go!”

His feet were moving before he even realised what was happening, taking home down the stairs at a dangerously reckless pace until he reached the ground floor and was able to throw himself into the small gap underneath the stairs just as the whole building exploded.

“Fuck!”

Covering his head with his arms he curled in on himself as the building literally crumpled down on top of his hiding place, the falling rubble blocking out the light and trapping him in the small gap which he genuinely feared would be his grave within a matter of seconds.

A crack sounded and the staircase above him dropped a couple of inches before coming to rest on a large piece of rubble which had fallen in such a way that it had ended up partially sticking underneath, creating something for the staircase and its load to rest on.

The noise was horrific, unlike anything he'd even experienced, but eventually there was silence although whether it was actual silence or he'd gone deaf he simply couldn't tell.

Was this what the last moments of his sister's life had been like?

His mother's?

No, he thought to himself as he unfurled as best he could in his small surroundings, being careful not to press against anything at all, *they were on one of the top floors not the ground floor so they would have been dead before the building collapsed around them…he hoped*…

Pulling his abandoned rifle towards him in the darkness he felt around it with his fingers until he found the switch to turn on the flashlight mounted to the top of the weapon.

“Should've left that off…” he muttered to himself as he found himself literally surrounded by either the flat walls of the building or a pile of rubble. “What the *fuck* should I do now?”

He needed to get out of there before the oxygen trapped with him in the small space ran out but digging his way out could result in the rubble collapsing even further, crushing him.
“Oh, the agony of choice…” he muttered sarcastically, running the beam of light over every square inch of the rubble. “Death by suffocation or possible death from crush injuries…”

No.

He wasn't going to sit there and wait to die; better a quick death when everything fell on top of him than a slow, agonising death struggling for every last breath of oxygen available.

That decided he unclipped his rifle from his uniform, placing it against a piece of rubble so that the beam of light fell upon the top section of the rubble where logic dictated he should start digging his way out, and after rolling up his practically ruined sleeves he got to work.

It wasn't easy, shifting the rubble piece by piece.

Some of the bits were large and very heavy and once he had managed to move them they usually created a mini-collapse which had him holding his breath, waiting for the end.

It never came.

Other bits were sharp, creating deep lacerations to his hands and fingers as he moved them.

Finally, after a gruelling couple of hours, he pulled away one large piece of rubble and a floor of smaller pieces, of dirt and glass and flakes of oil rained down upon him as he lay stretched out in the tunnel he had been painstakingly creating but once it was over, once the cascade had ceased, he found himself bathed in the muted sunlight of a cloudy day.

Semi-hysterical with relief he slid back down into the hole which had saved his life, retrieved his rifle and then forced his body up through the narrow gap he had created and out into the fresh, wonderful air without even bothering to check if the coast was clear beforehand.

Thankfully it appeared that the Peacekeepers were long gone.

Crawling away from the mountain of rubble which had once been a building he collapsed to the ground as soon as he was clear, heedless of the thick layer of dust covering everything.

He was already completely covered in dust and dirt and blood so what did it matter?

A loud thud came from the rubble he'd just escaped, prompting him to lift his head up off the ground and look back towards the remains of the building which shifted suddenly, dropping downwards with a louder series of thuds and crashes as his tunnel collapsed.

“…bloody hell…”

That had been close…

He was just debating what to do next given that he needed to find out what had happened to the others when he heard the sound of footsteps approaching at a rapid pace and, reacting instinctively despite the pain in his entire body, he snatched up his rifle, cocked it as he rolled over onto his front and aimed it towards the group of figures running towards him.

“Mikhail?”

Oh…

“Hey, Finnick, s’good to see you…” Mikhail mumbled, rolling back over onto his back as he recognised the figures as Finnick, Gloss, Jackson, Homes and Messalla. “How've you been?”
A sharp burst of laughter forced itself out of Finnick's mouth.

“Only you, Mikhail,” the handsome Victor muttered as he and Gloss moved to help the exhausted rebel to his feet, draping his numb arms over their shoulders. “Only you would be lucky enough and crazy enough to survive a bloody building collapsing on top of you…”

Mikhail chuckled.

“It's a skill…” he mumbled, groaning softly as his body protested being upright, looking across at the now completely still pile of rubble. “Although I had help…Deanna…she told me to run when she saw that…thing they had…told me to hide under the stairs...saved my life…”

“…Deanna?”

“We need to get back inside,” Jackson muttered. “Have you got him?”

Both Finnick and Gloss nodded, holding his arms across their shoulders with their outside hands, as it were, before reaching down with their inside hands to take hold of his thighs, lifting them up until he was in a seated position on top of the cradle of their strong hands.

“Diona and Deanna,” Mikhail mumbled, barely noticing that he was now being carried. “I wanted to know their names, to remember them you know? Stayed too long. My fault…”

He was somewhat amused to realise that they had only crossed the large courtyard before finding shelter in an undamaged building, untouched even by the oil on the inside, although he was less amused when they had to carry him up the winding staircase as the odd movements jostled his body which was beginning to ache more and more with each minute.

“Oh!” Katniss gasped loudly as they carried him across to one of the corner sofas set into the sunken area at the centre of the large room, jumping up from her own seat in surprise as Homes ape listed Finnick's help in stripping off his uniform. “You're alive! We thought…”

“M’like a cat…” Mikhail found himself mumbling, hissing in protest as his arms were bent in order to be carefully pulled out of the sleeves of his jacket which was then thrown away by Finnick, landing in a heap with a cloud of dust floating up from the fabric. “Nine lives…”

“Really?” the handsome young man snorted as he and Homes moved on to removing Mikhail’s undershirt which was bloodstained in places. “And how many do you have left?”

“Um…” Mikhail mumbled, frowning as he thought it out. “Five? I think I've got five left.”

“…you've had four near-death experiences?”

“Sounds about right,” Mikhail snorted, groaning in pain as they pulled him to his feet briefly in order to remove his trousers although they ended up bunched around his boots when they let him sit back down again as they hadn't taken those off first. “Although if you count, you know, surviving the first rebellion or the retaliation bombings as near-death experiences then it's...six…although if you count those you should really count the battle when I was captured…although I don’t because I didn't really nearly die...I was just there...you know?”

“What do you count as near-death experiences, then?”

Cressida sounded exactly the same as she had when they’d filmed his first propounds video from his hospital bed, part horrified, part fascinated, and he glared across at her when he caught sight of the camera she was directing his way despite his current state of undress.
“You just have to film everything, don’t you?” he grumbled, hissing when homes began cleaning one of the countless cuts and abrasions caused by the building falling on him and him digging his way out. “And, to answer your question the four I actually count are nearly getting executed by Peacekeepers, getting out of my hospital bed less than fifteen minutes before the hospital was blown up, the wounds which I’m told should have killed me and, you know, the whole building being blown up and collapsing down on top of me this morning…”

Jackson huffed softly,

“Nine lives, indeed…”

“Sorry about the Leegs,” he murmured sincerely whilst flinching away from the wipe being used on a cut near his hairline which stung like nothing else. “They were good people.”

Jackson nodded, accepting his condolences.

“And, you know, Boggs and Mitchell,” he continued, glaring at Homes when the man took hold of his jaw to stop him pulling his head away from the wipe. “They were ok people.”

This time his response was a grunt a accompanied by a sharply arched eyebrow.

What?

He’d hardly spoken to Mitchell and he and Boggs definitely hadn’t seen eye to eye so he couldn’t really go about complimenting them id he didn’t mean it even if they were dead.

“Here,” Gale muttered, handing him a plate of fancy looking food and a champagne flute filled with water rather than the expensive alcohol. “You need to refuel. It’ll help you heal.”

“Aw…” Mikhail cooed, accepting both the plate and the flute. “Didn’t know you cared…”

He wasn’t the only one eating, the others had obviously raided the apartment’s kitchen long before he’d made it out of the rubble, and by the time his wounds had all been cleaned and the worst of them covered with field dressings they’d broken out the champagne as well.

His uniform, tattered and dirty as it was, had been given a firm brush down by Pollux of all people who had then done what he could to repair the worst of the rips and tears, finding a sewing kit in one of the bedroom which unfortunately only contained bright pink thread.

Still, it was better than nothing…

As evening fell they moved on to the variety of fancy desserts which had been stored in the apartment’s fridge, all of them licking their fingers to get every last piece of the delicacy.

“I don’t think I ever really understood the Capitol until now,” Gale groaned as he polished off another alcohol laced chocolate truffle. “You eat like this, you’ll believe anything.”

Mikhail wasn’t the only one who grunted softly in agreement.

The holo-projector, suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the room, beeped to signal the start of a broadcast and then suddenly the room was filled with painfully familiar music; the “Horn of Plenty” which had always accompanied the daily broadcasts during the Hunger Games, the ones known more commonly as the “fallen broadcasts” which listed the dead.

This broadcast was no exception.
Cressida appeared on the screen first, a picture of her in her rebel uniform captured from a security camera with the words Cressida – Capitol stamped across the bottom of the screen.

Castor came next, then Pollux and Messalla, all with similar pictures above their names.

When Gloss’s picture appeared it was instantly recognisable as the image they had used during the Quarter Quell, as was Finnick’s when it appeared much to their amusement.

Whoever had selected the images had chosen one of the Capital propaganda images for Peeta, obviously trying to claim he was still theirs, whilst they'd purposely used the one of Katniss from the 74th Hunger Games, trying to make her look pathetically young and weak.

Mikhail rolled his eyes when the final image disappeared from the screen,

“I guess the rest of us didn’t warrant a mention…”

He wasn't the only one who's back stiffened uncomfortably when the unfortunately familiar figure of President Snow’s filled the screen, his voice echoing coldly around the silent room.

“So, Katniss Everdeen, a poor unstable girl with nothing but a small talent with a bow and arrow is dead,” he announced, seemingly emotionless as he perched stiffly on some sort of blue and gold throne. “Not a thinker, not a leader. Simply a face plucked from the masses.”

Across the room Katniss was leaning forwards in her own seat, hands upon her knees.

“Was she valuable? She was extremely valuable to your rebellion because you have no vision, no true leader among you,” President Snow continued coldly. “You call yourselves an alliance but we saw what that means. Your soldiers are at each other's throats…”

A flare of buzzing static drowned out whatever he said next and they were all treated to an image him looking first confused, then very annoyed before he vanished completely from their screens, being replaced by another familiar face sitting in front of the rebels blue flag.

“Good evening. For those of you who don't know me please, allow me to introduce myself. I am President Alma Coin, leader of the rebellion,” the severe looking woman introduced herself to the camera without preamble and Mikhail could easily imagine the frightened murmurs of the Capitolites who were watching this broadcast. “I have interrupted a broadcast from your President in which he attempted to defame a brave young woman.”

If anything Katniss looked uncomfortable to be described in such a way.

“A face picked from the masses he called her,” President Coin continued, her voice rapidly transforming into what Mikhail assumed was meant to be barely controlled emotion but seemed to him to be more like trapped wind or some other uncomfortable complaint, the dead eyes giving away the lack of sincerity felt by the woman blatantly reciting from a pre-prepared script. “As if a leader, a true leader, could be anything else. I had the privilege of knowing a small-town girls from the Seam in District Twelve who survived the Hunger Games and the Quarter Quell, who rose up and turned a nation of slaves into an army.”

Judging by the various facial expressions around him he wasn't the only one doubting her sincerity, only the loyal soldiers from District Thirteen remaining completely emotionless.

“Dead or alive, Katniss Everdeen will remain the face of this revolution,” President Coin vowed “passionately”, her voice trembling artificially. “She will not have died for nothing.”

Katniss rolled her eyes in disbelief,
“I had no idea I meant so much to her...”

“Her vision and ours will be realised,” Coin continued, recovering a fraction too quickly from her display of emotion. “A free Panem with self-determination for all. And in her memory we will all find the strength to rid Panem of its oppressors. Thank you. And be safe.”

Her broadcast ended with an image of Katniss, gloriously posed in her signature Mockingjay armour in front of the blue rebel flag of a free Panem as he signature whistle sounded, a banner reading ‘Remember the Mockingjay’ appearing across the bottom of the screen.

That definitely had an air of being too ready prepared for his liking...

“And here was me thinking that Katniss was the worst actor known to mankind,” he eventually announced with a snort when no one else broke the silence. “I was wrong. Does she actually think people are going to buy that whole weepy voice, shaking hand, pretend tear routine? Because my little sister could fake tears better than that when she was six.”

Jackson, loyal soldier of District Thirteen that she was, glared at him in response.

“Snow’s in his mansion,” Katniss murmured, jumping up out of her seat so that she could place the holo on one of the glass coffee tables, activating it so that a large semi-corporeal 3D map of the entire Capitol was displayed in the air directly above it. “Where is that?”

“That's us,” Cressida announced as everyone moved to gather around the large map, pointing the building question before gesturing to a different area. “That's the city circle.”

They didn't appear to be all that close together...

“It's at least seventy…seventy-five blocks north.”

No.

His body ached at the very thought of walking that far so soon after nearly being crushed.

“Seventy-Five blocks?” Finnick repeated incredulously, obviously finding the idea of travelling that far as unappealing as Mikhail did judging by his facial expression. “That's...”

Cressida sighed deeply, reluctantly,

“Uh-huh...”

“Nobody knows we're alive. This is our chance,” Katniss reminded them all firmly, leaning over the map to gesture to a certain point. “These buildings, do they overlook the gardens?”

“They do.”

It was Messalla who confirmed this piece of information when Cressida hesitated.

Katniss nodding, murmuring thoughtfully,

“If he goes outside at all I could get a clear shot.”

“We're getting ahead of ourselves here,” Jackson interrupted them with all the power and effectiveness of year being in command or even second in command of soldiers. “Whether they're looking for us or not, we are pinned down. Hit that red button, scan for pods.”
A murmur of discomfort spread around the group when, after Katniss did so, the entire map was riddled with little red dots marking the locations of the pods which were in their way.

“Just about every ten steps,” Homes surmised, definitely sounding less than thrilled.

“And that doesn't even show the new ones,” Gale pointed out with a deep sigh, standing at his full height looking down on everyone else. “So we can't go anywhere in the streets.”

“And the rooftops are just as bad.”

Mikhail snorted, unable to resist the urge to respond to Jacksons closing statement,

“So what do you suggest we do? Fly? Because I don't know if you've noticed but…”

Castor’s tense voice cut off what would have been an amusing, at least to him, rant, “There might be another way.”

Pollux, their silent member, smiled tightly and signed something for everyone to see.

“We can't go over,” Castor translated for him. “So why don't we go under?”

“Under?”

A/N Ok, when I did my original plan for this episode I didn't have Mikhail staying with Leegs but I could not get the scene to work the way I'd planned it and so this latest near-death experience found its way into the story. Anyway hope you enjoyed it. X
Chapter Eighteen

When they had first proposed the idea of going underground to avoid the deadly pods littering the streets and rooftops of the Capitol Mikhail had been all for the idea, agreeing that it sounded like the most logical solution to their problem of getting to President Snow.

Now, however, as he slowly descended a metal ladder which appeared to be never ending he wasn't so sure; his legs had begun shaking only a few seconds into his descent and nothing he did could get them to stop and then soon after his hands had started to tremble.

What was wrong with him?

The further he descended the worse the trembling got, his entire body wracked with unpredictable shudders by the time his boots finally came into contact with solid ground.

“My brother knows these tunnels really well.” Castor explained softly as Katniss, who had been the person climbing down immediately before Mikhail, moved away from the ladder to stand beside him. “He worked sanitation down here, right after they made him an Avox.”

Mikhail could not imagine being forced to work down here.

The ladder had deposited them in what appeared to be an access room, the cavernous ceiling looming high above them as they examined the multiple tunnel entrances around them with the flashlights attached to their rifles, the minimal lighting supplied by a handful of overhead lamps nowhere near enough to actually be able to see anything all that clearly.

A deep gasp echoed throughout the room, followed by an oddly muted whimper.

“Hey!” Castor called out soothingly, hurrying across to his brother who had begun gasping for air, pulling at the reasonably tight collar of his uniform. “It's going to be ok. Look at me.”

Pollux shuddered uncontrollably, something Mikhail could sympathise with.

“Look at me!” Castor commanded, his voice firm but his tone gentle as he placed his hands on his brothers bearded cheeks, guiding him. “We’re going to get through this. I promise.”

Taking in a deep, shuddering breath Pollux took a moment to compose himself, somehow managing to get his body under control and stop the trembling, before he nodded sharply.
Mikhail envied him for the apparent ease with which he got his body under control.

The former Avox made a slashing motion with his left hand, prompting his brother to nod once, and then turned to begin leading their rag tag group of supposedly deceased rebels along one of the nearby tunnels, everyone automatically falling into place behind him.

“ Took us five years to buy his way out of here,” Castor murmured from a couple of places behind Mikhail in the squad, his voice heavy with regret. “He didn't see the sun once.”

Something about his words struck a horrific chord with Mikhail and he suddenly found himself struggling to breathe, his lungs refusing to work as they should do as his mind supplied him with unwanted images of himself in Pollux’s place, trapped underground in the almost darkness for years with no end in sight, the tunnels getting smaller and smaller…

“Mikhail!” Finnick’s sharp voice was accompanied by a stinging slap to his cheek. “Breathe!”

He choked noisily, tears forming in the corners of his eyes – he was trying to breathe but for some reason he just couldn't seem to get anything more than a little gasp of air in at a time, nowhere near enough to satisfy his need for oxygen which only made him panic even more.

“Mikhail,” Finnick snapped, getting right up in his face. “You need to calm down.”

“…easy…for…you…to…say…”

“Glare at me all you want, doesn't make it any less true,” his friend responded with a shrug, reaching out to take one of Mikhail's trembling hands and placed it on his chest. “Feel my breathing and try to match your own to it. In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. Good.”

Slowly, agonisingly slowly, it became easier for him to breathe.

Unfortunately her his meant he also became more aware of his surroundings, of the fact that he was slumped against the damp wall of the tunnel with everyone watching him, of the way his other hand was pulling tightly at his collar leaving his rifle hanging from the clip.

“…well I feel rather stupid now…” he muttered once he was able to. “Sorry for, um, that…”

“Mikhail, there’s no need to apologise,” Finnick countered quickly, sweeping his hand reassuringly before move away so as to allow Mikhail to right himself, the District Eight native rubbing his shaking hands together for a long moment before rescuing his rifle from where it hung partially twisted against his chest. “You can’t help it if you’re claustrophobic.”

“…claustrophobic?” Mikhail repeated, his confusion evident. “I don't know what that is…”

It was Cressida who supplied him with an explanation, the Capitol born woman frowning to herself as she wondered how he didn't know the official term for one of the common fears, “Claustrophobia is the fear of being enclosed in a small space and/or having no escape.”

“Oh,” Mikhail mumbled shortly, noticing that both Katniss and Peeta had appeared as confused by the complicated word as he had been. Gloss and Finnick were nodding in agreement with her explanation, both of them having obviously been aware of the term. “Yeah. That’s…that’s actually a pretty good description of what’s going through my head right now. I had…I had no idea I was claustrophobic. It’s…it’s never happened before…”

“Ever been underground before?” Castor enquired, shooting him an understanding smile when he
immediately responded with a shake of his head. “It's ridiculously common to feel claustrophobic when going underground, particular in unfamiliar surroundings. Best thing to do is to imagine being outside, somewhere familiar, when it gets to be too much for you.”

His advice may have been meant for Mikhail but he wasn't the only one to nod in response.

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” Castor shrugged, clapping Mikhail on the arm. “Finnick was right, after all; you can't help being claustrophobic any more than I can help being pteromerhanophobic.”

Mikhail raised his eyebrows questioningly, causing Castor to chuckle deeply.

“Afraid of flying.”

“Seriously?” Mikhail snorted. “You're afraid of flying? But…the hovercraft…”

“He's gotten better as the years have gone by,” Cressida spoke up, chuckling fondly. “He used to be completely and utterly useless the moment he set foot on one of those things.”

“Ophidiophobia,” Gloss muttered suddenly, a shudder running through his enormous body. “Snakes. I'm not embarrassed to admit that since my Games they scare the crap out of me.”

Mikhail only been six years old when Gloss had entered the Arena but he could clearly remember the mutts the Tributes had faced that particular year; venomous snakes ranging from ones so small they could hide anywhere to ones as long and as thick as some of the trees, strong enough to crush it's victim to death before the venom started to do its work.

“Yeah, that's completely understandable,” he muttered, slowly beginning to feel more relaxed, more like himself as they succeeded in taking his mind off of things. “Thanks…”

Jacksons clipped voice stopped him before he could thank them all properly,

“If you're feeling better, soldier, we should really get moving.”

Even though it hadn't been a question or even a suggestion Mikhail found himself nodding in agreement before pushing himself away from the damp wall, smiling reassuringly towards Finnick who still wore an expression of worry on his handsome face, and set off once more.

“You know, I definitely wouldn't have come out anywhere near as sane as your brother if I'd been in his place,” Mikhail commented a little while later when he found himself behind Castor in the group, Finnick staying close behind him. “Seriously. I think he's one of toughest guys I've ever met. Down here for five years? I couldn't last five minutes, as you just saw…”

Castor smiled at him over his shoulder before returning his attention to watching where the were going, ducking just in time to avoid hitting his head on a rather low bend of red pipe.

“Most people don't see how strong he really is, they just see his weaknesses,” he sighed regretfully, leaning around Gloss who had ended up in front of the cameraman to get a good look at his brother still leading their group. “Seriously. I think he's one of toughest guys I've ever met. Down here for five years? I couldn't last five minutes, as you just saw…”

Mikhail found himself struggling to breath once more when they turned down a particularly narrow tunnel, so narrow in some places that they had to turn sideways to fit through.

He forced himself to think of home, before the bombings; of walking along the river with his friends on their way back from school, laughing with one another as they larked about and for a
few moments this helped…until his mind cruelly reminded him that they were all dead.

Killed, not by the Hunger Games as they'd all grown up half-expecting, but by the rebellion.

“…ugh…”

Whimpering pathetically as the mental image of his friends smiling faces was replaced with the few of them he'd seen as they died before finally an image of Adya inside the Arena took their place, his friend gazing sightlessly up at the camera as he lay dying, coughing up blood.

Clamping his eyes shut to banish the unwanted memories he found himself inches away from the other side of the narrowest portion of the tunnel when he opened them and completely froze up; unable to move forwards, unable to retrace his steps, unable to breathe…

A hand slipped into his, squeezing tightly much to his surprise and he turned his head to find Finnick had followed him into the narrow section, a reassuring smile on his handsome face.

“It's ok, Mikhail, you're ok,” he murmured soothingly, using that same tone of voice Mikhail had heard him use when Annie was having one of her ‘moments’ whilst nodding towards someone on Mikhail’s other side, someone who had already made it through. “You're ok.”

A second hand reached in front of him to unclip his rifle, pulling the weapon from his other hand gently so that it could be passed off to someone whilst this had was also taken hold of.

Gasping weakly, still struggling to draw in enough oxygen, he glanced to his right in order to discover the identity of his second helped and was somewhat surprised to find Cressida.

Her had was soft in his, small and dainty, and yet her grip was as firm as iron.

“Ok, Mikhail, come towards me,” the Capitol born woman ordered softly, tugging on his hand and automatically he found himself obeying. “That's it. Nearly there. Nearly there.”

It was painfully embarrassing how reassuring it felt to have his hands held as though he were a frightened child, how much easier he found it to regulate his breathing once the three of them emerged into the larger portion of the tunnel simply because of this fact.

“We can't keep stopping like this,” Jackson murmured, obviously not intending for him to hear her comment and actually flushing when he glanced at her. “My apologies, soldier, I'm just getting a bit worried about our schedule. We do, after all, have a job to do and soon.”

“No apologies necessary,” Mikhail murmured once he was able to breathe, still holding on tightly to Finnick and Cressida's hands as though they were his only lifelines which, to be honest, they were at that specific moment in time. “Trust me, if I could shut it off I would.”

Pollux made a series of quick hand gestures.

“He says we can try the transport level,” Castor translated for his brother who was gazing sympathetically across at Mikhail. “They have bigger tunnels and will get us across the city quicker as they're all linked however there's more chance of bumping into Peacekeepers.”

After a brief moment of contemplation Jackson nodded to show approval of this suggestion.

Mikhail sagged with relief.

He hated the fact that he kept holding people up and sincerely hoped that being able to use some of the bigger tunnels available would mean that he would be able to travel quickly.
Pollux led them up a shorter ladder than before which spat them out in a wide tunnel with a reasonably low ceiling and red bricked walls, the ground covered with a network of tracks.

Something within his chest loosened, allowing him to breathe significantly easier.

“Better?”

He shot Finnick a relieved smile, nodding.

“Good.”

Unfortunately they’d only been travelling through these larger tunnels for a grand total of fifteen minutes before they heard the sound of an approaching transport and were forced to hide behind the wall where the tunnel split off in two directions, only just making it out of sight before a train of Peacekeepers and their accoutrements went rushing past them.

“I'm sorry, Mikhail, but this isn't going to work,” Katniss apologised, surprising him with her sincerity as they let out a sigh of relief once it had passed. “We're too exposed up here.”

Logically he knew she was right.

They couldn't complete their mission at all if they'd been captured or killed.

That didn't make it any better, didn't make it any easier to breath as they were forced to descend down into the depths below the Capitol once more, taking a grand total of four ladders to get them down onto the sewage level where they found themselves knee deep in questionable liquid which smelled of everything foul he had could ever have imagined.

Katniss used the holo to check the way ahead, shining he torch down the foul tunnel,

“Looks clear.”

Before they had even taken five paces Mikhail felt his chest beginning to tighten uncomfortably although at that point he could still breathe, if a little bit more shallowly than he really would have liked, and his hands began to tremble so badly his rifle actually rattled.

Finnick didn't even ask permission before pulling one of Mikhail’s hands off of the weapon and holding it tightly in his own, thumb stroking gently over his knuckles in a soothing manner which only made it more embarrassing for Mikhail when it actually helped him.

If they made it out of this alive he was never going to live this down, certainly not if Johanna ever heard about it…she'd tease him endlessly for holding her best friends hand like a child…

He was also going to find some way of curing himself of this damned phobia!

A loud clunk drew him from his thoughts just as a large grey pipe covered with green mould burst over their heads, pumping highly pressurised water out over them even as they all dropped to their knees, weapons coming up as one in response to the perceived threat.

“Everybody ok?” Jackson called out from the back of the group after a pause. “Sound off.”

“Yeah,” Katniss called out first. “I'm fine. So's Pollux.”

One by one they responded, confirming that they were all right until only Mikhail was left.

“Warrington?”
“Still present,” he announced as firmly as he could. “If not entirely correct, however.”

“Good,” Jackson murmured, ignoring the second half of his statement. “Let’s keep moving.”

It didn't escape anyone's notice that the further along the tunnel they went the deeper the water got and so it was no surprise when it eventually reached up to most of their armpits, only those who were unusually tall like Gloss, Finnick and Mikhail being spared from this.

That didn't make it any easier for Mikhail.

“In, two, three, four,” Finnick murmured as he led him forwards by his hand, Gloss standing close enough behind him at he could feel the District One natives body heat. “Out, two…”

Mikhail stumbled on something hidden beneath the milky water but a hand on his shoulder saved him from stumbling so badly that he would have ended up completely submerged.

“Steady,” Gloss grunted deeply, his hand squeezing Mikhail’s shoulder tightly before retreating once more. “You don't want to swallow any of this water. You'll get sick.”

“Thanks…”

He wasn't the only one to stumble.

Poor Peeta almost disappeared under the water and would have had Gloss not turned back to offer him aid, once again saving the day by pulling the tormented young man upright just in time to stop his face from slipping under although his hair was completely soaked.

It hadn't helped that his hands were still bound leaving him unsteady already.

When the water finally began to recede to just below their knees, leaving most of them shivering from the cold in their damp clothes, it was decided that they needed a break.

“All right, everybody, we're gonna stop here for a bit and get some rest, yeah?” Jackson announced, gesturing to a small room leading off of the tunnel which had a raised floor made of metal gratings. It appeared to be an access of maintenance room for the bigger pipes which had been covering the walls and ceilings of the tunnels. “I'll take first watch.”

“Hey, Peeta,” Finnick murmured as he helped the handicapped young man up the short ladder, guiding him towards a small recess over a pipe. “Just tuck in there. You too, Mikhail.”

He felt he probably should have been protested being ordered around like a child but, to be honest, he was a little bit relieved that he wouldn't have to worry about think for himself.

Instead he silently dropped down beside Peeta, resting his back against the slightly damp wall whilst squirming slightly so as to get as comfortable as he possibly could on the cold metal grating, ending up with his thigh pretty much pressed to the tortured young Victors.

Finnick dropped down on his other side.

“All right,” Jackson murmured from where she was crouched in the doorway, rifle balanced across one of her knees whilst her finger rested on the trigger. “Settle in, everybody.”

Sadly, no matter how hard he tried, Mikhail couldn’t sleep.

He lent back against the wall between Peeta and Finnick, cold but mercifully not damp this time, folded his arms around his chest and tried to clear his mind, keeping his eyes closed.
It didn’t work.

Every time he pictured a wide open space, be it somewhere familiar like the woods above District Thirteen or somewhere he’d imagined, he soon found himself trapped once more.

And what’s more he was confused.

District Thirteen was underground.

It was made up of tunnels not that different to the ones that they found themselves in now so why was he reacting so badly now when he’d been absolutely fine in District Thirteen?

*Why?*

Abandoning sleep he reclined with his eyes closed and thought through everything he’d been through since…well…since the revolution had begun; the fighting in District Eight, almost being executed, almost being bombed, recovering from his wounds, Johanna, feeling…something for her, entering the Capitol, the building collapsing on top of him…

His eyes snapped open as he made a sudden realisation.

He hadn’t been claust…claustro…whatever the damned word was…afraid of small spaces before the Peacekeepers had brought the building down on top of him and the Leeg sisters.

Apparently nearly being crushed to death had had a lasting effect on him after all.

Jackson moved past him, barely even glancing his way, as she sought out Katniss.

“Katniss?” the soldier murmured softly, shaking the young woman’s shoulder. “Your watch.”

Roused from her sleep Katniss rubbed the sleep from her eyes before nodding, pulling herself up from her seated position so that she could make her way to the entrance, holding her bow capably in her hand as she dropped down to crouch in front of Mikhail and Peeta.

It turned out that Peeta wasn’t any more asleep than Mikhail was.

“You know,” the troubled Victor murmured, voice thick with emotion. “The Capitol, they…they used tracker-jacker venom on me. That’s what the doctors in Thirteen said.”

Mikhail shuddered.

Every District had problems with tracker-jackers, the genetically engineered wasps conceived and created by the Capitol, although some were worse off than others as proven by the monthly comparison of “incidents” which the Capitol had always collected.

Unsurprisingly the outer Districts suffered the worst, District Eleven especially, whilst the Districts closest the Capitol had always received the most help to deal with the nests.

District Eight, to most people’s surprise given its urbanisation, had had a real problem with the deadly insects who liked to make their nests in warm, dry places such as their factories.

Mikhail had, mercifully, never been stung but he’d known people that had been.

“You were stung once, too,” Peeta continued, holding Katniss’s gaze. “Real or not real?”

After a moment’s hesitation Katniss replied softly,
“Real.”

“When they used the venom on me, they would show me pictures of my life,” Peeta explained softly, his hands fidgeting restlessly with the buckles of his jacket. “But some weren't real. They changed them. At first, they all...they all blurred together but now... now I can sort them out a little. Like the ones that they changed, they have this...this quality...”

That sounded utterly horrific to Mikhail, having someone change his memories, implant new ones with the express purpose of causing him pain, worse than any torture he’d received.

“It's like they're shiny,” Peeta conclude. “Like they've been glossed over.”

“You should...” Katniss mumbled, voice unstable. “You should get some rest.”

Peeta hesitated briefly before speaking once more,

“You're still trying to protect me. Real or not real?”

“Real,” Katniss answered without hesitation this time, her voice stronger than it had been for the duration of their conversation. “That's what you and I do. Keep each other alive.”

“…and to hell with anyone else, right?” Mikhail muttered before he could stop himself, the familiar bitterness swelling up in his chest. “That's right, isn't it? The whole of Panem can burn to the ground for all you care just so long as the few people you care about survive.”

He snorted softly as both of the District Twelve natives turned to blink at him in shock.

“Mikhail…” Finnick muttered, revealing that he was no more asleep then they were. “Don't.”

“Don't? Don't what?” he responded sharply, keeping his glare fixed on Katniss even as he managed to keep his voice low enough so as not to disturb anyone else. “Tell the truth?”

“I didn't want any of this to happen…”

“Yeah,” Mikhail snorted disbelievingly. “I bet you didn't.”

“I didn't.”

“Well, it did, and let me ask you this, Miss Everdeen?” he hissed, once again unable to stop himself now that his own fire was up. “If you had to pick between saving, let's say, the population of District Six or your sister, who I like by the way, what would you chose?”

Katniss hesitated.

“I rest my case,” Mikhail snorted bitterly. “District Six isn't on your list, is it, sweetheart?”

“Mikhail…”

“I'd chose District Six,” Katniss eventually answered softly. “But, you're right, I would want to save Prim. Of course she's my priority but if that was a real choice? I know she'd want me to choose District Six. It would kill me inside but is do it. Can you say the same, Mikhail?”

“Would I chose people I don't know over my own family?” he queried for clarification, his expression turning glacial. “I'd have thought you'd remember that delightful propo they did about me; I already did. I joined your rebellion, right back when it first kicked off in District Eight, fighting to free the people of Panem and do you know what happened? You should do. They crushed us. They bombed us. And they killed my mother and my little sister.”
A hand took his, squeezing tightly, and he was surprised to note it wasn’t Finnick.

It was Peeta.

“How old is your sister now?” he enquired. “Thirteen? Fourteen?”

Katniss nodded stiffly.

“Sasha was fourteen when she died,” he informed her, subconsciously clutching at the hand holding his. “I joined the fight for people I will never meet. I fought for them. I chose strangers over my own family. I’ll admit it wasn’t intentional, not at the time, but that’s what I did. You’ve seen the video of the firing squad, right? My would be executioners?”

“Yes…”

“One of the men they killed was my father,” he answered, his eyes stinging with tears. “The others? My friends. I have one friend left from District Eight, that is if he’s still alive…”

He was completely unaware that Pollux was awake and recording every second.

“How many people have you lost to this rebellion, Katniss Everdeen?” Mikhail demanded thickly, a single tear falling down his scarred cheek. “I mean people that you really knew, people that you cared for years? Peeta’s alive and rescued, because of you. Your mothers alive, and your sister, too. Your best friend is alive. Oh, I know you’ve suffered, I’m not trying to claim that you haven’t. And I know you’re going to complete you’re mission and kill Snow, finally bringing an end to all of this killing. But I also know it’s not for us, no matter what you might claim, it’s not for the Districts; its for your sister and your lover and your best friend.”

“…your right, in a way,” Katniss admitted, her voice trembling with emotion. “Everything I’m doing, I’m doing to keep the people I love safe. But that doesn’t mean I don’t care about the Districts and the people who live in them, the people fighting and dying for us. I do care.”

Mikhail studied her for a long moment.

“Huh…” he chuckled deeply. “Maybe you do care a little bit after all…”

“I do,” Katniss intoned sincerely. “But…my family will always come first. Family should always come first. And I’m…I’m genuinely sorry about what happened to yours, Mikhail.”

“…my family were killed when the bombed District Twelve,” Peeta announced suddenly, his entire body stiffening as his eyes glazed over. “None of them made it to District Thirteen. I don’t…I don’t think anyone from the town made it out…too far away from the fence and…”

“A few made it,” Gale piped up suddenly, surprising them all. “Delly Cartwright and her brother, Niall. She wanted to come and visit you when you were…recovering…but they wouldn’t let her stray from her schedule. The Mallards all made it. Phoebe Gosling. Reckon, the cobbler, and his son, Rickard. The Wendell’s. We couldn’t get into the town, not in the time we had, but the ones who lived on the edge of the Seam followed us into the woods.”

Peeta nodded seriously.

“I understand,” he murmured. “The bakery was right in the centre of town. They…”

“They didn't have a chance,” Gale concluded for him. “I'm sorry.”
“Annie’s all the family I have left,” Finnick announced, running his fingers through his hair. “Both my parents were dead before I went into the Arena a second time. Natural causes.”

“My parents were still alive when all of this kicked off,” Gloss murmured gruffly, revealing that he too was put as asleep as he had appeared to be. “They’re probably dead by now, though, or if not already dead then due to be executed for what I’ve done. That’s how Snow works, you know? Uses your family against you. And we all know what happened to Cash…”

A heavy silence fell, broken suddenly by an odd clunking sound from the tunnel.

“What was that?”

Katniss, as she was the one officially on watch, moved to lean out into the tunnel.

Unable to see anything she hopped down, her feet splashing loudly as she landed into the dirty water, and used the torch incorporated into the holo to check out both directions.

Another clunk had her spinning around to face the way they had come, followed by a distinctly ominous hissing sound, almost like a deep voice but not quite human enough.

“Katniss?”

Peeta sounded terrified, his body trembling as Katniss continued to check out the tunnel, and his panicked breathing combined either strange noise was enough to wake the others.

It was Jackson who eventually spoke up,

“What is that?”

“We’ve got to go,” Peeta whimpered, struggling to climb to his feet without the aid of his hands, his boots thudding against the metal grating. “We’ve got to get out of here now.”

“Peeta!” Gale hissed. “Keep your voice down.”

Peeta shook his head, elbowing Mikhail in the side in his panic as he choked out,

“Mutts!”

Still recovering from the pain in his side Mikhail was a fraction slower than everyone else, scrambling to his feet just as Finnick succeeded in hauling the panicking Victor to his feet.

“They’ve released mutts!”

“Pollux!” Katniss called out as everyone piled out into the tunnel, checking their weapons were in perfect working order, safety catches switched off. “What’s the fastest way out?”

“Come on!” Jackson hissed as their silent guide took the lead, everyone falling in behind him and for the first time Mikhail wasn’t overcome with his fear of small spaces, his fear of the rapidly approaching muttations successfully overriding the claustrophobia. “Go! Go! Go!”

A flaming crossbow bolt, fired by Gale, ensured that the tunnels ahead were clear.

By the time their group was halted due to the tunnel reaching an access hole in the thick concrete wall, high enough that the water couldn’t spill through it, the unnatural hissing sound had become so loud they could barely hear their own voices over the top of it.

Pollux gestured for them to wait before throwing himself through the narrow access hole, rolling
to his feet on the other side and making his way around a corner with his rifle held confidently in his hands, returning after a long moment to beckon for them to follow him.

“Come on, Mikhail,” Finnick muttered, pulling him forwards. “You first.”

Nodding silently he obediently followed the path Pollux had taken, his breath seizing in his chest for the briefest of moments as he forced his body on through the narrow gap in the wall, scrambling out as quickly as he possibly could once he'd made it all the way through.

Gale followed behind him, then Katniss and Peeta.

There was a brief holdup when it came to Gloss as the access hole was only just big enough for the muscular Victor to fit through and required him literally crawling on his stomach.

Finnick positively left through in comparison, followed by Castor, Cressida and Messalla.

“Go!” Jackson, bringing up the rear, ordered Homes who was still on the wrong side. “Go!”

Nodding, once, the medic scrambled through.

Jackson, however, hesitated at the last second, tilting her head to one side as though trying to figure out what was making some noise that only she could hear amidst the hissing.

Eventually, after a long moment where she studied the semi-darkness before her, Jackson turned to begin climbing through the access hole...only to pause once more, the colour draining out of her face as he eyes went uncharacteristically wide with pure terror.

“Wha–”

Jackson was gone before she could even scream, turning at the last possible moment to face the swarm of humanoid lizard mutts, their fingers like claws and their elongated teeth like razor blades, overpowered her, heedless of the bullets striking them as she fired upon them.

It was Katniss who responded first, firing an explosive arrow into the access hole, bringing the thick wall crumbling down on the monstrous creatures struggling to climb through it.

The force of the explosion sent Mikhail thudding back against the wall, a grunt of pain forcing itself out from between his lips, whilst Katniss herself was knocked off of her feet.

“Shit!”

“Go! Go! Go!” Castor screamed, hauling Katniss to her feet. “Pollux, get us out of here!”

“Come on!” Messalla screamed, pulling at Cressida's arm to get her moving. “*Come on!*”

It wasn’t easy to keep up with those at the front of the group, the path Pollux taking them on having multiple twists she turns, and they had become somewhat stretched out when the worst happened; a second swarm of mutts poured out of a side tunnel just as the first half of their group had passed it, knocking Castor off of his feet before any of them could react, seizing hold of his ankles and dragging him, screaming, into the pitch black tunnel.

“Castor!” Cressida screamed hysterically, opening fire on the muttations. “Castor!”

Reacting instinctively Mikhail wrapped one arm around her tiny waist, hauling her back against his broad chest as he opened fire on the mutts, literally lifting her off of her feet.

Beside him Finnick, Gloss and Homes also opened fire on the endless stream of mutts now
Beside him Finnick, Gloss and Homes also opened fire on the endless stream of mutts now separating them from the front half of their group whilst Messalla stood frozen behind him.

“Fall back!” Homes screamed, the young medic now technically the most senior of their group following Jackson’s death, just as a wall of flames appeared on the other side of the mutations courtesy of either one of Katniss explosive arrows or Gales crossbow. “Move!”

“Go!” Mikhail screamed, shoving Cressida into her frozen assistant’s arms. “Messalla! Go!”

In the end the young man had no choice but to move, Cressida grabbing hold of the collar of his jacket and dragging him along beside her as she hurried back the way they came, firing blindingly around the first corner she came to before ducking around it leaving it up to Mikhail, Finnick, Gloss and Homes to fire back at the swarm of mutts following after them.

“Cressida!” Homes called out, his voice only just carrying over the noise of the gunfire, the mutts and their heavy footsteps. “Try and find a way to circle back around to the others!”

A set of claws slashed down his arm, making him cry out in pain, but was able to fire a stream of bullets into the creatures face, sending it crumpling down to the ground.

Unfortunately, for every one that they took out, two more took its place…

After everything they’d been through were they really going to be killed by lizard mutts?

It was almost by accident that they found the others, the narrow tunnel Cressida ended up leading them down taking a sharp incline downwards which sent them stumbling out through an opening grating and into a large room, a metal walkway suspended from the high ceiling over a large pool of water, a ladder connected to it leading up into the ceiling.

And more than half the room appeared to be on fire.

Pollux was almost at the top of the ladder but the others were all scattered around the room, desperately fighting a seemingly losing battle against the countless mutations.

With barely a moment’s hesitation their half of the group launched themselves into the desperate fight; Finnick dropping down into the pool of rancid water to save Katniss from one of the mutts, performing something which Mikhail could only describe as a “deadly dance” with his trident in order to keep the mutations away from her as she recovered.

Mikhail found himself laying down covering fire so that Gloss could drop down to deal with a mutt which had just bitten its way through the handcuffs Peeta had been using to keep the creatures deadly teeth away from his vulnerable neck by breaking the mutts own neck.

It was a truly impressive display of his strength.

Once the panicked Victor was safe Mikhail joined the other in firing towards the various tunnels which kept spewing mutts into the room, taking out as many of the creatures as they could whilst leaving the others to deal with the ones already inside the large room.

Cressida, her finger clenched tightly around the trigger so that a constant stream of bullets emerged from her rifle, hurried down to grab hold of Peeta by his jacket, hauling him to his feet with more strength than she seemed to possess and threw him towards the ladder.

“Go!” she screamed at him, pushing him up a couple of rungs. “Go! Go! Go!”

Obediently Peeta climbed up the ladder, followed by Gloss and then Cressida, still firing.
One of the rifles fell silent, Homes cursing loudly as he slapped his hand against the side of the weapon in a desperate attempt to free the jammed bullet but nothing could be done and before the rest of them could react he was overwhelmed by the swarm of lizard mutts and dragged, screaming, into the tunnel he had previously been firing steadfastly towards.

“Go!” Finnick screamed, literally throwing Katniss towards the ladder. “Go!”

Obediently the young woman began to climb, her hands visibly shaking as she reached up to grab hold of the next couple of rungs on the ladder and so focused was she that she didn't see the mutt burst out of the water, launching itself towards her back, teeth at the ready.

“Katniss!”

Finnick accompanied his scream with his trident, sending it flying across the room, the deadly blades slamming deep into the muttations back, severing its spine and killing it.

Unfortunately this left the handsome Victor with only a small knife to defend himself.

“Finnick! Behind you!” Mikhail called out, warning his friend about the mutt behind him as he himself stopped at the foot of the ladder instead of following Gale up it, opening fire on the muttations heading towards his friend, giving him the cover he needed. “Come on!”

His rifle gave an ominous click, signalling that he had finally run out of bullets, just as his friend reached him and he turned to ascend the ladder, pulling his pistol from the holster strapped to his thigh so that he could fire on the muttations still trying to attack them.

Finnick cried out suddenly in pain, wrapping his arms around the ring of the ladder he had reached in an attempt to stop the mutt which had thrown itself upon him, claws digging into the muscle of his thigh as it's jaw snapped shut around his knee, pulling him down into the writhing mass of deadly bodies at it's razor sharp teeth sliced effortlessly through his flesh.

“Finnick!” Katniss screamed desperately from the top of the ladder. “Finnick!”

“Ugh!” Finnick screamed loudly in pain as the mutt pulled at his leg and, acting completely on instinct, Mikhail reached down and grabbed hold of his friend’s shoulder straps. “Kill it!”

With his arm wrapped around the ladder to keep them in place there was no way Mikhail could fire down at the creature, his hand clenched tightly around his pistols grip as he struggled not to drop it, but thankfully someone above the, opened fire on the mutation.

Eventually, after what felt like an age, the mutt went still; it's teeth and claws ripping huge chunks out of Finnick's poor leg when it dropped like a stone to the writhing mess below.

“Move!”

Funny, Mikhail thought to himself as he used all of his strength to haul Finnick's trembling body up high enough for the Victor to grab hold of his shoulders, but that sounded oddly like Cressida and, when he started ascending the ladder once more with his whimpering friend hanging off of his back like a sack of potatoes, it looked like her too and his approval of the Capitol woman skyrocketed as she lent forwards somewhat precariously so that she was able to fire at the muttations below them without hitting either Mikhail or Finnick.

As he approached the top of the ladder hands reached out, grabbing hold of Finnick and hauling him up to safety even as Mikhail scrambled to follow his friend, twisting his body so as to avoid Katniss who had moved to lean out over the ladder with the holo in her hand.

Seconds after letting go of the device, allowing it to plummet, it exploded with enough force to shake the room they had found themselves in whilst destroying the room below them.

Pollux was already using one of the straps from his own uniform as a tourniquet for what remained of Finnick's leg, trying to stem the worst of the blood flow whilst Messalla was pressing a dressing against the worst of the bite marks, wrapping the bandages around his leg as best as he could what with how his own hands were trembling almost violently.

“We need to get out of here before they send more mutts after us,” Gale growled, fiddling with something on his crossbow, standing over them as they worked. “Can he walk?”

“No,” Messalla choked out, voice thick even as Pollux shook his head. “He…he can’t…”

“I'll carry him,” Mikhail offered, wiping the beads of sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his jacket. “I'm out of ammunition for my rifle anyway so I've only got a grand total of…”

His voice trailed off as he paused, pressing his thumb against the small button which released the magazine of his pistol, catching it automatically with his free hand so that he could count its contents under his breath before sliding it back into the grip of the handgun, his hands moving of their own accord to pull back the slide, effectively arming it once more.

“…six bullets left,” he concluded simply, thumbing on the safety catch as he had been taught to. “It makes sense for me to carry him and it's not like I'm not strong enough; should be a doddle compared to an eighteen hour shift dyeing endless reams of fabric for the Capitol.”

It was agreed that his argument made sense, especially as none of the others had any ammunition to spare given how much it had taken to escape the lizard mutts, and so once they'd dressed Finnick's leg as best as they could and had given him a shot of morphling from one of their personal med-kits to help with the pain Gloss helped to position him across Mikhail’s broad shoulders, his injured leg hanging free whilst he used Finnick's good leg and corresponding arm to hold him in place by wrapping his own arms around the limbs.

It was up to Pollux to lead the way once more as they hurried up and out of the lower levels of the city, anxious to get as far away from the mutts as possible, but it was almost painfully predictable that as soon as they emerged into what appeared to be some sort of underpass they found themselves under fire from multiple directions, a bullet grazing his left thigh just as he ducked behind an interactive map of the Capitol which was big enough to shield them.

“Come on!”

Relying on the others to continue firing back at the Peacekeepers he obeyed Katniss's sharp command, throwing himself forwards in order to get enough momentum to start running with the extra weight across his shoulders whilst also trying not to jostle Finnick too much.

A wide beam of bright yellow light suddenly shot down from the ceiling directly in front of Messalla, something so innocent that they all thought nothing of it until the young man disintegrated before their eyes, his body turning to dust the moment it touched the light.

“Keep moving!” Katniss screamed, her words aimed at all of them even as her attention was focused on Cressida who had stumbled almost to a halt beside what was left of her loyal assistant, tears evident on her pale face as she stared at the dust in horror. “Keep moving!”

Avoiding both the wild spray of bullets from the Peacekeepers and the unpredictable deadly beams of light was hard enough before the floor beneath their feet seemed to explode in long,
straight lines courtesy of what appeared to be row upon row of spinning blades.

“Seriously?” Mikhail panted as he struggled to keep up, his friend’s body bouncing painfully on his shoulders as he ran as fast as he possibly could. “Haven't they ever heard of overkill?”

“They're Gamemakers,” Gloss snorted beside him, jumping aside to avoid what turned out to be the final beam of light and then almost skipping to avoid a spinning blade. “Of course they haven’t heard of overkill; the more exciting a death is the better, don’t you know?”

Mercifully by this point they appeared to be out of range of the Peacekeepers rifles as well.

It turned out that the spinning blades only extended the length of the main room of the underpass and so, once they had stepped onto one of the angled tunnels which would take them to the staircases leading to the surface, the floor was once again safe to stand upon.

“Oh, thank goodness for that…” Mikhail gasped as they all stumbled to a halt, Katniss literally leaping to safety at the last possible moment. “Did we…did we lose anyone else?”

“No,” Cressida sobbed weakly. “Just Messalla…”

“I'm sorry…” he found himself murmuring sincerely as he adjusted his grip on Finnick's limbs, stretching his neck around as he attempted to see the Victors face. “Is he still out?”

“Yeah,” Gloss confirmed after bending down to check. “Probably a good thing, too.”

Just then his brain began to register the sounds of distress coming from Peeta who had crumpled to his knees against the wall, clutching his head in his hands, nails digging in deep.

“Peeta, come on!” Katniss called out desperately, her voice hoarse, quickly crouching down in front of him and laying her hands on top of his. “Peeta! Peeta, we have to keep going!”

“I'm a mutt!” Peeta cried out. “I can't keep control!”

Mikhail winced, wishing he could do something to help but Finnick was his priority.

“Can you check his leg?” he murmured softly to Gloss, nodding his head towards where he could see the bloodstained black boot. “To make sure the bandages didn't come loose?”

Gloss nodded, moving to do so and after a moment Pollux joined him, his steady hands taking over the task of reapplying one of the dressings covering the deepest claw wounds.

“Yes, you can!” Katniss reassured Peeta, ignoring the others for the moment. “Look at me!”

“Leave me!” Peeta sobbed desperately, pushing weakly at her shoulders. “I'm a mutt!”

“Look at me!” Katniss barked, taking hold of his face with her hands so as to force him to meet her gaze, his own glistening with a flood of uncontrollable tears. “Look at me.”

It wasn’t just Peeta who looked at her then which resulted in all of them witnessing the somewhat desperate kiss she pressed to Peeta's seemingly unresponsive lips, that all of them say the way she clung to his face and kept her lips close to his as she begged softly,

“Stay with me.”

Peeta blinked, his tears threatening to fall as he responded softly,

“Always.”
Gale shifted uncomfortably, glancing away from the couple.

“Come on.”

"You still all right to carry him?” Gloss enquired softly as Katniss helped Peeta to his feet, nodding towards Cressida and Pollux who moved to lead the way. “I can take him for a bit.”

“I can manage for now,” Mikhail reassured him, tilting his neck until it gave a loud crack.

“Although I might take you up on that offer if we don’t stop sometime soon. Finnick Odair might look like he weighs nothing at all but I can assure you he is heavier than he looks.”

Gloss snorted as they set of jogging after the others.

“I know where we are!” Cressida cried out with obvious relief when they reached the top of the staircase, emerging out onto a snow covered courtyard in what appeared to be the centre of a shopping area rather than housing. “I know a place. Up those stairs. Keep going.”

Hurrying up the winding staircase, significantly more decorative than the ones which had brought them up to the surface, Mikhail almost smacked Finnick’s head against a post but luckily Gale stepped in, reaching out to left the unconscious Victors head up and over it.

“Thanks,” Mikhail muttered. “He would not have been happy if…”

Gale grunted, nodding, before hurrying to catch up with Katniss, jogging past a row of interactive wanted posters displaying all of their names and faces…well, all of their faces at least; those from Thirteen were simply listed as ‘Unknown Rebels’ although they were all dead now so that didn’t really matter although Mikhail noticed that his name was correct.

They’d even got his District correct; Mikhail Warrington – District Eight.

Rounding a corner Cressida led them across to a row of darkened shop fronts, pausing outside one which appeared to sell nothing but fur; fur coats in every shape, size and/or colour, fur-lined jackets, fur-lined trousers, fur-lined underwear…wait…fur-lined underwear? Who in their right mind would wear fur-lined underwear?

Cressida reached out, knocking on the gold tinted glass door as loudly as she possibly could.

“Someone's coming,” Peeta murmured from where he was lent against the shop window, interrupting Cressida’s continued knocking which had the potential to draw more attention than they really wanted, everyone keeping a keen look out for trouble. “I can see…”

A tall figure, their facial features obscured by the oversized hood of their fur-lined dressing gown opened the door, jumping back just in time to avoid Cressida barging her way in.

“Shut the door!” Cressida barked as the others followed her inside. “Shut the door!”

Obediently the figure, a woman if her figure was any indication, shut and locked the door behind them, her hood slipping back just enough to allow Mikhail to see her face when she turned back to study the group she had just admitted into her shop…and what a face…

Mikhail couldn't blame Katniss for aiming an arrow towards her heart given that she almost looked like a mutt of some kind; it looked as though her skin had been stretched tight over the bones of her face and had been tattooed with black and gold tiger stripes, her nose had been flattened until it barely existed and long whiskers stretched out from her tight cheeks.
“No, Katniss, it's okay,” Cressida gasped hurriedly, placing a hand on Katniss's I order to pull the bow down, directing the arrow into the floor beneath their feet. “It's okay. Tigris, do you remember me? It's Cressida Mullins. I'm with Plutarch's underground. We need your help.”

Gale, the only member of their group who hadn't stopped to stare at the cat-like woman, moved around the reasonably sized shop, checking behind every display before announcing,

“Clear!”

A deep groan of pain rumbled against his back and Mikhail strained his neck on more to check that Finnick was still out of it, the morphling still working its magic to keep him under.

Eventually, after a long moment spent studying their group, Tigris nodded in a significantly feline way and gestured for them to follow her through to the back of the shop where she crouched down to pull a ridiculously soft looking rug aside to reveal a hidden wooden hatch.

“I know you,” Katniss announced suddenly. “You were a stylist in the Games.”

Tigris grimaced, her skin wrinkling unattractively as her expression settled into a scowl.

“Until Snow decided I wasn't pretty enough anymore.”

“I'm here to kill him.”

Judging by the smirk which transformed her odd face, making her look significantly more like the predator she was pretending to be, Tigris was pleased to hear this and gestured for Katniss to climb down the wooden steps she had revealed upon opening up the hatch.

“You go down first with his legs,” Gloss announced once the others had started climbing down, already reaching out to remove Finnick from Mikhail’s shoulders. “I'll follow.”

“Ok.”

It was awkward and Gloss ended up carrying most of Finnick's dead weight, strong arms hooked under his friends shoulders, when Mikhail missed a step and fell against the steps.

“You may use whatever you need to dress his wounds,” Tigris announced softly from above them, gesturing to the room they were entering. “Most of its just scraps of fabric anyway.

“Thank you, Tigris,” Gloss murmured, almost fondly and Mikhail suspected that he'd met the strange woman before on a more professional level. “You wouldn't have some alcohol to spare, would you? We need to clean out his wounds to stop the spread of infection.”

“Of course, dear boy,” Tigris murmured softly, fondly, reaching out to run her fingers through his short hair, the fingernails shaped and painted like claws. “I'll be just a moment.”

“…dear boy?” Mikhail repeated, as he reached the floor of the room. “A friend of yours?”

“Tigris was District One’s stylist back when I was competing in the Games,” Gloss answered simply as he reached the bottom of the steps, nodding towards mountain of fabric, primarily made up of scraps of fur, which would make a perfect bed for their wounded friend. “She dressed both me and Cash for years until she was forced to retire during the 72nd Games.”

As gently as possible they lowered Finnick down onto the bed of fabric, Mikhail scooping some up into another smaller pile to act as a pillow for his injured leg to keep it elevated.
A shrill whistle came from the hatch and Gloss jogged over, catching the bottle when it was dropped down, before hurrying back over to Finnick and Mikhail as the hatch was closed.

It took Mikhail a moment to realise that the odd sound he could hear wasn't to do with the basement they found themselves in but Pollux, sobbing silently in Cressida's gentle arms.

Peeta had dropped down to the floor, leaning back against the wall with his arms wrapped around his legs, and Gale moved to sit by him, pressing a hand to a wound to his upper arm.

Giving Pollux one last squeeze, accompanied by a soft kiss to the top of his head, Cressida released him and moved over to inspect the wound to Gale's arm, fingers probing gently.

"Gale's gonna need stitches."

Mikhail snorted, glancing down at the throbbing wound on his leg, before returning his attention to Finnick, assisting Gloss in removing the soiled dressings as quickly as possible.

"He's not the only one…” he muttered, grimacing as he carefully revealed the horrific mess that had once been Finnick's knee. “Fuck…I'm no doctor but even I know this isn't good…”

“I made it up,” Katniss announced suddenly, her voice hoarse as she stood at the bottom of the steps, clutching her bow in her hands like it was a lifeline. “All of it. There is no special mission from Coin. There's only my plan. Everyone that's dead is dead because of me. I lied.”

“Obviously,” Mikhail snorted when she'd finished her admission, trying not to throw up as he helped Gloss to remove their friends trousers, fully revealing the extent of the damage which had been done to his leg; a chunk of his thigh was literally hanging off of the bone, his knee cap was…gone…and his lower leg looked like it had been skinned. “Ugh…you can't lie for toffee, sweetheart. We all knew you'd made it up. Even Jackson, hard ass that she was.”

“He's right,” Cressida agreed, her skin turning ashen as she watched Gloss pour some of the alcohol onto a clean piece of fabric and hand it to Mikhail to start wiping down the wounds before doing the same for himself, plunging his hand into the thigh wound. “We all knew.”

Katniss blinked owlishly around at them,

“…the soldiers from Thirteen?”

“They did, too,” Cressida confirmed, watching as Pollux wiped the tears from his face and stumbled across to help Gloss and Mikhail, soaking a third rag and starting to work on Finnick's knee whilst they re soaked their own cloths. “Do you really believe that Jackson thought you had orders from Coin? She trusted Boggs and he clearly wanted you to go on.”

“I never meant for this to happen…” Katniss choked out, finally releasing her bow and allowing it to drop to the floor. “I failed. I...I killed them. I'm sorry, Pollux. I'm so sorry.”


He paused, looking across at Mikhail for a brief moment, before continuing to speak,


No one answered him, too stunned by the fact that he had remembered the majority of the Tributes lost during the past two years, all of the ones he had had some sort of dealing with.
“They mean that our lives were never ours,” he pressed on, his voice growing more firm with each word that passed between his lips. “There was no real life because we didn't have any choice. Our lives belong to Snow and our deaths do, too. But if you kill him, Katniss...”

Katniss blinked across at him, stunned.

“If you end all of this, all those deaths, they mean something,” he told her, meeting her gaze and holding it even as Finnick gave a weak whimper as Gloss pressed his re-soaked cloth back into his thigh. “Cinna, Portia, Boggs, Castor, Jackson. They chose this. They chose you.”

Even Mikhail, who was far from her biggest fan, couldn't argue against that.

~ * ~

A/N Sorry it's been so long. Not only did I attempt a writing challenge for the month of November (which I failed due to overestimating the amount of free time I would have between work, cadet parades and the Christmas show I was performing in) but this was also quite a difficult chapter to write and to get right. I hope you enjoyed it. I keep forgetting about Gloss, whoops, so had to go back a few times and add him in. And, of course, I had to save Finnick as this is a “canon-divergence” story. Lol. Comments/Suggestions welcome. X
Chapter Nineteen

Disclaimer: I don’t own the Hunger Games or any of its characters. The OC’s, of which there are many, are of my own creation.

Summary: The Mockingjay has been seen. The song has been sung. The Revolution has begun. Now it is up to Mikhail to fight for what he knows and believes is right. Freedom.

WARNINGS: HET! (M/F) SLASH! (M/M) VIOLENCE! ANGST! CHARACTER DEATH!

Stars Look Down

Chapter Nineteen

A deep familiar rumbling, like thunder but at the same time not like thunder at all, broke through the silence which had descended upon the occupants of the basement once all of their wounds had been treated to the best of their ability, Mikhail waiting until last.

“Mortar shells,” Gale announced, rising from where he had been sat beside Katniss, glancing up at the ceiling. “It's not ours. Peacekeepers must be shelling the rebels outside the city.”

Cressida shook her head,

“That's not outside the city.”

No, Mikhail silently agreed, there was no way those were falling outside of the city.

Given that they were definitely mortars, something that his unfortunately extensive experience under fire confirmed, rather than anything could be dropped from a hovercraft they would have to be a couple of blocks away for the explosions to be as loud as they were.

Finnick groaned, drawing everyone’s gaze across to him as his eyelids fluttered.

A moment passed as they watched their injured friend with bated breath; Gloss, who was closest to the injured Victor, leaned forwards to take Finnick’s hand in his, squeezing gently.

Another weak grown, followed by an even weaker exclamation,

“…Annie…”

Mikhail’s stomach clenched in sympathy for his friend.

He was in a bad way, his skin beaded with sweat as his body fought to stave off the infection which had begun to settle into his extensive wounds despite their efforts to keep it at bay, his three remaining limbs trembling as his muscles clenched and released uncontrollably.

And now his much needed rest was disturbed by dreams or, worse, hallucinations.

“…please…Annie…don't go…don't go…”
It was going to take a miracle for him to survive the night in their present circumstances.

Sleep was near impossible for all of them; if they weren't taking turns monitoring Finnick, keeping him as cool and as calm as they could manage, then they were startled awake by the almost continuous bombing taking place above them, each bomb closer than before.

By the time morning officially came, Tigris opening the hatch and becoming for one of them to come and collect some food she had prepared for them, all of them were a little on edge.

“I’ll have a quick look outside,” Gale announced, jumping to his feet. “Cressida, the food?”

Cressida nodded, heading up the steps to join her strange looking friend and returning with a tray positively loaded down with fresh fruit, toasted bread slathered in butter and tiny mugs of a hot, steaming liquid called coffee which Mikhail found to be unpleasantly bitter.

Once he'd eaten as much as his stomach could handle he picked up a couple of pieces of fruit, unrecognisable to him, and patiently fed them to Finnick between his hallucinations.

“Sun's only just coming up,” Gale announced as he returned, jogging lightly down the steps and dropping down between Katniss and Peeta so that he could help himself to some of the cold toast. “There’s some small-arms fire. Could be Paylor, maybe Lyme. Rebels are close.”

Cressida paused, her fingers hovering over the mug she’d been reaching out for, her eyes taking on a surprisingly cold appearance as she gasped out what all of them were thinking,

“This is it.”

Before any of them could voice their own agreement a familiar beep echoed around the subterranean workroom, drawing their attention to the holo-projector resting on one of the cluttered workbenches of the room just as it flared to life with an image of President Snow.

“Ugh…” Mikhail grimaced in protest. “Just what we need…”

“To all capitol citizens more than a half mile outside the city circle, I am announcing a mandatory evacuation,” President Snow announced from the projected image, his tone disturbingly gentle and welcoming as he reclined in his ornate looking chair. “Come to the mansion. I am promising you shelter and sanctuary. All refugees, come to my home.”

Almost as though she were in a trance Katniss moved closer to the screen.

“And there you will be provided with food, medicine, safety for your children,” he continued. “And you will have my solemn oath to protect you until my dying breath.”

“Wish he’d hurry up with that last part…”

“Our enemy is not like us. They do not share our values. They have never known our comfort and our sophistication,” President Snow continued, his voice taking on an almost apologetic tone before hardening into one that was blatantly meant to frighten his people into submission. “And they despise us for it. Make no mistake. They are not coming to liberate us. They are coming to destroy our way of life. They are coming to bury us.”

With an audible click from the holo-projector the image shuttered out abruptly, plunging the room into silence, a stunned and contemplative silence which Katniss eventually broke,

“Is he still in the mansion?”
Peeta, obviously affected by the sight of the man who was literally responsible for ruining his life time and again, didn’t respond, staring at the spot where the image had just been.

“Peeta?”

His gaze snapped across to hers, his eyes painfully wide.

“Y-Yeah…” the tortured young Victor eventually stuttered. “I recognise the room.”

Mikhail couldn't help but be a little impressed as only a tiny bit of the room had been visible over the top of the ornate chair and to him it had just looked like a set of fancy bookshelves and a ridiculously large window; then again were he to be shown just a fraction of the room where he had been tortured he supposed he’d be able to recognise it pretty easily enough.

Katniss nodded, humming thoughtfully before unfolding a paper map of the city on the floor in front of her, looking up at Cressida as everyone automatically moved to gather around it.

“Where is that?”

“About five blocks away,” Cressida answered, shifting her grip on her rifle as she lent down to point out the positions on the map. “We're right here, just off the Avenues. Mansion's here.”

“What about the pods?”

“They'll probably deactivate the pods around here,” Cressida surmised, sweeping her hand across the centre of the map to indicate a reasonably large area. “For the residents' safety.”

“That could work,” Katniss murmured. “I could get close enough.”

“Katniss,” Gale protested softly. “Every peacekeeper's gonna be waiting.”

“But not all of us are in a fit state to move, don't forget,” Mikhail piped up, nodding towards Finnick but also sweeping a hand out to indicate Peeta who was still shaking, Pollux who looked decidedly unsteady and then himself. “We'd never be able to move fast as a group.”

“Snow’s offering shelter to all the refugees,” Katniss pointed out, reaching out to grab a piece of fabric off of the nearest workbench, wrapping it around her shoulders like a cloak. “So we turn ourselves into refugees. It's going… it's going to be chaos. Are they really going to be checking every face in the crowd? I know it's a risk but it's our best opportunity.”

Reluctantly Mikhail had to admit that she had a point; put them all in some Capitol clothes, all garish colours and frivolous styles, and they'd blend right in to the rest of the crowd.

“Mikhail’s right though,” she continued, her words surprising him. “We can't all go. Not only because some of us aren't fit to travel but also because a large group would be noticeable.”

Cressida hummed in agreement.

“So… I'll go alone,” Katniss announced, her head tilting up stubbornly. “That was I can…”

“There is no way in hell that I'm letting you go out there alone,” Gale interrupted her, his voice even more gruff than usual. “A group is dangerous, I agree, but going alone is tantamount to suicide. I'll go with you. I'm not injured so we can move quickly. We know how each other moves and thinks so I can watch your back. This isn't up for debate, Katnip.”
Katniss glared at him for a long moment before finally nodding once in agreement.

As it turned out Tigris was all too happy to supply them with suitably concealing clothing, dressing Katniss in “something from her new winter line” which turned out to be a metallic blue coat which somehow had a cape incorporated into it which completely hid her left arm from view, giving her a perfect way to conceal her very recognisable weapon of choice.

They didn't bother to replace her black trousers or combat boots.

The coat also had an oversized hood which would definitely aid in concealing her identity.

Gale on the other hand…

“Huh!” Mikhail huffed a laugh when he followed the others up into the shop and caught sight of the coat Tigris was slipping onto Gale, crossing to test the fabric with his fingers. “This is from last year isn't it? You probably go the fabric a month or so after the Games.”

“I did indeed,” Tigris confirmed, tilting her head. “I did not realise you followed fashion…”

“Oh, I don't,” Mikhail snorted, checking out another section of the fabric much to Gales obvious discomfort. “I did, however, dye that piece of fabric. Second week on the job; my hands were completely black for days afterwards because of the dye we had to use.”

“…you dyed this?”

“Yup,” Mikhail confirmed. “I remember because it was a bitch. That fabric did not want to take on this colour. It's Forged Iron, right? Well I ended up with something closer to Tarnished Silver to start with, according to my supervisor, so we had to do another wash.”

“You're from District Eight,” Tigris surmised, smiling down at him even as he hands draped a deep purple scarf around Gales neck to conceal his uniform where the oversized coat couldn't. “I've never had the pleasure of meeting anyone who had a hand in creating the fabrics that I ordered. What made you chose to be a cloth dyer rather than something else?”

“We needed the money, simple as that,” Mikhail shrugged, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling as he realised everyone was listening in on them. “I was supposed to start working in the loading bay with my dad when I finished school but…well…things got a little bit too tight, if you know what I mean, so I dropped out and got myself taken on at the factory. It was an awful place, you have to understand, and the job was horrible but the spy was twice what I could have got as an apprentice at the loading bay. Especially up on the third floor where I was; that's where we did all the hand-dying and let me tell you that's no picnic.”

“Oh.”

“Not that any of that really matters now,” Mikhail snorted, tugging on the fabric one last time before stepping back. “I don't think there's a single factory left standing back home.”

“Head straight North,” Cressida instructed Katniss, helping the younger woman sort out her belt. “There's gonna be thousands of refugees. Just get into that stream and don't look up.”

Katniss nodded,

“We've got one shot at this.”

“OK, then,” Gale grunted, checking his rifle was hidden from view. “Let's make it count.”
“Good luck, Katniss,” Cressida murmured, pulling the Victor into a hug. “I believe in you.”

“Thank you,” Katniss responded thickly, pulling back after a long moment. “Pollux.”

As far as Mikhail was aware only Cressida could understand what the Avox member of their group was saying with his hands but Katniss must have understood the sentiment behind it, offering him a broad smile before reaching out to pull him into a hug, thanking him softly.

“Don’t even think about hugging me,” Mikhail snorted when she turned to face him next, meeting her gaze even as he fought back a broad smirk. “I don’t like you, remember?”

“I remember,” she responded softly. “I don’t like me either, sometimes.”

“But I do like your sister and I don’t want to see her upset so don’t go dying or anything.”

Katniss actually cracked a smile towards him.

“I’ll try not to,” she offered softly, turning to face the hulking Victor beside him. “Gloss.”

To say that the District One native was surprised by the hug was an understatement, the normally smooth spoken Victor mumbling something in response before heading back down the stairs, mumbling something about not wanting to leave Finnick on his own for too long.

“Tigris,” Katniss murmured, turning to face the Capitol woman who paused in her fussing over how Gale should wear the infinity scarf. “Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

Offering Katniss an incredibly feline smile Tigris nodded her head once and then returned to her fussing, her clawed hands proving to be surprisingly dexterous as she draped the fabric around Gales neck as it was intended to be worn, making him look as Capitolite as possible.

“Katniss,” Peeta gasped, lurching forwards until the couple were practically pressed together. “Let me come with you, okay? I can be a good distraction. They know my face.”

“No,” Katniss countered without hesitation. “I’m not losing you again.”

“Peeta,” Cressida interrupted gently. “You’ll be safer with us.”

“What if the Peacekeepers are searching the houses?” Gale disagreed softly, moving to stand beside the Capitol reporter. “What if they find you? If he's captured he could...”

He wasn’t arguing to take Peeta with them, not really; simply pointing out the facts.

“Then give me a nightlock pill, okay?” Peeta begged pitifully. “Because I'm not going back...”

Mikhail started, his hand flying up to pat the pocket containing the pill he’d forgotten about.

Was it...

Was it even still intact?

Whilst Gale handed his over to Peeta, helping the traumatised Victor to secure it in his jacket pocket, Mikhail checked on the state of his own pill; amazingly it was still intact.

Katniss reached down to unlock Peeta’s shackles without being prompted.

“Stay alive.”
It wasn’t often that Mikhail felt uncomfortable witnessing public displays of affection but the hug that Katniss bestowed upon Peeta was intimate in its simplicity, their arms locking tightly around each other as their heads tilted so that their cheeks could press together.

“If I see you again, it's gonna be a different world.”

Of course it was Gale, radiating jealousy, that interrupted their moment,

“Ready, Katniss?”

She pulled away, reluctantly, her hand straying to Peeta’s cheek before she nodded.

“Let's go.”

Pulling up the oversized hood to conceal her face Katniss picked up her bow, hid it within her costume and led the way outside, Gale following once he’d pulled up his own hood.

No one moved as the door clicked shut behind them.

“We should…” Cressida mumbled after a long moment, moving away from the shop window when she spotted a brightly coloured figure hurrying past on the other side. “We should get out of sight. Quickly. I have a feeling it's going to get very busy out there in a few minutes…”

“I shall keep watch as best as I can,” Tigris murmured smoothly as she followed them to the hatch, intent on shutting it behind them. “Please, stay hidden unless I tell you otherwise.”

“Thank you, Tigris,” Cressida murmured, reaching up out of the hatch to clasp hold of her friend’s hand. “I don't know how I shall ever be able to repay you for what you've done…”

Tigris smiled in her feline way.

“Cressida, you've known me a long time,” Tigris responded softly as the others awkwardly manoeuvred their way past Cressida’s body, descending the steps. “If I had expected repayment for my services I would have stated so at the beginning of our transaction.”

Pausing for a moment in order to allow his eyes to readjust to the dimness of the workroom Mikhail crossed to kneel beside Gloss who was replying a damp cloth to Finnick's forehead.

“How's he doing?”

“Not good,” Gloss mumbled worriedly, brushing his fingers through his friends damp curls. “I've seen too many Tributes suffer like this. I know the signs. I know what comes next. He needs…he needs a hospital. He needs medication and treatment which we can't give him.”

“Hopefully, if things go roughly to plan, this will all be over by the end of today,” Mikhail murmured, carefully adjusting the bundle of fur serving as poor Finnick's pillow. “Katniss will deal with Snow, or if not her then the Rebels will. And then we can get him to a hospital.”

“And then what?”

“Then we rebuild our lives, I guess,” Mikhail sighed. “As best as we can, anyway…”

It was strange.

He'd honestly never expected to survive through to the end.

It was one of the reasons he hadn't allowed himself to get too carried away with Johanna.
But now the end was in sight, the promised peace just over the other side of the hill, so close he could practically taste it and he was still breathing, still fighting; he was still alive.

“Will you go back to District Eight?”

“I don't know,” Mikhail murmured honestly. “There's not much to go back to…”

Their conversation was brought to an abrupt end when the holo-projected beeped sharply as it whirred to life once more, drawing all their gazes across to the image which appeared.

“What the…”

It was obviously a hand held camera, the image so shaky that it actually made Mikhail's stomach churn as he struggled to figure out what it was that they were being shown.

“…are those children?” Peeta gasped, moving towards the screen. “What are they?”

“Bring your children forward!” a voice commanded, only just heard over the pleading of the panicking civilians. “The gates will open momentarily! The children will be received first!”

“Mom!”

Whoever was holding the camera had managed to get in as close as possible, practically becoming one of the crowd, and so they and everyone else watching was in the perfect position to watch young children being snatched away from their hysterical parents.

“Is that…” Cressida gasped in confusion. “Is that a holding pen?”

“Oh, God…” Mikhail groaned, the not you falling out of his stomach. “He's creating a human shield between him and the Rebels with the children. He's not letting them in. He's...he's…”

“Stay calm! Bring your children forward!” the same voice ordered, louder than before as people continued to shove at the line of Peacekeepers holding them back, desperate to get through to safety. “The gates will open momentarily. The children will be received first.”

And then, quite suddenly, a hush fell over the crowd as people began glancing up.

Finally the camera panned upwards the reveal a hovercraft passing overhead, the Capitol Seal printed on the underside of its wings, familiar silver parachutes raining down from it.

“It's the Capitol!” someone cried out excitedly. “Gifts from the capitol! Gifts!”

“I've got a bad feeling about this…” Mikhail muttered as they watched the crowd reaching up towards the parachutes, particularly the children in the pen. “Why would they use…”

He wasn't the only one to cry out in horror as the screen literally exploded, flames appearing out of nowhere as bodies were ripped limb from limb before their very eyes, the person holding the camera ducking down in an obvious attempt to save themselves.

The main target had been the children in the pen and, when the smoke cleared, there was nothing left but bodies inside the pen; some were whole and therefore possibly breathing but most were in blackened pieces, their young blood strewn all over the place even as those who had survived in the larger part of the crowd struggled forwards to help them.

“What just…?”
“How could they…?”

Peeta lurched to the side, dropping to his knees and heaving up the contents of his stomach, prompting Cressida to hurry across to support his sobbing form, rubbing his back soothingly even as she continued to stare at the screen, her face completely ashen in horrified shock.

The voices on the screen began to filter through to their shocked minds.

“Medic! Medic! Medic!”

“Make a hole!”

“Medics coming in!”

“Aren't those…” Mikhail mumbled, frowning. “Those are our medics. Rebels.”

“Bring a stretcher!”

“This way, this way!”

It was then, as the various medics in the distinct grey uniform of District Thirteen, began working on those who had somehow survived the initial explosion that they heard a painfully familiar voice calling out desperately from somewhere near the camera operator.

“Prim?”

“Katniss…”

Prim.

Mikhail's eyes practically bulged out of his head as he began to search the faces on the screen with renewed purpose, desperately hoping not to find that of the young girl who had treated him with so much care and kindness back in District Thirteen no matter what he said to her, no matter how badly he'd behaved; surely they wouldn't have let her into the field?

She was just a child…

“Primrose!”

A figure paused on the screen.

“No…”

It was Prim, her face turning towards the camera as she obviously heard her sisters voice.

“Prim!”

And that was when, completely unexpectedly, a second explosion went off.

This time the person operating the camera was thrown backwards, the camera falling wildly which caused the image to spin until the device finally struck the ground, landing in such a way that they were treated to a crooked view of the devastating aftermath of the attack.

No one was moving.

And Prim…Prim was just gone…
“Prim…”

A boot made contact with the camera and, following a couple of minutes of fuzzy, intermittent footage, the feed died and the holo-projected sputtered and went silent.

“How could…” Peeta groaned, openly weeping. “How could they do that?”

“They're monsters…” Gloss growled, tears falling silently down his own cheeks. “…fuck…”

“But…what was she doing there?” Peeta gasped, pulling away from Cressida's comforting arms as his body vibrated with righteous anger. “Prim was too young. She shouldn't have been there. She shouldn't be... she shouldn't be... and Katniss… God… Katniss saw her d-die…”

All of them jumped when they heard Tigris cry out sharply above them, the sound of a lot of glass shattering quickly drowning her out before they heard the distinct sounds of a scuffle.

“Tigris!”

Of all people Peeta led the way, disregarding the Capitol woman’s order to stay out of sight and ignoring Cressida’s cry of warning as he thundered up the steps to push open the trap door, tumbling out into the shop with Mikhail only second behind him, gun up and ready.

“Hey!” Peeta snapped as they caught sight of Tigris struggling in the grip of two angry looking Rebel soldiers, her wig in one of their hands. “What do you think you're doing?”

The shopfront had been destroyed, both the windows and the glass door having been broken, a more a Rebels were climbing in through the openings, rifling through the stock.

“…that's Peeta Mellark!”

Peeta stood up straighter, looking rather imposing despite the tears still staining his cheeks.

“What?” another Rebel gasped, all of them turning to face Peeta and Mikhail who had yet to alter his grip on his rifle, aiming at one of the ones holding Tigris. “I thought he was dead!”

“A useful ruse used in order to penetrate further into the city,” Mikhail responded sounding far more important than he actually was, drawing more of their attention to him. “Now, I suggest that you unhand our friend who has given us shelter before I lose my patience…”

“Mikhail?!”

Turning his attention to the owner of the startled voice he couldn't stop himself grinning broadly, dropping his rifle as he hurried over to throw himself into his friend’s strong arms.

“Felyx!” he laughed happily. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Unhand the… woman…” another equally familiar voice ordered as its owner stepped into the shop, her layers of clothing showing signs of the difficult battle they'd just won. “Now.”

Tigris was released immediately.

“Commander Paylor,” Mikhail greeted the important woman as he finally released his hold on Felyx who looked just as happy to see him, grinning broadly. “Nice of you lot to join us.”

Commander Paylor blinked across at him for a long moment.
“Why doesn't it surprise me that you, of all people, can't stay dead?”

Mikhail let out a loud laugh, unable to stop himself.

“You know me, more lives than a cat,” he announced, moving to offer her his hand only to grunt in surprise when she pulled him in for a hug instead. “It really is good to see you.”

“And you, Mikhail,” she responded. “We're heading for the Mansion to join the fighting…”

“I doubt there'll be much fighting now, not after those bombs went off,” Mikhail muttered angrily, the disgust pooling in his belly once more. “Whoever order that should be hung.”

“…what do you mean?”

“Didn't you hear the explosions that went off, like, a couple of minutes ago?” Mikhail asked, pausing until she and the rest of her group nodded. “Well, they were broadcasting the crowds at the gates live, showed them putting the children into a pen, creating a barrier of toddlers between the Rebels and the mansion. And then they dropped a load of fucking parachutes, the kind they sent into the Arena, you know? Only these ones exploded.”

“…fuck…”

“Oh, it gets worse,” Peeta piped up. “Because they waited long enough for our own medics to rush in to help before triggering a second explosion which killed everyone, including…”

“…including?”

“Primrose Everdeen,” Mikhail answered Paylor's hesitant query, his voice becoming choked. “And possibly Katniss Everdeen herself. She was there, you see, screaming for her sister…”

Commander Paylor's expression did nothing to conceal her horror, her chocolate coloured eyes going wide before hardening with determination as she turned to face Tigris.

“I apologise for the damage done to your shop and the treatment you received,” she spoke calmly and clearly, meeting the Capitol woman's gaze. “We have wounded with us. Could you find room for them so that we may render aid to those caught up in the explosions?”

After a long moment Tigris inclined her head in silent agreement.

“We have wounded of our own,” Mikhail announced quickly. “Finnick, Finnick Odair. It's…he's not got long if he doesn't get…if we don't get him to a doctor…a proper doctor…”

“Hathor?” Paylor called out to a young woman with hair so blonde it almost appeared translucent. “Put out a call for a priority Med-Evac for Mr Odair and our wounded.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Mikhail's body sagged with relief.

“Thank you.”

As agreed Tigris willingly opened up her home to the Rebels, allowing them to take over both the shop floor and the private apartment above for their alarming number of wounded; the basement level, however, remained Finnick’s private place of refuge.

Mikhail, Peeta, Cressida and Pollux helped to get them settled in while Gloss stayed with Finnick, checking dressings as they went while Tigris distributed the contents of her kitchen.
She also took the time to inform those who weren't rounded to help themselves to any replacement clothing they required from her shops stick room, putting emphasis on the racks if very warm looking coats whilst also apologising for the rather garish colours.

Most of them took her up on her offer, adding more layers to their tattered clothing.

Once dressed and fed Commander Paylor said her goodbyes and led them off towards the Presidential Mansion where their help would be most needed, leaving Felyx in charge.

It took nearly an hour for the Med-Evac to reach them, a hovercraft which couldn't land close by due to the building layouts and so had to use a winch to bring the wounded men and women up into its belly; Finnick was loaded first, his body carried out to the metal basket by Gloss and Mikhail and strapped into place as carefully as possible.

“I'll see you soon, old friend,” Gloss murmured, pressing a kiss to Finnick's forehead once they'd got him secured and were just about to give the dig so to start the winch. “Don't die.”

“Yeah,” Mikhail muttered, squeezing Finnick's shoulder. “Don't you fucking die…”

They'd lost too many people already.

“You ok, Mikhail?”

“I'm…” he paused on the verge of claiming he was fine, of keeping up the strong façade that he had adopted in recent weeks, deciding instead to be truthful. “Tired. I'm so tired, Felyx.”

Felyx sighed deeply,

“Me too, Mikhail. Me too.”

His radio crackled loudly, signalling an incoming message, and he excused himself.

“So, you two seem close,” Peeta murmured as he and Gloss caked to stand beside Mikhail, the latter offering him a bottle of what turned out to be iced tea. “How do you know him?”

“We worked together back in District Eight, before all of this began,” Mikhail answered absently, sipping the sweet drink despite the fact that he didn't much care for it. “He and his friends, Misha and Donovan, showed me the ropes when I first started. We became good friends, so good that they eventually took me along with them to their secret meetings.”

“…so he got you involved in the Rebellion?”

“He's one of the people who did, yeah,” Mikhail confirmed, his fingers tapping out a rhythm on the bottle. “He's also the only other one of our group to have survived this long; Donavan, Leroy, Willard and J-Juno were killed during the fighting in District Eight. Misha was executed. Belle died of her wounds and Ella was killed when the hospital was bombed.”

“No wonder you were so happy to see each other.”

Felyx finished his conversation, returning his radio to his jacket as he moved back to Mikhail.

“So, that was Command,” he announced, acknowledging the two Victors with a polite nod whilst ignoring Cressida and Pollux who had appeared and were, predictably, filming everything. “It's over. Snow’s surrendered. Peacekeepers have been ordered to surrender.”

Felyx nodded, his expression tight.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. Apparently he's being holding pending a public trial,” Felyx confirmed, his expression that of someone who had a foul taste in their mouth. “Apparently the legal niceties much be kept, not that they're going to find him anything other than fucking guilty. But anyway, I've strayed slightly off topic; you've been ordered to report to the Presidential Mansion and no, that doesn't come from Commander Paylor. These orders come straight from President Coin. Any Victors who have survived are to be housed at the Mansion until the trial date.”

“…and me?”

“Strictly speaking her orders didn't include you, Mikhail,” Felyx admitted, smiling somewhat ruefully. “However I'm going to interpret her orders as, um, all surviving members of the so called ‘Star Squad’ should report to the Presidential Mansion as soon as possible. Victors and ‘Heroes’ alike. Oh, and that includes your damned camera crew, by the way.”

Mikhail automatically reached out to punch his friend in the shoulder.

“Don't call me that,” he muttered. “I could kill whoever came up with that damned title.”

“What? Don't tell me you don't like being the ‘Hero of District Eight’, Mikhail?” Felyx snorted, rubbing at his shoulder before offering his friend a smile. “But you're so good at it.”

“You looking to get a broken nose, Felyx?”

Letting out a bark of laughter Felyx took a step back, hands up in a show of surrender.

“Easy, you know I'm only messing with you,” he chuckled deeply, kicking a piece of glass away from his foot moments before he reached out to pull Mikhail into a hug. “Stay safe.”

“You too,” Mikhail responded, thumping his friend on the back. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“What, you mean something like this?” Felyx chuckled mischievously, pulling back just enough so that he could cup Mikhail’s face in his strong hands, holding him in place so that he can press a hard kiss to his lips. “I've wanted to do that ever since you turned me down.”

Mikhail was stunned for a long moment, blinking wildly, before he burst out laughing.

“You always were a fucking flirt, Felyx,” he snorted, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth as he pushed his friend away from him. “So? Did it live up to your fantasies?”

“Oh,” Felyx leered appropriately, licking his lips. “It most certainly did…”

Rolling his eyes towards his friend Mikhail turned away, grimacing when he spotted the camera’s directed towards him by Cressida and Pollux, capturing every single moment.

He let out a groan of annoyance before plastering a fake smile on his face.

“Alrighty then,” he announced loudly, over-emphasising the natural drawl of his voice as he made a show of clapping his hands together with false cheer. “Come on, then, my little chickadees. Didn't you hear? We've got places to go, people to see, so let's get a hustle on.”

“…chickadees?” Gloss snorted, his hands methodically checking over his uniform. “Really?”
“Oh, I’m sorry, Gloss. Have you got something against being called a chickadee? Well, ok then, what would you prefer?” Mikhail enquired teasingly, his smile growing, to which Gloss responded with a deep chuckle. “Oh! I know, what about duckling? Would that be better?”

“I don’t know,” the enormous Victor responded, his tone equally as teasing even as his posture became somewhat more threatening. “Do you like your teeth where they are?”

“…chickadees it is!” Mikhail declared brightly, dancing away when Gloss swung playfully at him, moving across to where Tigris was stood watching. “Thanks for the food and the shelter and everything. For a crazy looking Capitol cat lady you aren't half bad, you know?”

“Mikhail!” Cressida all but shrieked, offended on her friends behalf. “You can't just…”

She was cut off by the odd sound of Tigris giggling from behind her clawed hand.

“You're most welcome, Mikhail,” she responded with another giggle, offering him her other hand demurely. “You aren't too bad yourself, for a dirty, smelly rebel from District Eight.”

Mikhail's bark of laughter was completely uncontrollable.

Reaching out he shook her hand, automatically adjusting his grip to account for her claws.

“Tigris, I think this is the beginning of a disturbing and probably worrying friendship.”

Gloss snorted, shouldering Mikhail out of the way so that he could say his goodbye to his former stylist, promising to keep in contact with her and visit her once he'd found his wife…

“Whoa!” Mikhail interrupted sharply. “You're married?”

He wasn't the only one to gasp in response to the casual revelation, every single person involved in their conversation or just listening in to it reacting in exactly the same way.

“In the eyes of the law, no,” Gloss responded, a haunted look appearing in his eyes, his hand almost clutching at the one Tigris had offered him. “President Snow would never have allowed it. But we made our vows to each other after the Quarter Quell was announced.”

“…I thought Victors were encouraged to marry?” Cressida murmured in confusion. “Why…”

“Yes, Victors were encouraged to marry and procreate once their service the Capitol had concluded,” Gloss responded with a bitter chuckle, referring to the forced prostitution Finnick had exposed during his interview. “Cash and I, we were still popular in certain circles but we probably only had a couple more years to go on the main circuit. But Percy’s service had only just begun, given that she only became a Victor a couple of years ago, and on top of that she was Snow’s favourite. He would never have allowed us to be together.”

“Percy…” Cressida murmured, still filming everything although it did appear to be a subconscious act now. “As in Persephone Waters, Victor of the 72nd Hunger Games?”

Gloss nodded.

“I don’t know what happened to her after the Arena fell,” Gloss admitted, more emotion in his deep voice than any of them had ever heard and to Mikhail it looked as though the Victor was seconds from crying. “Cash...my sister took my wife's place at the Reaping, volunteering to go in her place, because...because we'd just found out that Percy was…”
It was more than Mikhail had ever heard the imposing Victor speak in one go and he was amazed, truly amazed, that the older man had managed to keep this to himself for so long.

“…because she was pregnant…”

Peeta's face blanched, no doubt thinking of the story he and Katniss had concocted.

“I tried to find out what I could back when we were still in District Thirteen but none of them seemed to care about finding out what had happened to the Victors and family members who'd been left behind, either in the District or the Capitol,” Gloss pressed on, unable to stop now that he'd opened up. “But I'm going to find her, one way or another.”

“Oh, my poor boy,” Tigris cooed, pulling him down into a hug. “You'll find her.”

Mikhail turned to Peeta, enquiring softly,

“Did you have any idea about…well…any of that?”

Peeta shook his head.

“You were closer to him, through Finnick,” the Victor pointed out softly. “Did you know?”

Mikhail shook his head, mimicking Peeta's motion almost exactly.

“Guess this just gives us all the more reason to get moving,” he announced, meeting Gloss’ tearful gaze when the Victor finally stepped away from Tigris. “All surviving Victors are to be housed at the mansion, remember? If your wife's still alive, Gloss, that's where she'll be.”

The remaining farewells were done quickly, spurred on by this new information and the need that they all now shared with Gloss to find out what had happened to his wife, and then they were heading off through the war torn streets of the Capitol, Cressida leading.

Unlike their previous excursions in the Capitol there were people on the streets this time, Rebels and Capitol Citizens alike, all of whom stared at them like they were some sort of a mirage; some of them even reached out to touch them, predominantly Peeta who really didn't like it, but a few too many of them reached out to touch the “Hero of District Eight”.

“Seriously, people,” Mikhail muttered after someone had almost caused him to trip and fall, their hands grasping his wrist from behind. “Have none of you heard of personal space?”

It was something of a relief when they finally came within spitting distance of the Mansion.

Mikhail wished he wasn't impressed by the sheer opulence of the humongous building, wished he could have held back the loud whistle of admiration when they were admitted into the entrance hall which appeared to have been made entirely out of the finest marble.

“If you'll follow me, please,” the young soldier who was obviously being used as an aide murmured politely, gesturing with his in bandaged arm towards the grand staircase before hurrying to lead the way. “President Coin is waiting for you in the main conference room.”

“She's obviously gotten herself settled in already,” Mikhail muttered softly, his eyes bulging comically wide as his brain struggled to process the lavish décor he was seeing. “Fuck me…”

“No thanks,” Peeta responded, almost absentmindedly. “You're not my type.”

Mikhail guffawed even as Gloss snorts back a roar of laughter, thumping Peeta on the back.
“And here was me thinking you were the sweet, innocent one…” Mikhail muttered, grinning across at the young Victor who was trembling ever so slightly. “Should've known better.”

“Sorry,” Peeta murmured blushing. “I'm...I'm struggled to filter my thoughts...I've got too many unpleasant memories of...of this place so it just sort of...just sort of came out…”

“Don't apologise,” Mikhail countered sincerely. “Nothing wrong with a little bit of banter.”

“Should help bury some of the memories, too,” Gloss pointed out. “If only temporarily.”

Peeta nodded, smiling gratefully at their understanding.

They eventually came to a halt in front of a set of ornate doors stretching right up to the ridiculously high ceiling, gold edging gleaming the soft light, the aide turning to face them.

There were two big, burly looking soldiers acting as guards on either side of the doors.

“I'm sorry but the President has requested that no cameras enter this room for the time being,” the aide addressed Cressida and Pollux. “If you wish to participate in the meeting you'll have to leave them out here. They'll be perfectly safe with Seppius and Oenomaus.”

Seppius, or so Mikhail assumed given how the guard had reacted to the name with a minuscule nod, accepted both Cressida and Pollux's cameras when they agreed to hand them over, placing them into the pockets of his black uniform jacket quickly and efficiently.

“President Coin,” the aide murmured politely when he eventually pushed open the door, indicating their group of to follow him. “Soldiers Mellark, Peridotte and Warrington for you.”

President Coin was perfectly put together and as emotionless as usual.

“And Miss Mullins and Mr Kilinc, I see,” Coin murmured, nodding towards where Cressida and Pollux had ended up stood close together. “I must congratulate you all on a job well done. Your broadcasts as the 'Star Squad' helped swell our ranks and ignite our people.”

“Thank you, Madame President,” Cressida murmured. “We've continued to film what we…”

“You must all be very tired,” President Coin pressed on as though Cressida hadn't spoken. “Each of the surviving Victors has been given a room in the East Wing of the Mansion. Soldier Deacon will show you to your rooms where you can freshen up, rest and recover.”

“Um, thanks,” Peeta mumbled. “I guess…”

“And Miss Mullins, Mr Kilinc, you are free to return to your own homes within the Capitol if you wish,” the grey haired woman once again pressed on without hesitating. “Or you may join Heavensbee and his assistants in their suite in the North Wing when they arrive.”

“I doubt that there's much left of out former homes given that we betrayed the Capitol and they would therefore have been torn apart in their search for information,” Cressida pointed out, her voice tight. “Not to mention the damage done by the siege. I for one know that my old apartment block was targeted early on so I expect we shall stay with Plutarch.”

“Now Soldier Warrington, I'm afraid no proviso has been made regarding your living situation from now on. To be strictly honest I did not request your presence here today,” President Coin announced calmly, turning her cool gaze on Mikhail. “Therefore I shall have you transferred to one of the units working to clear up the city and manage its population…”
The doors burst open with enough force to send them banging into the walls.

“You'd better not be planning on leaving any time soon, Mikhail,” Johanna snapped as she strode into the room, apparently having heard the tail end of the conversation, ignoring the spluttering Coin as she strode over to stand directly in front of him. “We had an agreement, you and I; we both survive takin the Capitol, we get to figure out if this works between us.”

And with that said she grabbed hold of his neck and pulled him down into a kiss.

It wasn't a gentle kiss.

It was full of passion and fire.

And most importantly it was nothing like the first kiss he'd shared with Juno.

In short it was perfect.

“I think that works quite well, don't you?” she suggested once they'd separated, her hands still holding onto his neck as she pressed her much smaller body against his. “Mikhail?”

Someone, it sounded like Annie, giggled as he blinked down at her for a long moment.

“Oh, definitely…”

“So, in short…” she trailed off, turning to smile at President Coin who appeared to be trying to get her annoyance under control and hidden much to the obvious amusement of Haymitch who was standing between Beetee and Annie, Plutarch Heavensbee standing a few paces away from them as though to disassociate himself. “He's not going anywhere.”

~ * ~

A/N This was not where I had intended ending this chapter and as such have had another one onto my plan to incorporate what would have been the second half of this one. Sorry, but it just flowed to a good stopping point and pressing on would have annoyed my inner muse which, I know from previous experience, would have given me terrible writers block. Anyway, hope you're still enjoying this story. The end is in sight but the series/collection will continue as I've got a few more ideas that I want to explore. As such comments/suggestions are most definitely welcome. X
Hissing sharply as her nails accidentally caught one of the countless wounds on his broad shoulders Mikhail nipped at her plump bottom lip, not hard enough to draw blood but certainly enough to distract her from what his hands were doing; taking hold of her wrist and forcing her strong arms down against the ridiculously plum pillows beneath her head.

“…not…playing…fair…” she gasped when he finally released her lips, grinding his hips against hers whilst maintaining his hold on her arms despite her seemingly half-hearted struggles. A deep groan reverberated through her body, causing him to chuckle softly, as he leaned down to nuzzle at the soft flesh in the valley between her breasts. “…oh…fuck…Mikhail…”

He could feel her heart beating beneath his lips as he pressed a series of kisses to her scarred skin, thudding out a wild, powerful rhythm as she pressed her hips up towards his.

Their clothes were strewn around the room, her bra actually dangling from the ridiculous chandelier hanging over the bed, leaving them in nothing more than their scar covered skin.

“I want…fuck…Mikhail…” Johanna groaned, her cheeks flushing as she emphasised her point with a series of futile grabbing motions. “I want to touch you…I need to touch you…”

Mikhail chuckled, scooting back up her body to press his lips against hers for a long moment.

“Touch, yes,” he finally conceded with a grin. “Scratch, no. I’ve got enough scars as it is.”

In less than a second following the release of her wrists Johanna had the globes of his arse firmly grasped in her hands, causing him to let out an uncontrollable groan as she pulled his hips even closer to her own as she wrapped her legs around him, pressing them together.

“How about that? Is that sort of touching all right with you, Mikhail?” Johanna enquired, a teasing smirk dominating her features as she rubbed against him. “Or would you like more?”

Mikhail was not an innocent.

Nor was he a virgin.

Yet none of his previous experiences could have prepared him for her powerful sexuality.

“…more…” he groaned, relinquishing control of their lovemaking. “More sounds good…”

He imagined that, had she lived, Juno could have been as confident as Johanna was when it came to knowing her own body, could have been as capable of taking charge but as it was all of his memories of their most intimate moments were of the desperate little noises she would make as she tried to figure out just what it was that her body was screaming out for.

Johanna didn’t need to figure out what her body was craving.

She knew exactly what her body wanted….

She knew what it needed…
And most importantly she knew how to get it...

Their lovemaking was wild and passionate, lasting far longer than either of them could have expected, and whilst he allowed her to take charge for the most part he couldn't help but fight for dominance every now and then which resulted in them rolling back and forth across the bed until, with a pair of startled laughs, they tumbled to the floor with a thud.

“Shit!” Johanna laughed, leaning over him from where she had landed on top. “You ok?”

His response was to flip them over so that he could press her down into the bedding which had taken the tumble with them, re-entering her body with a single confident thrust which drew forth a wild cry of pleasure from her red raw lips, both of them having nipped at them.

When things eventually calmed down between them, both of them finding their pleasurable completion within seconds of each other as they rutted together on the floor of their ridiculously extravagant suite, Mikhail couldn't stop himself from cradling her in his strong arms, lifting her up out of the tangled bedding and depositing her gently on the large bed.

“I'm not some damsel who needs cuddles and kisses after a good fuck, you know?”

He wondered if she realised that even as she spoke she was snuggling down into the pillows.

“Never said you were,” he pointed out, grabbing some of the bedding and returning it to its proper place on the bed. Once her gloriously naked body was covered her slipped under the covers to join her, pulling her body against his own. “However, I happen to like cuddles and kisses after a good fuck so I'm afraid you're just going to have to shut up and deal with it…”

Johanna snorted before cutting herself off suddenly, turning over in the circle of his arms so that she could rest her head on his shoulder, her hand moving to rest on top of his heart.

“I thought you were dead,” she mumbled softly, studying one of the scars her finger tips had begun tracing. “I didn't... I didn't expect it to hurt so much... or to regret not kissing you…”

“I came very close to actually being dead a couple of times,” Mikhail admitted softly, his lips pressed against the soft spikes of hair on the top of her head. “I was in that building with the Leeg's, you know? The one the Peacekeepers brought down? I only survived because I managed to shelter under the stairs and, by some minor miracle, they actually held out.”

Her body stiffened against his and, automatically, he began rubbing her back soothingly.

“A couple of the pods almost killed all of us,” he pressed on, suddenly feeling the need to get everything out in the open between them. “That's was about as fun as you can imagine. Don't know if they showed the footage of that or not. And then there were the mutts…”

“I missed you, you know?” he pressed on, tightening his hold on her tense body. “And, yeah, I regretted that we decided to wait until the Rebellion was over but do you know what's? I was also glad that we'd decided to do that because it gave me something to fight for. Yeah, there was the cause and the bigger picture but mostly I was just fighting to get back to you.”

They were probably still rushing things.

Neither of them had healed, physically or mentally, from the events of the past few months.

Mikhail wasn't over Juno and probably wouldn't be for a long time.
Johanna wasn't over her Games.

Neither of them were over the deaths of their families.

And yet it felt so right to be with her, their bodies entwined, and Mikhail just knew that they stood their best chance of a complete recovery from...everything...if they were together...

“No more regrets,” he murmured, tilting her head up with a tender grip on her chin so that he could press a gentle kiss to her lips. “There was a war. Shit happened. But we survived.”

“Yes,” Johanna smiled in response, stealing her own kiss. “Yes, we did. No more regrets.”

Much to President Coins displeasure the couple refused to emerge from their rooms for the next three days, requesting that their meals be brought to them and refusing any and all invitations to attend meetings and promotional events set up to “re-educate” the people of the Capitol, stating that they had more than earned the right to spend some time together.

Alone.

And, yes, the vast majority of their time was spent familiarising themselves with each other's bodies, repeatedly driving themselves towards new heights of pleasure, but they were also able to dedicate a large portion of their time getting to know each other better.

Johanna, as well as suffering from hydrophobia thanks to her treatment at the hands of the Capitol, had been afraid of thunder and thunderstorms for as long as she could remember.

Mikhail had admitted that, as well as being claustrophobic, he was also afraid of spiders. Not the little ones, he'd hastened to add when Johanna had laughed, the big ones.

Johanna adored strawberries and had refused to allow the Capitol to ruin them for her.

Mikhail, on the other hand, wasn't all too fond of them.

He preferred savoury treats, like cheese, to anything overly sweet.

Not that he'd ever had much opportunity to have either back home in District Eight.

They spoke of their families, swapping stories of their childhoods, and mourned for the wonderful people they would never have a chance to meet after speaking of their deaths.

They compared their Districts, finding the main similarities and differences, the largest being the fact that District Seven was covered in woodland whilst District Eight had been urban.

Sadly, as much as they would have loved to remain hidden away indefinitely, they could only ignore their responsibilities for so long and after one last lazy morning spent tracing their fingertips all over each other's new scars they were forced to re-join the real world.

Their first task, they were informed by one of President Coins robotic little aides, was to participate in a propo which would be focusing on the Victors who had managed to survive.

Cressida had split them up into three groups.

The first group was made up of those who had been rescued from the Arena so that they could take up their roles in the Rebellion, Gloss, Beetee, Finnick and Katniss, but also included Haymitch who had been smuggled out of the Capitol to play his important part.
The second group was the smallest of the three, or as Johanna put it the most exclusive, and consisted of those who had been rescued during the daring raid; Annie, Johanna and Peeta.

The third group was, surprisingly, the most surprising.

Prior to walking into the conference room they had been directed to all of the Victors who had taken part in the Rebellion had been under the impression that they were the only ones who had survived, Mikhail sharing this opinion as they'd all heard about the so called *Purge*.

And yet that was exactly what the third, and largest, group was made up of.

The Victors who had survived the *Victors Purge* or *Snow’s Purge* as it was sometimes called.

Cressida had made sure to set up multiple cameras to capture the various expressions their group wore when they first stepped into the busy room, allowing her to gain some of her most powerful footage such as the moment Gloss was reunited with his wife, Persephone.

His very pregnant wife.

Mikhail didn't recognise half of the Victors in the room to begin with, their appearances so severely altered from what he was used to seeing; gone were the ridiculous outfits the Capitol had insisted they were, replaced with the utilitarian uniforms of District Thirteen, and each and every one of them bore the physical signs and scars of their rough treatment.

Obsidian, now the oldest surviving Victor from District One, had been beaten so severely that he had been left with a permanent limp, forcing him to use a walking stick for anything more than a couple of steps and his handsome face was hidden behind an impressive beard.

He was also one of the few Victors to survive the *Purge* without having his head shaved.

Sykes, now the oldest surviving Victor from District Four, had become famous during the 51st Hunger Games for trapping his opponents under his net and spearing them with his trident like they were fish, laughing all the while, and Mikhail had always found him to be a little bit unnerving so he had been surprised to see how comfortable and happy Annie was around the older Victor who, it turned out, had had the skin flayed from his back for the part he had played in the downfall of the Arena as he had been acting as Finnick's Mentor.

“He saved me,” Annie explained softly from where she was stood behind her husband's wheelchair, the handsome Victor looking remarkably well considering what had happened and the fact that they had been forced to amputate his leg six inches above his knee so as to save him from the infection which had begun to set in. “When Finnick was called away…”

It was painfully obvious that called away was a polite way of saying *summoned to the Capitol to sleep with whoever President Snow wanted him to* and Mikhail would have moved to comfort his friend had Sykes not beaten him to it, winding an arm around Annie's shoulder and tucking her into his side whilst his other hand settled on Finnick's shoulder.

Atam, of District Three, was the last Victor to have been spared the humiliation of having his hair shaved off although judging by the bald patches it would probably have been a mercy.

“E-Everyone's alw-ways l-l-liked my c-curls,” he explained, clenching his hands at his sides as he struggled with the stutter he'd had ever since emerging from the 66th Hunger Games. “S-So th-they p-p-p-pulled it out in…in ch-chunks…r-r-rather than c-cut it all off a-at once…”

Cissy, the sole surviving Victor from District Nine, took one of his hands in both of hers.
She had won the 68th Hunger Games by virtue of being the Tribute to last longest in an Arena where the only source of food was the parcels from the sponsors in the Capitol, outlasting the Careers when even that source of food had been taken away from them.

Her own long dark hair had been reduced to short layer of regrowth similar to Johanna's.

“I've been looking forward to meeting you, Mikhail,” she offered softly, a genuine smile gracing her pretty features as she brought free hand up to rub self-consciously at the back of her neck. “After they figured out that we didn't know anything about the Rebellion we were restricted to our apartments in the Training Centre and, given our poor health, there wasn’t much else we could do but watch the broadcasts from the Rebels and the Capitol.”

He noticed idly that she had had all of her fingernails torn out and a quick glance around the group confirmed that most of the other Victors had suffered the same treatment, only Johanna, Annie, Peeta and Enobaria having been spared this particular method of torture.

“You're a remarkable young man,” Cissy continued. “Not to mention very well spoken.”

“...And brave,” Atam added nervously, causing Mikhail to flush uncomfortably even as Johanna shot him a smugly proud look. “P-Personally I f-f-found you to b-be more inspi-inspiring than K-Katniss. N-Not m-m-man y-many people w-would have carried on f-f-fighting the w-way you did, n-not after everyth-everyth...th-that happened t-to y-you so...th-thank y-y-y—you…”

Mikhail huffed awkwardly.

“Um...you're welcome? I guess…”

“Mikhail?” Cressida called out suddenly, prompting several of the Victors conversing with each other to glare at her. “Could you try that again but make it sound less like a question?”

Mikhail snorted.

“You should know me better than that by now, Cressida,” he announced calmly before turning his back on her to shake the hand being extended to him by Atam, carefully avoiding the strange brace which was holding the Victors wrist in place. “It was nice to meet you.”

He felt like a fool for ending their conversation like that but he couldn't think of anything better to say, given the circumstances, although neither Atam or Cissy seemed to mind.

Lowell, the sole surviving Victor from District Ten, approached him next to shake his hand.

His gaze was haunted in a way that Mikhail was painfully familiar with; he'd seen it in the mirror whilst he'd been recovering in District Thirteen from his physical and mental wounds.

Rhett, the sole surviving Victor from District Six, although he had the added complication of being a recovering Morphling addict; he'd been forced to go “cold turkey” by the people in charge of torturing the Victors, apparently, which hadn't helped as his body had become so dependent on the drug that he literally needed it to function and now the doctors from District Thirteen were determined to keep him off of the drug and get him healthy again.

“Sorry about the shaking,” he mumbled, nodding to his hand as it trembled in Mikhail’s strong grip. “It hasn't stopped shaking since I missed my first hit but it's getting better.”

Mikhail honestly didn't know what to say to that and so instead he gave Rhett’s hand a gentle squeeze before releasing it, silently reassuring him that the shaking wasn't an issue.
Whilst the others seemed to have had their hair removed with clippers giving it a reasonably even appearance, Bluebell, the only surviving Victor from District Five, had obviously been attacked by a pair of scissors; her light brown hair hung in clumps of different lengths, the longer sections just touching her chin whilst the shortest bits revealed stitches in her scalp.

“I'm glad you found someone to care for you, Jo,” she murmured whilst tucking her hand into the crook of Rhett's arm, guiding him towards a chair. “You deserve some happiness.”

“She seems…”

“Nice,” Johanna supplied the simple word for him. “She's always been like that. Don't know how, given how pretty she is and how popular she was on the circuit, but she is just…nice…”

He could see that in the way she was looking after Rhett.

They were approached by the four surviving Victors of District Two next, the former Careers sticking close together and helping each other, particularly Gannicus, when it was needed.

Gannicus had been wounded during the bloodbath of the 58th Hunger Games and had been abandoned by his fellow Careers, left to die in agony but he had managed to survive long enough to receive the medicine he’d needed to save his life, allowing him to lie in wait for the finale of his Games at which point he'd taken out the boy who had believed he'd won.

He'd been left with permanent nerve damage which had been aggravated by the torture he'd suffered, leaving him wheelchair bound for the time being just like Finnick and Beetee.

Mikhail could tell that Kol, Victor of the infamous 69th Hunger Games, wasn't really there.

His mind had been fragile following his Games, one of the most horrific in recent memory which had included a Tribute that Kol had eventually killed to win going mad and resorting to cannibalism in order to survive, harvesting from the bodies before they were collected.

It was one of the years which had never been rebroadcast, not even just the highlights.

“You're one tough son of a bitch, you know?” Gannicus muttered as he offered his hand which trembled almost violently to Mikhail who, startled by the somewhat backhanded compliment, took a fraction longer to respond than was socially acceptable. “Seriously. I mean it. I always thought you guys from Eight were a bunch of pathetic little pansies but boy was I wrong; if even half of the stuff they say about you is true then you're one of the toughest bastards I've ever met and I'm real glad I never had to face you inside the Arena.”

Johanna snorted.

“Coming from someone from District Two that's a compliment,” she informed him, smirking down at the wheelchair bound Victor who responded with a somewhat feral grin of his own. “And for your information, Nic, those stupid promotional broadcasts only she the half of it.”

Nerilla, who had been the one pushing Gannicus’ wheelchair but was now focused mostly on keeping a comforting arm around Kol’s waist, shorted softly, shooting him an equally feral smile which revealed the fact that she was missing a worrying number of her teeth.

“You have good taste, Johanna,” she murmured, her words a little bit distorted even as she chuckled teasingly. “Or perhaps should that be; Mikhail, you have truly questionable taste.”

Nerilla was the Victor that people had always compared Katniss to given that she was the only Victor to choose a bow as her weapon, killing from a distance with skill and precision.
“Probably a bit of both,” Mikhail responded with a deep chuckle, wincing playfully as Johanna huffed and jabbed him in the ribs. “Oh, come on, you know you were thinking it.”

“Doesn’t mean I was going to say it,” Johanna snapped at him, somewhat playfully but also somewhat seriously, before turning to face Enobaria. “You’re awfully quiet, Sharp-Tooth.”

It took every ounce of his resolve not to flinch when the Victor in question flashed her deadly fangs towards them, the gold encasing the surgically altered teeth glinting brightly.

That… that was seriously unnerving…

“What is there to say, Jo-Jo?”

Johanna scowled at the older woman.

“Well, you could start by explaining how you managed to survive?” she suggested tightly and Mikhail noticed out of the corner of his eyes that the cameras were moving closer so as to best catch this particular meeting. “I mean, you were basically the poster girl for President Snow and the Capitol during the Rebellion weren’t you? Sure, they used Peeta to get to Katniss and I had to do that stupid photoshoot with a gun aimed at my head but you, you were crowned the Victor of the 75th Hunger Games and you lapped it up, didn’t you? I never heard you bring tortured with the rest of us. How come President Coin let you live?”

“Well, it probably has something to do with the fact that I was the one to actually capture President Snow,” Enobaria answered stiffly, her face a blank mask even as several people reacted with surprise, Johanna included. “Managed to resist the urge to slip his throat long enough to hand him over and everything. What? Don’t tell me you bought the District Two loyal to the Capitol until the end act, Mason. You were all doing an excellent job of pissing Snow off but someone needed to be in a position to watch him, to, oh I don’t know, listen out for any useful tidbits like the fact that District Thirteen was about to be bombed and feed that information to Peeta Mellark do that he could warn his precious little girlfriend?”

“You…” Johanna mumbled, stunned, before scoffing. “No. You’re lying to save your skin.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Peeta murmured, one of the cameras spinning around to focus on the young Victor was stood between Katniss, mostly recovered from her wounds, and Haymitch. “She was one who told me to warn District Thirteen about the oncoming attack.”

“Huh.”

Sensing that Johanna was still processing the information she’d just been given Mikhail stepped forwards, offering his hand to the Victor he had been truly terrified of as a child.

“In that case, it’s a pleasure to meet another soldier of the Rebellion,” he announced clearly, spotting Cressida doing a funny sort of happy dance as they shook hands. “Although, given that your teeth have terrified me for years I have to ask; your choice or President Snows?”

“I don’t know if it was Snows idea but it certainly wasn’t mine,” Enobaria chuckled in response, curling her tongue awkwardly around her top front teeth. “Have you any idea how hard it is to eat when your teeth are shaped like points? And I was forever biting through my lips or my tongue until I got used to them. And no, before any of you ask, I won’t be keeping them and have already made an appointment to get them returned to normal.”

“I won’t be able to call you Sharp-Tooth anymore,” Johanna complained with a seemingly genuine frown as she pictured the future. “No, wait, I can call you Fangless. That’s fine.”
Rather than becoming insulted as everyone expected Enobaria merely smirked.

“You can try…”

Ilythia, of District Four, had found a shawl somewhere and had fashioned it into a turban to hide her shorn hair and, given that she’d used her beauty to seduce her way through her opponents during the 55th Hunger Games it wasn’t surprising to learn how vain she was.

It was also pretty clear that she couldn’t stand Annie and so, given how well he got on with young woman, Mikhail was perfectly happy to keep his distance from the pouting Victor.

Persephone, Gloss’ wife in everything but the legal sense, was nothing like he was expecting but at the same time exactly what he was expecting; she was well-mannered, polite and despite being so very, very pregnant moved with an effortless grace born of years of study.

And yet underneath the smile which seemed to be permanently fixed on her pretty face there was an air of solemnity, of sorrow and grief, which spoke of the pain she had suffered.

Gloss was, understandably, rather protective of her.

He tried to keep her within the safety of his arms, either wrapped around her shoulders or her waist, but she was determined to give every single person in the room a long, tight hug.

Mikhail included.

“I don’t really…” he attempted to protest before finding himself with an armful of pregnant Victor, her bulbous belly pressed so tightly against his that he felt it when the baby gave what he imagined must have been quite a sharp kick. “Ugh! That was…I felt it…that’s…”

“Sorry,” Persephone apologised, pulling back from him. “He’s been doing that a lot since we were rescued. He was never very active before then. It’s like he knows everything’s alright.”

“He?” Johanna asked. “You’re having a boy?”

“Yes,” Persephone responded with her biggest smile yet. “Any day now, in fact.”

Johanna seemed about as uncomfortable as Mikhail was when she was pulled into her own tight hug by the beaming young woman whose once distinct purple hair had been shorn off.

“Congratulations.”

They had saved Johanna’s fellow District Seven Victors for last.

Phoebe, Victor of the 43rd Hunger Games, was now the second oldest surviving Victor behind Beetee and the resemblance between her and Johanna was striking; their thick hair was the same dark brown, sticking up in unruly tufts as it grew back, their features were angular and their noses slightly pointed whilst their dark brown eyes were almost identical.

In fact the only major difference between them, other than the fact that Phoebe’s lips had an artificially plump appearance thanks to her years spent as a Victor, was their height; Phoebe was significantly shorter than Johanna and, indeed, everyone else in the room.

Summer, Victor of the 56th Hunger Games, shared the same thick, dark hair as the other two surviving Victors but there the physical similarities ended; her jawline was impossibly square, her lips stretched thin as though to accommodate this, and she was tall and willowy.
Her eyes were the biggest difference, however, given that whilst her left eye was the same warm brown he had begun to associate with District Seven the right eye was a pale blue.

It was a little bit unnerving to say the least.

No doubt the Capitol had loved it.

“Heterochromia,” she announced, offering him a broad smile as she gestured to her eyes with a hand which was missing all of its fingernails, just like the rest of the Victors who had survived the Purge. “That's what they call it when you're born with eyes that are different colours, or so I'm told. My dads are the same although admittedly not quite so distinctly different; dark brown in one eye and light brown in the other. Blue comes from my mum.”

“Right…”

“But we're not here to talk about my eyes,” she pressed on cheerfully, extending her hand for him to shake. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Mikhail. You're a very brave young man.”

“So they tell me,” Mikhail responded, letting out a wry chuckle as he shook Phoebe’s hand when it was offered. “Personally I don't think I'm any braver than the other people in this room. If I were to describe myself I'd have to go with lucky, very lucky, and a little bit crazy.”

“Sounds like you'll be well matched with Johanna, then,” Phoebe commented, her voice surprisingly deep for such a small woman. “Given how she's always been a little bit crazy.”

“Like you're one to talk,” Johanna snorted, running her fingers through her short hair. “Who was it who used to sleepwalk out of her house in the Victor Village to throw axes at a tree?”

Phoebe chuckled.

“Me,” she confirmed without hesitation. “I'm glad to see you looking so well, Johanna.”

“You too,” Johanna responded, her usual gruff manner surprisingly absent as she catalogued the scars and healing wounds on the two Victors. “I'm sorry they didn't get you out earlier.”

“I'm not,” Phoebe announced succinctly, surprising Mikhail, Johanna and the various others listening in to their conversation. “They only physically tortured us for a couple of weeks. Once they figured out we didn't know anything they executed the older Victors, the ones that wouldn't be of any further use in their grand scheme, and locked us on our respective floors and focused their attention on you, Annie Cresta, the Mellark boy and Persephone.”


“She was Snows favourite,” Summer answered regretfully, also glancing at the young woman who had been convinced to take a seat. “More than half of her appointments were with him, you know, and people in the Districts thought she was his Mistress willingly.”

“And for that he tortured her?”

“No, he tortured her because he found out about her and Gloss,” Summer explained simply. “She had to admit she was pregnant and they tested the babies DNA. He was…furious…”

“We were tortured for information,” Johanna agreed. “And to punish us for our involvement in the Rebellion. Persephone was tortured because she humiliated him by falling in love.”

There were no Victors left for him to meet from District Eleven, just as there were none left from
his own District; Woof, Cecelia, Chaff and Seeder had all fallen victim to the 75th Hunger Games whilst Margot, Victor of the First Quarter Quell, hadn’t survived the Purge.

Speaking of Margot, a much respected woman by the sounds of it, brought them back onto the subject of the older generation of Victors who had been dragged from their homes by mobs of Peacekeepers, brought to the Capitol and tortured before being brutally executed.

Obsidian spoke of Peony, Victor of the 10th Hunger Games, who had apparently had several choice words for the Peacekeepers who had come to arrest the Mentors, so much so that a couple of the newer recruits had been unwilling to manhandle her, taking Obsidian instead.

“You should have heard what she called the one who was sent to execute her,” he chuckled sadly, brushing away the tears threatening to fall. “She was utterly spectacular to the end...”

“Ivory was unconscious when they came to...” Gannicus admitted softly, breaking off with a sudden hiss as his hands flew to his right thigh, massaging the flesh. “Sorry. Muscle spasm.”

“What happened to Mason?”

Phoebe’s sudden question took them all by surprise, none more so than Bluebell who let out a sharp gasp from where she was helping Rhett drink a glass of water without spilling it.

“He was younger than me, won the 46th Hunger Games, so why did they kill him?”

“Technically they didn’t,” Bluebell answered softly, carefully placing the glass on one of the many sideboards in the large room as she spoke of her fellow District Five Victor. “He...they broke something inside of him when they tortured us. He stopped eating. Stopped talking.”

Mikhail had an awful feeling where this was going.

“He hung himself,” Bluebell pressed on, tears welling up her eyes. “They were very angry.”

Several voices blended together, murmuring sympathetic apologies.

“What about Lyme?” Katniss spoke up with a frown. “Why isn’t she here?”

“She was killed during the last of the fighting.”

“Oh.”

Silence fell, dark and heavy and sombre, as they remembered the Victor of the 52nd Hunger Games and, indeed, the rest of the friends that they had lost both recently and in the past.

“Well, this got real depressing real fast,” Mikhail found himself announcing, breaking the silence like a knife. “Who wants to raid President Snow’s liquor cabinet and toast the dead?”

Cressida attempted to protest,

“Mikhail, I don't think…”

“It's what my friends and I did whilst we watched the opening of the Quarter Quell,” he continued calmly, talking over the Capitol woman who looked unusually panicked. “Felyx, and we never asked how, managed to acquire two bottles of hard liquor that had been intended for our Peacekeepers in District Eight and we drank a toast for our fallen Victors.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea.”
Surprisingly it wasn't Haymitch, a known alcoholic, who voiced their agreement.

It was Annie.

“Of course Persephone and myself shan't be able to partake,” the quiet Victor continued, resting a hand on the soft swell of her stomach. “But don’t you think it's a wonderful way to remember our friends? And to get back at President Snow, if only in a pathetic little way?”

And that was how, with the other Victors agreeing one by one, Mikhail found himself breaking the lock on the wine cellar whilst ignoring the shocked exclamations of the District Thirteen soldier who had been assigned to guard it, loading up a wooden crate with as many differently shaped bottles as it could hold before carrying it back to the conference room.

He repeated the trip five more times.

They had no glasses and so drank straight from the bottles, passing them round as they toasted the fallen, starting with Ruby Martinson of District One, Victor of the 1st Hunger Games, and wracking their brains in order to name each and every Victor there had been.

By the time President Coin, summoned by the soldier he had ignored, burst into the room they were all down a bottle of alcohol and had only reached Gwyneth Tucker of District Nine, Victor of the 36th Hunger Games, and therefore couldn't care less about her anger.

It was a good afternoon…night…early morning…

What little he could remember of it anyway…

~ * ~ * ~

As was to be expected there was a great deal of spectacle surrounding the trial of Panem's former President with the official proceedings being broadcast live throughout the country.

Alongside him stood his staff and advisors, also on trial for their part in the Hunger Games.

In no time at all the trials came to their inevitable conclusion…

Guilty.

A great cheer rang out throughout the nation when Coriolanus Snow was sentenced to death for his numerous crimes, including but not limited to having a direct hand in the orchestration of the Hunger Games and the subsequent murders of those Reaped, totalling in 1,742 innocent victims including those who were Reaped a second time for the last Quell.

Predictably his staff and advisors received the same sentence.

Surprisingly, however, mercy was granted to the surviving stylists, Escorts and the Host of the Hunger Games himself, Caesar Flickerman, after it was concluded that they had only behaved as they had in order to keep themselves and their families safe from Snow’s wrath.

Mikhail and Johanna celebrated the news by retiring early for the evening with another couple of bottles appropriated from Snow’s wine cellar and they weren't the only ones.

In fact by the sounds of things they were relatively tame.

A concerned soldier knocked on the door of the room Annie and Finnick had been given after hearing what sounded like someone being murdered only to find them…well…
Gloss and Persephone had somehow broken their bed despite her being so very pregnant and several of the others spent the night debauching some of the District Thirteen soldiers.

Morning came all too soon, of course, and word reached them of a private meeting with President Coin which all of the surviving Victors were expected to attend after breakfast.

The message also stated very clearly that Mikhail was not required to attend.

"It's almost as though she doesn't like me," he snorted loudly with a shake of his head, his hands busy lacing up one of his heavy boots. “I can't think what I've done to upset her.”

Johanna cackled, rubbing a towel over her wet hair in an effort to dry it after her shower.

“No, I can't think what you might have done,” she agreed sarcastically. “Although I have a feeling that if she didn't have to invite me as a Victor that I'd have been excluded as well.”

“Probably,” Mikhail agreed, blousing his black trousers as he had been told to whilst wearing the District Thirteen combat uniform, something that he was still required to do apparently. “It's fine. I might head out and do a bit of exploring now that things aren't, you know, blowing up. Might even try to hook up with Felyx, see how he's doing, have a drink.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Johanna agreed, throwing the towel into the en suite, not really caring where or how it landed. “And significantly more fun than a boring old meeting…”

And so when they finally left their room, both of them dressed appropriately for the day ahead, they parted ways but only after entering into a little war of who could away the others ass harder, dancing around each other to try and avoid the playfully stinging blows.

Strolling out of the building, offering a cheerful wave as he passed Annie and Finnick who were no doubt on their way to the same meeting as Johanna, he breezed past the guards who gave him a rather startled look and headed into the city he had helped to conquer.

Amazingly a lot of the information points had remained intact within the City Circle and so he was able to use the detailed maps they displayed to navigate his way around, taking in the sights as though he was nothing more than a tourist visiting the Capitol on holiday.

Not that he or anyone from the Districts had ever taken a holiday in their lives.

He began by visiting the Training Centre which, if the dozens of people milling around in the ridiculously lavish foyer was any indication, had been turned into accommodation for the hundreds of District Rebels who had participated in the siege, not including the wounded.

Where the soldiers from District Thirteen were being housed he neither knew nor cared.

Piles of broken glass, fragments of concrete and the remains of what had once been furniture or doors were located throughout the large atrium which was missing its glass roof; evidence of the damage done during the raid to rescue Peeta, Annie and Johanna.

He also noticed several large bloodstains over near one of the walls.

“What happened there?” he enquired of a woman with pitch black skin. “The bloodstains?”

“It's Peacekeeper blood,” she answered, her voice pitched a lot higher than he had been expecting. “They were about to execute someone, the Victors maybe, I don't know for sure. All I know is that before they could pull the trigger our guys arrived and took them all out.”
“Huh.”

“Blood won't come out now,” she continued with a shrug, tucking one of the hundreds of tiny braids which made up her hair behind her ear. “We've tried getting rid of it but it was left too long and it's soaked into their fancy floor so now it'll probably be there forever.”

Mikhail grunted in response, moving to stand in the centre of the room and tilting his head back so far that his neck began to protest in order to take in the sight of the atrium with its odd curving walkways and glass lifts which zoomed up and down without making a sound.

“Are any areas of the building off limits?”

“Nope,” she responded, speaking loudly enough to cover the distance now between them. “Some haven't even been touched yet, like the Training Rooms, so feel free to wander.”

“Thanks.”

So Mikhail did just that.

He knew this building wasn't the same as when Adya had resided in it, the entire thing having been updated and improved in honour of the Third Quarter Quell, but that didn't stop the bottom dropping out his stomach when he reached the Training Rooms and came face to face with the obstacles and tasks his poor friend would have been forced to master.

The room was devoid of people.

Supplies were strewn around the room, weapons abandoned on the practise areas, and there was even a table of what had once been food, the chairs pulled out so odd angles.

He doubted this room had even been touched since the 75th Hunger Games had begun.

A cold shiver ran down the length of his spine.

This was a room of ghosts.

Exiting the Training Rooms he followed the sounds of activity down a further level, a chill filling the air which he now knew to mean they were underground, and found a team of workers dismantling a row of temporary cages whilst another group were packing up…

“…fuck…”

This was where they'd been tortured.

Annie.

Peeta.

Johanna.

And all the other Victors who had been held in captivity.

This was the place that haunted Johanna's nightmares, this painfully bright room with its medical equipment and its metal tables and it's cables and it's knives and it's carefully designed floor, angled ever so slightly towards a large drain so as to wash away the blood.

“If you're going to be sick please go somewhere else,” a sharp voice interrupted his reeling thoughts, drawing his attention to the speaker who appeared to be supervising the removal of the
cages and ego was currently supporting one of the sections being cut away. “Please. It's hard
eough to work down here without the smell of fresh vomit to contend with.”

Mikhail wasn't ashamed of how quickly he obeyed him, all but sprinting from the room with a
hand pressed over his mouth as his mind helpfully created imagines images of his lover and
friends screaming inside those tiny cages or strapped to the metal desk as someone…

“…*fuck*…”

He barely made it to a potted plant beside the stairs in the atrium before losing control of his
stomach, heaving up what he'd had for breakfast as he continued to swear to himself.

It was far too easy for him to imagine the scenarios which must have played out inside those
rooms, his own memories giving his mind all it needed to create unwanted images for him.

“Um…” a soft voice sounded from beside him just as a small, cool hand touched the back of his
neck. “Are you…are you all right, mister? Do you want me to fetch one of the medics?”

“No, I'll be fine in a minute…” he responded, spitting into the potted plant before wiping the back
of his hand over his mouth. “Sorry. Just…memories and…knowing what…never mind…”

“It's ok. Lots of people are a bit messed up right now,” the soft voice continued, another gentle
hand joining the first and helping him to move so that he was sitting with his back resting against
the wall. “Tayra? Will you get rid of that for me? Thanks. Want some water?”

It took him a moment to realise the last question had been for him.

“Yes. Please.”

He was slightly surprised to be handed a glass bottle, the clip top already released and clinking
lightly against the neck of the bottle, rather than a canteen but he took it gratefully, gulping down
almost a third of its contents in an effort to get rid of the foul aftertaste.

“Do I know you?” his young helper enquired when he finally turned his head to look at her whilst
passing back the bottle, her incredibly freckled face marred with a frown. “You look oddly
familiar but I can't quote figure out...what District are you from? I'm from Four.”

“Eight.”

“Eight? Wait…” she gasped suddenly, her vivid green eyes going wide with shock. “You're the
_Hero of District Eight!_ That's why I recognised you! We watched all your broadcasts!”

He couldn't stop himself from grimacing slightly even as he offered her a stiff nod.

“I can't believe it's really _you_!” she gasped so loudly that almost everyone in the atrium turned to
look at them. “You're the reason we're here, my friends and I. We didn't really feel like the
Mockingjay understood us, given that she was a Victor, but you…you're _just like us!”_

Much to his displeasure a crowd began to form around them.

“Is that…?”

“It is…”

“The _Hero of District Eight_…”

Mikhail rolled his eyes, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth once more before pushing
himself to his feet so that he didn't feel quite so vulnerable in front of the crowd.

“Just Mikhail, please,” he requested awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck as he looked around at the awestruck faces. “Honestly, I'm no Hero – I'm just a guy from District Eight.”

A murmur of disagreement sounded.

“No, you are a hero,” someone, a man with a thick grey beard and very little hair on the top of his head, contradicted him. “You're our hero; the people's hero. Now, shake my hand.”

Mikhail knew it was a mistake the moment he placed his hand into the one offered to him.

He lost track of how many hands were thrust into his own, his hand going numb from the amount of times it had been shaken up and down, and how many firm hugs he received.

It was awkward.

He was uncomfortable.

They truly seemed to believe in the version of him which had been created by the propo’s and no matter how many times he protested that he was just an ordinary man they refused to stop; refused to refer to him as anything but a Hero or to stop thanking him for his part.

It was…embarrassing.

He wasn't a hero.

He wasn't...was he?

“What's going on here?”

The crisp familiar voice of Commander Paylor broke the general hubbub of the crowd.

She, along with her protection detail, had just exited one of the lifts after having watched the scene taking place below them all the way down and were understandably curious to find out what all of the fuss was about given that the atrium was normally a quiet place.

Moving as one the crowd parted, allowing Paylor to stride forwards.

“...Mikhail?”

“Hey, Commander Paylor,” he responded with an awkward chuckle. “Long time no see.”

“I thought you were being house with the Victors in the Presidential Mansion.”

“Oh, I am,” Mikhail confirmed, shaking out his numb hand. “But they're having a Victors Only meeting today so I decided to go for a bit of a wander and then...well...this happened.”

The crowd seemed to be torn about who they should be staring at following the group’s arrival their gaze flickering back and forth between the Hero of District Eight and the woman who had led the ground troops into the Capitol with way too much admiration in their eyes.

“Actually I was going to try and find you,” Mikhail admitted, moving to stand a couple of paces away from the capable woman. “Well, not you, exactly. Felyx. Thought, if you were free, we could have a bit of a catch-up. I still don't know what happened after I left Eight...”

“Trust me, you didn't miss out on much,” Felyx chuckled, grinning broadly before adopting more
serious appearance than Mikhail ever seen him wear. “And as much as I'd love to spend the day with you, Mikhail, Commander Paylor is required at a meeting so I have to…”

“Go on,” Paylor interrupted him with a calm wave of her hand. “The others can worry about my protection without you for one day, Felyx. You deserve a day off. Have a good time.”

And so, with Commander Paylor's blessing, the two friends fled the crowd who were still clamouring to get a closer look at the Hero of District Eight and spent the rest of the day wandering around the Capitol sharing tales of what had happened since they’d parted ways.

He'd known that the fighting in District Eight had lasted for another couple of months after he'd been evacuated to District Thirteen but he hadn't realised that the fighting had only continued to intensify, the Rebels responding to the attack on the hospital by becoming angrier than they had ever had been before, or that by the time the Peacekeepers had been recalled to protect the Capitol the Rebels had actually been taking the upper hand, pressing further into the Peacekeeper held land more and more with each passing day and actually managing to cause more casualties than they received, their guerrilla tactics saving the day.

“And they never found the forest camps,” Felyx announced proudly as they parted to allow an elderly rebel carrying a crate of fresh fruit to pass between them. “So all of our non-combatants survived the war, apart from those that were lost during the hospital bombing.”

“Really? That's great news.”

A sudden thought struck him.

If the camps had remained safe then that meant…

“I'm not the only one left,” he gasped, his wife eyes locking with Felyx's which shone with confusion. “I thought…I thought I was alone but…my Aunt Zoya and my cousins…they were in one of the forest camps so that means…Alexei, Piotr and Ivan…I'm not the only one left…”

And that, finding out that he had family left after everything he'd been through?

That was quite possibly the best feeling the world, barring only the love he felt for Johanna.

Or the love he still felt for Juno even though she was no longer alive.

Returning to the Presidential Mansion, eager to share his news with his friends, he found out that the meeting had been over with for some time but that most of the Victors had retired for the remainder of the day, requesting that they remain completely undisturbed.

Even Finnick and Annie had left word that they didn’t want to be disturbed.

So, with no one else to share his news with first, he went in search of Johanna.

“Hey,” he greeted as he slipped into their room, finding the young woman from District Seven reclining against the mountain of pillows in her underwear. “How was the meeting?”

“It was…productive…”

“Oh?” he murmured, bending down to unlace his boots. “In what way?”

“We took a vote on whether or not we should hold a final Hunger Games.”

He froze, his stomach clenching painfully as he met her gaze.
“…what?”

“President Coin asked us to decide whether or not there should be a final Hunger Games,” Johanna answered, her voice emotionless. “Using the children of those who wronged us.”

The boot he had succeeded in removing dropped from his numb fingers with a loud thud.

“…a final Hunger Games?” he repeated in disbelief. “With children of the Capitol?”

“Yes.”

“…what was the final vote?”

Johanna met his gaze calmly, still reclining back against the pillows as she answered,

“12-11 in favour so, yes, it’s happening.”

Mikhail couldn't think of anything more horrific than having another Hunger Games.

Wasn't this Rebellion supposed to have brought an end to them?

“…what did you vote?”

“I voted Yes,” she answered, obviously challenging him to argue with her as she finally pushed herself up into a seated position on the bed, squaring her shoulders firmly. “As did Obsidian, Enobaria, Kol, Gannicus, Nerilla, Ilythia, Rhett, Summer, Lowell, Katniss and Haymitch. Persephone, Gloss, Beetee, Atam, Annie, Finnick, Bluebell, Phoebe, Maybelle, Cissy and Peeta all voted No. Are you…are you trying to tell me that you wouldn’t have voted in favour? After everything that’s happened, to you, to your family, to your District…”

“No,” Mikhail murmured thickly. “I would have said No. There’s been enough death.”

Reaching down he righted the boot he had removed, holding it still as he shoved his foot back inside it and laced it up enough to keep it from falling off as he headed for the door.

“Mikhail?” Johanna called out as he turned his back on her. “Mikhail, I thought you would…”

“I know what you thought,” he interrupted her, pulling the door open with more force than was strictly necessary. “But you were wrong. I thought…I thought we believed in the same thing. That the Hunger Games had to end. But…I…I can’t be here right now…I just…I can’t…”

He ended up spending a miserable night on the couch in Peeta’s room.

Not at all the ending he had envisioned for such a wonderful day…

~ * ~ *

“Welcome to the new Panem.”

Standing beside Felyx who in turn was stood beside if a fraction behind Commander Paylor on the balcony overlooking the terrifyingly crowded Avenue of the Tributes, President Coin standing only a couple of metres in front of them as she gave her speech to the masses, Mikhail couldn’t stop himself from fussing with the uncomfortable collar of his dark jacket.

Commander Paylor had chosen his outfit herself, along with everyone else who was acting as her personal guard for this auspicious occasion; the execution of one Coriolanus Snow.
It was mercifully simple compared to some of the others he had seen amongst the crowd.

Plain grey trousers made of a lightweight yet warm fabric, designed to make his legs look even longer than they actually were, and a collarless grey shirt, over which he wore a jacket made of a black velvet like fabric which was somehow darker at the shoulders and cuffs.

The jacket had two pockets, one of which had come with a discreet knife already tuck into it, and was fastened snugly about his torso by three pairs of slightly oversized black buttons.

“Today, on the Avenue of the tributes, all of Panem, a free Panem, will watch more than a mere spectacle,” President Coin continued calmly with her pre-prepared speech, the wind catching in her light grey cape as she spread her arms wide, fluttering almost wildly as her shoulder length grey hair. “We are gathered to witness an historic moment of justice.”

He could see Johanna from where he was stood on the balcony and, in spite of how hard he tried to keep his attention focused on either the current or the former President of Panem, his gaze kept being drawn back to where she stood alongside her fellow surviving Victors.

It had been decided to dress them as though they were attending a funeral, their clothes styled as per their Districts but made up of various shades of grey, navy blue and black.

Their expressions were mixed, however, and not exactly what you would find at a funeral.

Anticipation.

Regret.

Pain.

Fear.

Hunger.

Excitement.

Satisfaction.

“Today, the greatest friend to the revolution will fire the shot to end all wars.”

Katniss had, quite predictably, been given a grand entrance to add to the spectacle of the day and Mikhail had fought back an unimpressed snort as he’d watched her stride along the Avenue of the Tributes in her full Mockingjay regalia, her face so heavily made up that she almost didn’t look like herself and leading a sea of Rebels as though they were her army.

“May her arrow signify the end of tyranny and the beginning of a new era.

“Could she drag this out any more?” Mikhail huffed, his fingers beginning to ache from the cold where they were clasped firmly together behind his back. “I mean, seriously, hurry up.”

Felyx snorted, earning both of them a glare from Commander Paylor.

“Mockingjay, may your aim be as true as your heart is pure.”

Moving slowly, her movements automatic and precise, Katniss withdrew an arrow from the quiver strapped to her back and drew back the string, the arrow nocked and ready to fire.
Cressida, who had predictably been chosen to broadcast the event live, shifted with anticipation as Katniss lined her arrow up with Snow’s heart as he stood bound to a post.

A second past.

Then two.

Then ten.

And just when Mikhail thought she was going to chicken out of the duty which had been asked of her she finally moved, altering her aim just a little bit and letting the arrow fly.

Just as Coin had requested the arrow flew true, striking its target with deadly precision.

The only problem was that she hadn’t been aiming at former President, Coriolanus Snow.

She had been aiming at the current President, Alma Coin.

Chaos erupted as the cold-hearted woman let out a shocked gasp, falling to her knees briefly before tumbling off of the balcony to land on the empty lower balcony with a thud.

“...did she just...?”

Mikhail was moving before he even made the conscious decision to do so, sprinting forwards and jumping off of the balcony onto the lower balcony where Coin’s body lay.

He didn't stop there, however, jumping down to the ground which was now swarming with countless angry Rebels who were determined to end the life of Coriolanus Snow that day.

“Johanna?”

Given that he was one of the tallest people there he could see over the top of the crowd, giving him an unrestricted view of what they were doing to the now unconscious or possibly already dead body of their former President but he only had eyes for the woman he loved.

He finally can't sight of the Victors, struggling to make their way out of the writhing crowd.

Katniss was nowhere to be seen.

“Mikhail!” Annie cried out, her voice thick with panic. “I can't move Finnick's wheelchair!”

Abandoning his search for Johanna, if only temporarily, he forced his way through the crowd to where Annie was struggling with Finnick's chair, unable to find a way through the people.

He hoped Johanna was ok.

He was still mad at her, yes, but he didn't want the last thing he'd ever said to her to be…

“Annie!” he called out to the panicking young woman. “I'll clear you a path.”

Using his strength and height to his advantage he literally moved people out of the way, creating a gap big enough for the wheelchair and, unknown to him, most of the other Victors who had tagged along behind his friends as they too had been struggling to escape.

Johanna was not among them.

Once he’d gotten the Victors who’d needed his assistance to safety he turned and headed back into
the crush of celebrating Rebels, grimacing as he saw what remained of Snow’s body being carried aloft to a suitable place where it could be strung up for everyone to see.

“Mikhail?”

His head snapped across to the right, his eyes searching the crowd for the owner of the voice he had only just heard over the celebrations but finding no sign of her anywhere.

“Johanna?”

A gloved hand shot up into the air, seeming to appear out of the top of someone's head.

“Johanna?”

The hand beckoned to him, somehow managing to make the action seem impatient.

He chuckled to himself.

Yup.

That was Johanna.

Forcing his way through the crowd once more, at one point actually picking someone up and depositing them back down once he'd moved past where they had been blocking his way, and then finally there she was, standing in front of him with her hand still held up in the air.

Someone jostled her from behind, sending her stumbling forwards into his waiting arms.

“Hey.”

Her arm came down to hang loosely around the back of his neck, her other hand ending up trapped between the two of them with the palm pressed directly over his thundering heart.

“Hey.”

“…you ok?”

She nodded, gazing up at him as everything happening around the world faded away.

“…you still mad at me?”

He should be.

The facts behind their argument hadn't changed although it was unlikely that there would still be a final Hunger Games now that President Alma Coin, the woman behind it, was dead.

“No.”

Johanna let out a sigh of relief, dropping her head forwards to rest against his shoulder as her body sagged towards him which caused him to tighten his arms around her trim waist.

“I can't believe she shot Coin instead,” she mumbled into his neck. “Why would she…”

“Probably had something to do with the fact that Coin was as crazy and corrupt as Snow,” Mikhail interrupted her, nuzzling at her short hair gently. “She just hid it behind her rules.”

A cheer echoed throughout the surrounding area as Snow’s body was finally hoisted up by his
ankles, his arms flailing around limply as they hauled him up on one of the flag poles.

“So…what do we do now?”

“Now?” Mikhail repeated softly, looking away from the morbid spectacle which had excited so many of the people surrounding them. “Now we do whatever the hell we want to do.”

She pulled back, grinning up at him.

“Sounds good to me.”

Their lips crashed together in a kiss filled with passion and hope, their bodies pressed together as they ignored everything going on around them in favour of drinking each other in.

They had no way of knowing what the future held.

They didn't even know what tomorrow would hold for them.

But they knew one important thing.

They were free.

~ THE END ~

A/N There will be an “Epilogue” to finish this story off properly but other than that it's done. Hope those of you who stuck along for the full ride enjoyed it. X
Waking to the familiar sounds of birds singing in the trees outside their bedroom window Mikhail stretched the kinks out of his back, something which was only getting worse with each passing year, and rolled over to face his wife…only to find her side of the bed empty.

It was rare for Johanna to rise before him, so much so that it had become a simple way of identifying the nights that she was plagued by nightmares of the Games and the Rebellion.

Letting out a deep sigh he pulled himself up into a sitting position, moving his legs so that they hung over the edge of the mattress, and used the heels of his palms to rub at his eyes.

Noises filtered through the open bedroom door; a pan being placed down upon the hob, the cutlery drawer rattling as it was closed, plates being laid at the kitchen table and laughter.

His children's laughter.

He smiled to himself, running his fingers through his messy hair which was now a mixture of various shades of grey and white, before rising and heading over to their shared wardrobe.

Some days he still couldn't believe how lucky they had been in the twenty years that had followed the Rebellion, twenty years to the day he realised as he caught sight of the outfits hanging up on the front of the wardrobe ready to be worn to the annual Commemoration.

Following the so called murder of President Alma Coin it had been ruled that Katniss was “mentally unstable” following the “difficult events of the previous years” and, rather than facing the death penalty, had been sent to live out the rest of her days in District Twelve.

Haymitch had gone with her, much to Johanna's annoyance although she'd never admit to anyone but Mikhail how much she missed the old drunk, and Peeta had followed soon after.

Their departure had been the first of many, sadly, with most of the surviving Victors returning to their home Districts in order to begin rebuilding their lives although some made the decision to travel somewhere new in order to give themselves a completely fresh start.

Mikhail had truly hated saying goodbye to Finnick and Annie, his closest friends barring Johanna, and even saying goodbye to Gloss had brought an unexpected lump to his throat.

They'd all stayed in contact over the years, thankfully, and visited each other regularly.

Heading into their en suite bathroom to take his morning shower Mikhail smiled to himself as he remembered the day Johanna had offered to return to District Eight with him if that was what he wanted whilst at the same time making it clear that she'd prefer to go home.

“There's nothing left in District Eight, not for me,” he'd told her, holding her close to his chest.

“Just painful memories. I don't think going home would be good for me, not really…”

“District Seven it is, then.”

He'd been just as surprised as everyone else at how quickly he'd settled in to the District which was so very different to the one he had grown up in, helping to rebuild the log cabins which made up the majority of the town that had been burned down by the Peacekeepers.
Grimacing as he somehow managed to get shampoo in both of his eyes he quickly leaned out of the large glass shower stall in order to grab a towel to wipe the suds out of his eyes.

He was always doing that, much to Johanna's continued amusement as it left his eyes horrifically bloodshot for a good few hours, particularly on days when something important was due to take place such as the morning of the first official Presidential Election at which Commander Paylor had been almost unanimously voted into office or their wedding day.

President Paylor had proven to be an excellent choice.

Her first official act had been to abolish the Hunger Games once and for all, ordering that memorials be built to remember all of the innocent lives that had been lost over the years.

She had then set about establishing a Government that would benefit all of Panem.

A Presidents term of office could last no longer than five years.

A Mayors term of office could last no longer than one year.

Both could, however, be re-elected should the people wish it.

In order to ensure that each District had “a voice” an official representative, voted for by the people of their District, would sit on the President Council to aid in the overall decision making, vote on important issues and make any issues personal to their District known.

This role could be taken by anyone, not just someone of “importance” and, just like the President, could only hold their position for a total of five years but could be voted in again.

The Capitol was also required to vote for a Mayor and an official representative.

Mikhail, much to his continued bemusement, had served as Mayor for District Seven twice and had been their official representative for the first five years of the new Government.

Several of the Victors, such as Finnick and Peeta, had ended up being voted in as well.

Exiting the shower he moved to the mirror, wiping away the condensation, and finished off his morning ablutions with a quick shave to remove his more white than grey beard and tame his hair back with a thorough combing following the simple towel drying he gave it.

Returning to the bedroom he couldn't stop himself from pausing in front of the shelves which were covered with framed photographs of their friends and family, ranging from group photographs taken at various weddings to intimidate family photos sent out as gifts.

Their most recent photographic gift sat front and centre of the top shelf in pride of place.

It was of Annie, Finnick, Peeta and Katniss at the latter’s home in District Twelve, their children gathered in front of them whilst Haymitch hovered at the edge of the frame.

He still couldn't believe how many children Finnick and Annie had ended up having together; Skipp was the eldest and the spitting image of his father, the twins Saylor and Reefe taking more after their mother whilst Coral, Tyden and Ariel were a perfect mix of the two Victors leaving their youngest Kelvin to be the odd one out taking after Annie's father.

His second favourite sat to its right, the photograph of his and Johanna's wedding day, whilst his absolute favourite photograph sat to its left; the one he'd taken of his three beautiful children when they visited the Odair's in District a Four and had gone swimming.
…or rather everyone else had gone swimming whilst he had mostly paddled, his swimming abilities never having improved much past the simple floating that Johanna had taught him.

He’d commissioned Peeta to turn the photograph into a stunning portrait on canvas for his fifteenth anniversary gift to Johanna earlier that year which now hung over their fireplace.

Tomas, their eldest son, was in the centre of the picture.

He was almost fifteen now, his birth coming only a couple of months after their wedding making it clear to all of their family and friends what finally pushed them to set a date.

Until that point they’d been perfectly happy to continue living in sin…

He was already almost as tall as Mikhail, taking after him physically although his facial features had definitely come from his mother as had his rather explosive temperament.

Kaya, his little princess, was twelve going on twenty-five.

In the picture she was tucked in close to her older brother’s side, his arm wrapped around her shoulders, and the smile positively lighting up her beautiful face was her Aunt Sasha’s.

Their youngest child, eight-year-old Alexei, was the spitting image of his mother.

He’d arrived early, dangerously so, and had always been small and prone to sickness.

It had worried them when he was younger but he had inherited every ounce of their determination, refusing to be cowed by the weaknesses he had been left with, and had refused to be treated any differently than their other children or his honorary cousins.

He was laughing in the picture, so wildly that his eyes were barely visible they were scrunched up so much, having just dumped sand down the back of his brother’s trunks.

Mikhail chuckled, recalling the outrage shrieks which had followed the camera flash.

The semi-playful fight which had followed had lasted for nearly half-an-hour, their honorary cousins joining in almost immediately, and had culminated with huge pile-up of bodies and foul smelling pieces of seaweed being stuffed into places that it really shouldn’t be stuffed.

Grabbing a clean pair of black boxer shorts from his underwear drawer he pulled them on, following up with an equally clean pair of socks, before moving across to his chosen outfit.

It was, according to his unexpected friend Tigris who had insisted on designing all of the outfits their family wore to their official engagements, a retro inspired smart/casual outfit.

A spear-point collar shirt, white with brown ticking, was the first layer he put on.

The sleeves were a fraction too long by design which required him to wear a pair of brown leather sleeve garters above his elbows in order to get the cuffs to hand around his wrists.

The cuffs were designed to be fastened by a pair of cufflinks rather than with a button and Tigris had, of course, supplied a pair; rhodium plated with green enamel raised cats eyes.

His trousers were of the same design she had tended to put him in when he was attending official business in the Capitol as District Seven’s representative so he was perfectly aware of the fact that he’d been needing a pair of elasticated braces to hold them up properly.
They were a chestnut brown colour with chalk stripes to add detail to the fabric, had a high-rise natural waist, turn-ups at the hems and twin pleats that allowed them to hang properly.

The braces he pulled out of his so called “bits and bobs” draw were a light taupe colour, not that that really mattered as they wouldn’t be seen underneath the waistcoat Tigris had sent.

He’d never worn a waistcoat until the former Stylist had begun dressing him but now they were a firm fixture of his wardrobe, both in the more formal situations as well as every day.

This particular waistcoat was made of the same soft fabric as his trousers, had six medium sized brown buttons, two working pockets, a watch chain button hole and a pointed hem.

A slightly darker brown silk tie completed his outfit.

“Not bad, old man,” he chuckled to himself as he studied his reflection in the full length mirror, tucking a wayward lock of hair back before tugging on the bottom of his waistcoat in order to get it to sit properly over his pudgy stomach. “Getting a bit of a spread though…”

Thanks to the hard work of the Government and the people of Panem food was readily available for anyone who wanted to purchase it or, in most cases, source it themselves.

Mikhail and Johanna had a vegetable garden which all of the family contributed to.

This regular access to good food was responsible for the softness of his stomach, for the rosy cheeks of his children and the soft curves of his wife’s body which he loved so much.

She was still strong, muscular in the way that only people who lived an active lifestyle, but having the freedom to eat what she wanted and carrying three children had softened her body in ways that he had always found attractive, particularly around her stomach and hips.

Speaking of his wife…

“Mikhail? Is that you?”

He smiled as her voice filtered up from the ground floor of their house.

“You’d better be up because we are on a tight schedule today and you know it.”

“Did you know that when you say stuff like that…?” he chuckled as he exited their bedroom and bounced his way down the stairs, turning right once he’d reached the bottom of the winding staircase and entering the kitchen. “…you sound an awful lot like Effie Trinket?”

Something cold and wet struck his cheek, dropping down to the floor with a splat.

A glance down confirmed that it was half a strawberry.

All three of his children snorted loudly from where they were sat at the breakfast bar eating their large bowls of natural yogurt, cereal and pieces of their favourite fruit; blueberries for Tomas, slices of banana for Kaya and a mixture of blackberries and raspberries for Alexei.

The strawberry, of course, belong to his darling wife, Johanna.

“Thank you, dear,” he muttered sarcastically. “That is just the accessory this outfit needed.”

Johanna snorted, confirming just where their children had learned that particular response, and placed a plate of freshly toasted bread coated with a thick layer of kumquat marmalade.
He was the only one in their family to like the strange substance which had been popular in the Capitol for years and had slowly been growing in popularity throughout the Districts.

“Oh, we were just about to get ready, dear,” she pointed out assertively, making her way around the breakfast bar to kiss him on the cheek just as he bit into his first slice of toast. “Unlike you we prefer not to risk ruining our clothes by getting bits of our food on them.”

To prove her point she reached out to brush the crumbs from the front of his waistcoat.

“Right, you three, if you’re finished with your breakfasts please go and get ready,” Johanna instructed their children, taking Alexei’s bowl away from him once their youngest had managed to scoop up the last of his breakfast and moved to follow Kaya upstairs. “Tomas…”

“I’m nearly done.”

“Tomas…”

Tomas huffed.

“Mum, it won’t take me that long to get ready and I’m still hungry…”

“You’d better give yourself enough time to sort out your hair, young man, because you currently look like you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards,” Johanna instructed their eldest son seriously, nodding towards the mess on top of his head. “Back in a minute.”

Kaya was back downstairs and ready to go before her brother had even finished his food.

“Darling, you look beautiful,” Mikhail sighed, a beaming smile splitting his face as his only daughter gave a twirl to show off the flare of her skirt. “Did you pick that out yourself?”

“Yes, I did,” she confirmed happily. “I liked the colours.”

He wasn’t surprised.

Kaya’s favourite colours were purple and yellow and the dress, a sleeveless swing dress with a flared skirt was a bright purple colour with a pattern of yellow sunflowers across the skirt.

Her hair had been pulled up into a high ponytail, decorated with a purple ribbon.

“Tomas, no third helpings,” Mikhail ordered as he caught sight of his son reaching out for the tub of yogurt still sitting on the breakfast bar. “You really do need to go and get ready.”

Tomas huffed but obediently slipped off of his stool and headed upstairs.

Finishing his toast Mikhail set about tidying up the kitchen area, putting the tub of yogurt and leftover fruit away in the fridge and the dirty plate, bowls and spoons in the dishwasher.

It had taken him literally years to get used to that particular piece of technology.

Johanna descended the stairs next, closely followed by Alexei who looked absolutely adorable in a miniature version of Mikhail’s own outfit only in a lighter shade of brown.

“Looking good” Mikhail told his son, resting his hand on top of the boys head carefully so as not to disturb the way his son’s hair had been carefully combed into place. “Very grown up.”

“I tied my tie all by myself,” Alexei informed him proudly. “…does it look right?”
“Alexei, I told you that your tie looks even smarter than your fathers,” Johanna chuckled, moving to adjust the knot in Mikhail’s tie. “Because you managed to do yours straight.”

“Have you ever thought that I tie it crookedly on purpose just so that you’ll have to fix it?” Mikhail chuckled, winking at his wife who responded by rolling her eyes as she moved to tuck the label in on the back of Kaya’s dress. “No, you’re right, that was a lie. In my defence they always look straight when I’m actually tying them, you know, when I’m looking down.”

“Try using a mirror next time…”

He gasped, pretending to be hurt by her faux-insult comment much to his son’s amusement.

Johanna looked stunning as she always did when they attended these events.

Her dress was made of emerald green silk velvet and, as Tigris had put it when she’d sent them their outfits, was designed to be flattering and utilised a number of elegant features to do so including a deep ‘V’ shaped neckline, a drop waist and a so called handkerchief hem.

“Tomas!” Johanna called up the stairs as she adjusted the emerald feathers of her vintage flapper style headpiece so that it wasn’t tickling the top of her ear anymore. “Five minutes!”

A thud followed by muffled cursing resonated from his son’s bedroom.

“Language!”

It still made him smile to hear his wife reprimanding their children for their use of foul language when his wife could strip paint from the walls with her explosive repertoire.

“Your beads are crooked,” Mikhail couldn’t resist pointing out, nodding to the layered necklace his wife wore over her dress, the smallest loop tight around her throat, the second just long enough to brush the swell of her cleavage whilst the longest loop reached her waist. “If you can critique my crooked tie then I can point out that your beads are crooked.”

Johanna responded by sticking her tongue out at him as she fixed her beads.

“Kaya, where’s your shrug?” Johanna asked their daughter. “And your shoes?”

“In the front room. I’ll go put them on now.”

Mikhail moved to automatically push the cupboard door shut when his youngest son went to help himself to a candy bar, tutting softly as he shook his head down at the pouting boy.

“Not until after the memorial service, Alexei,” Johanna told him. “Shoes. Now.”

Alexei huffed, his chocolate addiction a constant struggle for his parents, but obediently moved towards the front door where his smart brown shoes and white socks were resting.

“Tomas!”

“I’m coming!”

Johanna huffed.

“I miss the days when he didn’t answer back,” she muttered, crossing to slip her arms around her husband’s waist. “How long do you think we’ve got until Kaya goes that way?”

“Kaya?” Mikhail snorted, holding her close by looping his arms around her back. “Never. She’s
already more mature than we ever will be. It’s Alexei we have to worry about.”

“Yeah, I think you might be right,” Johanna chuckled brightly, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips which he more than happily returned. “How did our daughter turn out to be so…so…”

“I have no idea,” Mikhail responded softly, massaging the base of Johanna’s spine with his thumbs much to her approval. “Although she reminds me more of Sasha every single day.”

Johanna smiled.

Their son decided to grace them with his presence with only a few moments to spare which led to them arriving in the Town Square just in time for them to take their places up on the stage moments before the cameras went live, the countless view screens broadcasting not only the main ceremony taking place in the Capitol but also the smaller ceremonies taking place simultaneously in all Thirteen of the Districts, all of them linked together seamlessly.

President Lyell Mayfleet spoke softly as he always did, the microphone picking up each word, and from the heart as he recited the words which had been crafted for the occasion.

As had been the tradition since the first of these memorials the names of those who had been lost either to the Hunger Games or the Rebellion were read out by the Mayor of each District, some sadly taking longer than others such as District Eight and District Twelve.

“…Rowan Mason…Ava Mason…Cedara Mason…Jack Mason…”

Mikhail slipped his arm around his wife’s waist as their current Mayor, Ashford Collins, reached the portion of the alphabetical list which included the names of her family which had been included after their deaths had been officially linked to Snow and the Games.

Soon enough it was Johanna’s turn to comfort him as they watched Felyx, who was serving as the Mayor of District Eight for a second time, began to read out the painfully long list.

“…Adya Kaminski…”

Mikhail sucked in a deep breath, using his knuckle to wipe away the moisture from his eyes.

“…Brandon Warrington…Elisa Warrington…Sasha Warrington…”

Hearing their names never got any easier, no matter how many years had passed, but being surrounded by his family made it a fraction easier to bear; feeling his wife’s strong hand in his, being able to run his fingers through his daughters hair or squeeze his sons shoulders.

Finally, after “…Kolton Yarrow…” of District Thirteen had been remembered by the people of Panem the memorial service was brought to a close with the recitation of a Hymn from before the Dark Days, found in the databanks of the Capitol and selected for its apt words and meaning.

As they sung, helped along by a choir in the Capitol, flowers were laid around the memorial.

“Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav’d a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
   And grace my fears reliev'd;
How precious did that grace appear
   The hour I first believ'd!

Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares,
   I have already come;
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
   And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promis'd good to me,
   His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
   As long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
   And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
   A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
   The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
   Will be forever mine."

~ THE END ~

A/N Well, I hope you liked it. After what I put him through I felt that I had to give Mikhail and therefore Johanna a happy ending. Hope you enjoyed it. Now to continue with the others stories I have planned for this not-quite-a-series-but-a-series-nonetheless. X
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!