A Game Played Beautifully By Children

by PresidentHades

Summary

Ember Abernathy and Cato win the 74th Hunger Games, but their victory is more bitter than it is sweet. Or, in which Haymitch and Maysilee's daughter inadvertently turns the Career from Two away from the Capitol, and love, family, and tragedy still make the world burn. AU of my already AU story The Sweetest Mockery because I'm nuts.

Notes

Written for Arianna Le Fay on FFN.

This story is an AU of my already AU fanfic, The Sweetest Mockery. If you haven’t already been reading it, then I highly recommend you check that out first before reading this fic. But either way, the premise of both stories is that because Haymitch and Maysilee pulled off the star-crossed lovers routine during their Games, both of them became Victors, and over the years they’ve had several children. Both Sweetest Mockery and this fic focus on their middle daughter and child Ember, and even more specifically on her relationship with Cato. Unlike Sweetest Mockery, this fic ended up being told completely from Cato’s POV.

This first section is the least angsty section of the entire story. I apologize in advance for
any heartache you may experience. You may want to have some tissues at hand.

See the end of the work for more notes.

- Inspired by The Sweetest Mockery by PresidentHades
Cato is just as surprised as everyone else when Ember Abernathy waltzes up to him during training. The sword he is practicing with purposely slices dangerously close to her, as he decapitates yet another dummy.

She doesn’t flinch.

He ignores the sweat running down his face. “What do you want, Twelve?”

“Pretend to be friendly with me.”

The strangeness of the request gives him pause. “Why?”

“I’m trying to piss off a Gamemaker.”

He wonders if she’s entirely right in her head. “And you want to drag me into this stupidity?”

“She won’t retaliate against you, just me. It’s a personal dispute.”

Cato is intrigued, despite himself. “Give me details and I’ll play along.”

Ember Abernathy considers his offer. “Fine,” she agrees. “Don’t make it obvious you’re looking, but one of the Gamemakers is my sister.”

He glances at the balcony out of the corner of his eye. A Gamemaker, young and blond and bearing a stunning resemblance to Maysilee Donner, is watching them. The Gamemakers’ identities are usually kept secret from the general public, for fear of corruption and bribery, with the sole exception of the Head Gamemaker, who is the face and voice of his or her colleagues. Cato, like everyone else in Panem who’s endured broadcasted feature specials about the Abernathy family for his entire life, knows that the eldest Abernathy daughter (Lorraine?) ended up at the Capitol somehow, but he never knew specifically that she became a Gamemaker. “And you want to piss her off.”

“Yes.”

“Any particular reason, or just sibling rivalry?” Cato wonders why she isn’t milking her familial relationship, to increase her odds (or rather, her little brother’s odds; everyone in Panem heard during District 12’s Reaping about how she volunteered for the sole purpose of ensuring Cedric Abernathy lives) of winning.

“I hate her.” There’s something strange in her voice that Cato can’t identify—but it doesn’t sound quite like hatred. “She told me to stay away from the Careers, you in particular, to stay out of trouble, yada yada. So obviously, I’m going to do the exact opposite.”

Cato can’t help his gruff laugh, and he feels the force of many pairs of eyes burning into him. Ember Abernathy has a forthright, brutally honest kind of charm, and against his will, he feels it
winning him over.

This could be fun.

She places her hands on her hips. Ember Abernathy, he decides, is one of those girls who looks extremely attractive when angry, or on the verge of it. “So I told you the details. Now it’s time for you to uphold your end of the bargain. Pretend to be friendly with me.”

Cato smirks. “I can do better than friendly.”

Her blue eyes grow suspicious. “What do you mean?”

“Humor me.”

He can see her visibly struggling to heed his request, but in the end, she nods. So he swoop in and kisses her hard.

Cato thinks he hears a feminine gasp from the Gamemakers’ balcony, but he’s too busy discovering the pleasure of Ember Abernathy’s lips to give it much thought.

II

Ember Abernathy loves her brother. This is a fact. And normally, Cato isn’t the type to complain about familial affection. He himself is in possession of it, after all. But it’s hard to enjoy kissing a pretty girl when her twelve-year-old twerp of a brother stares at you in disgust while you’re doing it.

Since Ember has yet to call off her scheme to get on her Gamemaker sister’s nerves—and she herself isn’t complaining about it—Cato has taken to publicly kissing her, in full view of the Gamemakers and the other tributes, as often as he can get away with it. Everyone else’s attention doesn’t bother him. Just Cedric Abernathy’s, for some reason. The little nerd’s death glare makes him feel like he’s doing something pornographic, not just making out with his sister.

Anyway, the reason Cato is complaining about Ember’s attachment to her brother is that she almost never leaves Cedric’s side, which means if Cato wants to kiss her so they can maintain this plot to drive Lorraine Abernathy insane, he has to endure Baby Abernathy’s almost tangible resentment.

One day, Cato is stealing one last kiss from Ember before they part ways for lunch—he always sits with the other Careers, and she refuses to sit with them—when a glob of mashed potatoes splats the side of his head.

He turns to catch the culprit, and he spots Cedric standing on his chair, spoon still poised in his hands, distinctly unrepentant.

Somehow, instead of fury, all Cato feels is amusement. “Good aim, nerd,” he says, to the surprise of all the other tributes, including Cedric, including Ember. As he wipes potato off his face, he catches the expression on Ember’s face.

She’s smiling, the first genuine smile she’s given him.

Food still on his cheek, he can’t help going on for one last kiss. For real this time.

III
It’s when Cato begins to actively seek out Ember, and not just to make out with her, that he realizes he might be in trouble. He learns from somebody or other that Ember likes to hang out on the rooftop garden. He prowls around up there one evening and comes across her reading a book while sprawled on a blanket.

She startles when he plucks it out of her hand, intentionally obnoxiously, to see its details. “Did no one ever teach you not to take other people’s belongings without permission?”

Cato smirks as he returns it. “How do you have the time to read right now? Shouldn’t you be making plans with your parents about the Games?”

“Probably,” she admits without sounding too troubled. “But once I’m in the arena, I’m going to have zero privacy. Cameras 24/7, you know. I’m going to take advantage of any alone time while I still can. We all know I’m never going to have it again once the Games start.”

He remembers how Ember has publicly written herself off in the Games. Not because she has no chance of winning—because honestly, she could be a top contender, considering how her parents have trained her since she was young, like the Careers but not quite—but if her brother Cedric is to live, then she must die.

Cato is not happy with that thought. He tells himself it’s because he might never find as good a kisser as Ember after the Games.

(He tells himself that.)

Then Cato makes the mistake of asking Ember what her book is about, and he idles away at least an hour with her, listening to her talk, and to his horror (but not really horror), he finds that he enjoys it.

IV

During his interview, Caesar Flickerman directs their conversation toward the topic of Ember.

“So, Cato, a little birdie told me that you’re rather, ah, _amorous_, with a certain Miss Abernathy. What drew you to her?”

His attention flies toward Ember, whose interview dress makes her look preternaturally radiant. Her face is an attractive shade of pink as the cameras follow Cato’s gaze toward her.

Never looking away from her, he hears himself say, “Ember Abernathy is a force of nature. Trying to turn your back on her is just as impossible as trying to stop the sun from rising.”

The Capitol swoons.

Cato doesn’t give a fuck about them.

That night, after the interviews, he goes up on the off chance she’s there instead of spending what little time she has left with her family: with Cedric, with her mentor-parents, with the baby sister (Summer?) they tote around.

His gamble pays off.

She’s still in her interview dress, but she’s scrubbed off her makeup, and her hair is awry around her head. Cato’s blood runs hot, and soon he’s pressing her against a trellis.
He doesn’t want to lose this tomorrow.

“You should join me,” he tells her in between kisses. “At the Cornucopia. Stick with me and the Careers.”

Her eyes are sad as they entrap him. “The others wouldn’t accept Cedric.”

She’s right. Clove would sooner kill the boy from Twelve than ally with him.

They don’t say goodbye. As Cato turns his back on her, he can’t decide whether or not he wishes to see her in the arena.

V

Four days into the Games, he runs into her. Her face is covered in soot from the Gamemakers’ firewall, her hair is a mess, and she’s overall filthy from the Games.

She might be the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

(Shes alive.)

They eye each other warily. He knows she’s trying to decide if he wants to kill her (no), if killing him would increase her brother’s chances of winning (yes), if she wants to kill him (uncertain).

(The world watches with bated breath.)

He puts down his sword first. Her knife soon follows.

“Where’s your brother?” he asks, seeing no sign of Cedric in the vicinity.

“He’s safe.”

They both hear it at the same time: the other Careers drawing near, wondering where Cato went.

“Go,” he hisses, and then she’s gone.

Somewhere in the Capitol, his mentor is probably bashing his head against the wall for his “weakness.”

VI

Soon after the Careers’ supplies are destroyed, Cato comes across them. He arrives just in time to see Cedric Abernathy shooting Marvel in the neck.

There’s a heavy feeling in Cato’s chest. He liked Marvel. Given the chance, he even thinks they might have been friends.

Ember is crouched over a tiny body, tangled in a net, one of Marvel’s spears straight through the little girl’s middle. Cato barely has time to comprehend what happened when Cedric turns his next arrow toward him.


“Why not?” the little boy demands. “He’s just like him.” The vitriol is targeted at Marvel’s corpse. “He would’ve killed Rue, too.”
“Cato let me go.”

Cedric’s arms tremble. The bow lowers.

Cato feels like an intruder as he watches the Abernathys waste precious time organizing an impromptu funeral for the little girl. Cedric cries as he places flowers around the girl. Ember, although solemn, is dry-eyed.

He wonders if it’s because deep down, in a very dark part of her, she’s grateful that it wasn’t Cedric who died.

Cato watches them grieve for the girl from Eleven, so tiny and young, a girl whom, if she were from Two, the Academy would never have thought about sending into the Games, for lack of experience and age. So why is it okay when the other Districts send them?

He sees Marvel’s body being picked up by the hovercraft, and he realizes no one has mourned him. In the Games, it’s normal not to mourn dead tributes, especially not ones from your district, especially not ones you yourself have killed, as is the case with Cedric. But somehow, it feels wrong now not to do so.

Cato watches the three-finger salute that Ember and Cedric give to the little girl in farewell. And although Marvel is within the bowels of the hovercraft now, he does the same for the boy who might have been his friend.

VII

Clove no longer trusts him. And if he’s honest, she has good reason not to. Because at this point, he is extremely uncertain whether he would pick his district partner or Ember Abernathy, if it comes down to it. So even though Cato goes back to meet up with Clove after watching that little girl’s funeral, Clove disappears soon after.

He’s on his own now. For some reason, he’s not as upset about it as he thought it would be. At least he won’t have to stab Clove in the back—if she hadn’t done it to him first—if the final two came down to them. Two’s tributes always ally with each other, and it’s not uncommon for them to be the last two standing. When that happens, it’s not unheard of—expected, even—for them to turn on each other, and where there was once camaraderie, now there is a desperate thirst to defeat the other and win.

If he’s lucky, someone else will get to Clove first.

When he arrives at the feast, it’s to the sight of Clove pinning Ember to the ground, one of her deadly knives at the corner of the other girl’s mouth. Cato reaches for his sword, not knowing to whose defense he intends to come.

(He tells himself that.)

Thresh gets there before him, and in the blink of an eye, Clove is dead.

Ember isn’t.

(He can breathe.)

She exchanges words with Thresh, who then grabs the Districts 11 and 2 backpacks (that one is Cato’s, he needs that) before taking off.
Ember meets his gaze, across the clearing. She stands up shakily. Her lips say nothing, but her eyes speak volumes. She grabs the District 12 backpack and darts away.

Cato stands there for a moment, staring at Clove’s body until it’s picked up by the hovercraft. He feels a pang of loss, the loss of someone from home, and a pang of sadness, that someone with as much skill and potential as Clove—although certainly not the kindest or most likeable person—is so easily, needlessly dead.

And he feels a pang of anger. But it isn’t directed at Thresh.

He turns to the wheat field, where Thresh is hiding. Thresh has his pack, and Cato needs that pack. That’s why he’s going after the boy from Eleven. It’s the only reason.

He’s lost his taste for killing.

VIII

Cato doesn’t want to kill them.

He, Ember, and Cedric are the only tributes left. The three of them are all trapped on top of the Cornucopia, which is surrounded by mutts. They have the tributes’ eyes—Marvel’s, Clove’s, Glimmer’s, Thresh’s—and it makes him sick to the core.

Cato stands on one end of the Cornucopia’s roof, Ember and Cedric on the opposite. Nobody moves to kill anyone else. He and Ember stare at each other, and he wonders if the world can hear how his heart is pounding.

What will happen if they just do nothing?

They soon find out the answer, when the stalemate draws out too long for the Gamemakers’ liking. Without warning, a candy pink bird swoops down from the sky. Its razor-sharp beak pierces Cedric’s shoulder, causing him to topple off the Cornucopia, into the mutts’ waiting jaws.

Ember screams. She tries to jump after her brother, but Cato grabs her around the waist before she can throw her life away (the first of many times he will do this). “CEDRIC! CEDRIC! CEDRIC!” She shrieks her brother’s name over and over again, until her throat is bloody. Then she’s sobbing, and Cato presses her face into his chest, his hands covering her ears, desperately hoping that he’s preventing her from seeing or hearing her baby brother gruesomely dying.

But the mutts seem intent on extending Cedric’s death for as long as possible. Soon, the little boy isn’t even screaming anymore, and the silence is even more haunting than his cries of pain. But no cannon has sounded.

Cato lets go of Ember, now limp and unmoving. He picks up Cedric’s bow and his last arrow, both of which the boy dropped when the pink bird drove him to his death. His aim isn’t as good as Cedric’s, but it’s good enough to put the young boy out of his misery.

The cannon sounds.

But now Cato has a new problem. He refuses to kill her. He won’t have her blood on his hands, too.

But just as before, the decision is taken out of his hands.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the Victors of the Seventy-Fourth Hunger Games!”
The post-Games spectacle is hell. For him, but especially for Ember. Somehow, the Capitol has spun their relationship (whatever it is) into another tale of star-crossed lovers, just like her parents’, but with a touch of love at first sight.

Maysilee Donner and Haymitch Abernathy sit stoically in the audience, and the shadows of many sleepless nights are evident on their faces. As are signs of the many tears they have shed in recent days, for the son whom they watched die and whom they will never see again.

Ember is borderline comatose beside him on the loveseat they’ve provided this year. Cato ends up answering all of Caesar’s questions, and Caesar is smart enough to know not to push Ember into speaking. Cato begins to think they might get through this.

Then the recap reel starts to play.

Whenever Cedric is featured—which is quite often—Ember’s eyes regain a spark of life. But they both know what’s coming. When the Cornucopia scene starts, Cato pulls her toward him and covers her ears, just like he did during the actual event.

The Capitol seems to realize that it wasn’t just any tribute who died at the Cornucopia, but Ember’s brother, one of the Abernathys they so loved to celebrity-stalk over the years. When Caesar calls for applause, the cheers are muted.

He returns to the rooftop garden. He doesn’t expect Ember, who’s in a perpetual state of shock, to be up there. But she is.

“How are you feeling?”

She doesn’t answer him. She just keeps staring over the city, into the distance, at some sight he’s incapable of seeing.

Cato remembers Ember Abernathy. He remembers the girl on fire. He remembers a force of nature. He remembers the girl who asked him to help piss off her sister. He remembers the girl he kissed. He remembers the girl who kissed him back. He remembers the sister who loved her little brother, to the point that she would have sacrificed herself for him. He remembers a girl who was so full of life, even when she was prepared to die.

He fears that girl was killed in the arena, after all.

Cato tries to take her hand in his, but her fingers are limp and unresponsive. Her blue eyes, once bright and vivacious, are now dull and glassy. Whatever it was that made Ember Abernathy Ember Abernathy is gone. Stolen. Torn from her.

His anger simmers.
He notices something beneath a bench and picks it up. Cato recognizes it as the book Ember was reading before, her bookmark still in its place. He wonders, if Ember hadn’t come out of the arena, if he hadn’t come up here and found the book, would it have been left abandoned on the ground, forever waiting for its owner to return?

Cato opens the book, and he begins to read aloud where Ember left off. He wonders if she hears a single word he says.

XI

Cato soon realizes the only reason they are both alive is that Snow willed it.

The president’s summons for him, on their last day before they ship out from the Capitol, surprise him. He has no choice but to accept, obviously.

“You were always my favorite to win.” Snow tells him in between sips of wine, which Cato declined. “Seneca was in favor of an underdog, but you and I know that strength is what wins you victory.”

Cato doesn’t respond. Snow doesn’t ask him to.

“The little...romance, between you and Ember was an interesting development. The Capitol fell in love with the idea of a repeat of her parents’ Games. But two star-crossed lovers defying the Capitol again, and succeeding? No, I couldn’t have that again. At least, I couldn’t have the two lovers making that choice again. But if I made the choice this time? To spare you two, out of magnanimity and condescension? That suits me very well, indeed.”

When Cato finally speaks, it’s to ask a question that’s been haunting him. “Why kill her brother like that?”

Snow’s mouth curls into a smile. “Well, we couldn’t have the people believing I was going soft in my old age, could we?”

Cato’s fist clenches.

“Now, Cato, I didn’t ask you here just to reminisce about the past. We must speak of the future. I think the both of us—and most others in Panem—know there was only one real Victor this year, and that was not Miss Abernathy.”

He isn’t so sure that he won either, though.

“Officially, Ember is entitled to all the same prizes as you. But you must be properly rewarded. It wouldn’t be fair for you otherwise.”

Cato feels dread spreading through his body.

“When you and Ember leave the Capitol tomorrow, she will be going with you to District 2.”

He hates himself for not feeling entirely displeased at the idea. “She isn’t going home?”

“Cato, District 2 is her home now.”

XII
Haymitch Abernathy is drunk when he corners Cato, shortly before their trains are to depart. “I don’t know what you want with her, you little shit, but if you so much as lay a finger on her, I’m gonna make you wish you were the one who died at the Cornucopia.”

Cato might have felt compassion for Haymitch (Cedric really does—look just like his father), if he weren’t so aggravated that the old man thought he would hurt Ember, after everything they’ve been through. (But perhaps, perhaps, the old Cato, the Cato before Ember, would have.) “You don’t tell me what to do, old man.”

The older Victor looks like he might punch Cato in the face, but the other Victor of the Second Quarter Quell stops him. “My husband isn’t feeling well,” Maysilee tells Cato. “You’ll have to forgive him.” To Haymitch: “I’ll take care of this. Find Cinna, he’ll help you.” So Haymitch stumbles off, in grief and in pain.

Cato rubs the back of his neck. “I won’t hurt her,” he tells Ember’s mother.

“I didn’t think you would,” she answers honestly. (Why doesn’t she? How does she know anything about him?) “It’s nice to hear it all the same.”

“What did you want from me?”

Maysilee’s familiar blue eyes (if Cedric looks—looked—like Haymitch, Ember looks like her mother, but dark-haired) force him to face her. “Ember is never going to come back to Twelve again. Only for one day, during the Victory Tour, but that’s it. When she isn’t in the Capitol, she’ll be in District 2 for the rest of her life. I don’t know what life is like in Two. And I don’t entirely know what happened between you and my daughter. But I am asking you, begging you, whether any of it was real or not, to please watch over her for me. I think you see as clearly as I do that Ember is far from okay, and I don’t know when she’ll be okay again. If you have any compassion at all, please take care of her for me.”

Cato has no answer to that, except this: “I will.”

XIII

Snow has decided to place the two of them in the same house in the Victors’ Village. Cato doesn’t mind, and Ember doesn’t say anything either way.

She hasn’t said anything since before the Games ended. The last thing Cato heard her say was Cedric’s name, on the Cornucopia, before her voice betrayed her and gave out.

Cato settles Ember in the best room in the house, spacious and warm, with tall windows that let the morning sunlight flood in. It has a view of the majestic mountains near Two. He often finds her curled up on the window seat, staring outside, but he isn’t sure if she’s really seeing anything.

His family isn’t sure what to make of her. His father, Cato knows, finds Ember’s survival an affront to the rules of the Games, but given that it was Snow himself who decided to break the rules, his father says nothing about it. He tends to ignore Ember’s existence altogether, and he often uses the word “Victor” in the singular form, rather than the plural.

His older sister, Vespasia, tried to get Ember to speak, but gave up in frustration when Ember failed to react to anything she said. His younger sister, Laelia, quickly grew bored with Ember’s continued silence.

His mother doesn’t show it, but Cato knows she pities Ember. When his mother visits, he sometimes finds her sitting beside Ember in companionable silence, sometimes quietly murmuring
to the girl without expecting any answers back. Cato doesn’t know if Ember is aware of anything his mother is saying, but he’s grateful all the same.

His older brother, Tiberius, nearly blows Cato’s fuse. Tiberius took one look at Ember and quips, “I guess what they say is true. To the Victor really do go the spoils.”

Cato manages to get a good punch in Tiberius’s smarmy face before their father forcibly separates them.

Through it all, Ember says and does nothing.

XIV

He wakes up suddenly one night. He’s always been a light sleeper—he was trained to be—so sometimes the slightest sound is enough to jolt him awake. But before he can roll over and go back to sleep, he hears the noise again, and he recognizes it as weeping.

Immediately, he gets up and crosses the hall to Ember’s room. There’s a mass of blankets on her bed, and quiet sobs escape from somewhere within. Cato sits on the mattress and gently peels away blanket after blanket, until her miserable face is exposed to the air.

“He’s dead. They killed him. Rain killed him. He’s dead. It’s my fault. I couldn’t save him. I should have died. It should’ve been me. Why wasn’t it me? Why couldn’t I have died?”

Once again, Cato pulls her to his chest, but this time he doesn’t cover her ears. There’s nothing to deafen her to tonight. He knows nothing he can say will make it better, so he simply strokes her hair until she cries herself to sleep.

XV

Cato wakes up again in the morning, but he thinks he must be dreaming when he goes downstairs and finds Ember making breakfast.

It takes her a moment to look up at him after he enters the kitchen. Her blue eyes are clearer than they have been in weeks. “Good morning,” she says quietly, and it’s the sweetest sound he’s ever heard.

“Good morning,” he answers, and he means it.

XVI

He takes her to his favorite hiking trails, the ones he’s never shared with anyone before so that no one disrupts his solitary treks. The sunshine gives life to her skin, pallid from so much time cooped up indoors. Her eyes are animated by the exercise. When she trips over a tree root, she laughs as she dusts herself off.

(His heart feels peculiar.)

Cato helps her up. Once she’s on her feet, though, she doesn’t let go. She entwines her fingers with his, and they continue their hike with their hands clasped tightly together.

She gasps. “What is that?” Because her hand is still holding his, he’s dragged with her to investigate what caught her eye: unusual but beautiful flowers, somewhere in between blue and
purple, blooming along the edge of the trail.

Cato is pleased when he realizes he knows the answer to her question, because it’s one of his little sister’s favorite flowers. “Those are columbines. Laelia loves them. Says their name comes from how the petals look like doves clustered together, supposedly. I personally don’t see it.”

“Dovelite or not, they’re gorgeous.” Ember plucks one, looks at it thoughtfully, and sticks it behind Cato’s ear.

He finds that he doesn’t mind at all, not when she beams at him like that.

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**XVII**

His family isn’t sure what to make of her. His father can no longer ignore her, now that she’s actually talking and interacting with people. So he just remains stony in her presence, and now he’s the silent one when they’re in the same room.

Vespasia decides that Ember’s earlier silence wasn’t a personal insult to her, after all, and now gaily chats with the younger girl. Laelia decides that she quite likes Ember when she acts like a human and is often perched on her lap.

His mother doesn’t show it, but Cato knows that she is pleased by Ember’s change. What he doesn’t know is why his mother so frequently glances between him and her.

Tiberius is quiet. Then, just before his family is about to leave, his brother comments, “I didn’t know trophies could talk.”

Dead silence. Cato prepares to punch him again.

“You know, just because you have trouble winning over a girl the real way doesn’t mean your brother is incapable of it.”

Dead silence, again, as everyone stares at Ember. Cato didn’t realize until now how much he missed that look of shameless unrepentance that was once so characteristic of her.

Vespasia cackles. “She’s got you there, Ty.”

Tiberius turns red and stomps out.

Cato thinks he could kiss Ember, right then and there. But he waits until his family leaves.

He didn’t realize until now how much he missed kissing Ember.

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**XVIII**

A package from Twelve arrives shortly before Ember’s birthday. Cato has been expecting it, and he quickly hides it before she can see it. Ever since Ember began talking again, she’s also started making phone calls back home. There isn’t much she can say, since the phones are certainly bugged, but Cato overhears how she giggles with her cousin Madge, how she reassures her father that she’s okay, how she teases her little sister, and how she has quiet, lengthy discussions with her mother.

One day, Ember passed the phone to him. Bewildered, he took it.
“Thank you,” Maysilee Donner told him.

One time, several of Ember’s friends back home were gathered around Madge’s phone, and Ember orally introduced him to Katniss, Peeta, and Gale. They were wary of him at first, but by the end of the group conversation, Cato thought they seemed to have accepted him.

A few weeks ago, Maysilee asked to speak to him again. “We want to send Ember some things for her birthday. Will you make sure she doesn’t open her presents early?”

On the day of her birthday, Cato tickles Ember awake. She mercilessly beats him with her pillow before yanking him down for a long kiss. Breakfast is cold by the time they make their way downstairs.

With his mother’s help, Cato has individually wrapped each of the presents that Ember’s friends and family sent, and they wait for her in a neat stack on the kitchen table. He watches her tear into them with delight.

From Katniss and her little sister, a homemade bottle of perfume, made from flower petals. Cato catches a whiff of it; it smells just like Ember.

From Peeta the baker, a tin of cinnamon cookies decorated with uncannily accurate icing flowers. Ember is able to identify each bloom as from her garden at home.

From Gale and his family, a handknit scarf in radiant shades of red and yellow and orange. Smiling, Ember says that it was likely a group effort: Gale hunted whatever game was needed to be traded for the dyes, his baby sister picked the colors, his little brothers helped make the yarn from the Everdeens’ goat’s wool, and his mother did the actual knitting.

From her cousin Madge, a disc, with the words “Ember’s Song” written in an elegant hand on the cover. When Ember plays it, beautiful piano music fills the room. Her cousin, Ember explains, loves to play the piano, and she’d taken up composing just last year.

From her parents: a framed family photo (the last one they took before the Games, Ember murmurs as she gazes at Cedric’s face), a copy of the new novel by her favorite author (she’d completely forgotten that the book was coming out), and her mother’s mockingjay pin.

Cato remembers that pin. It was her token in the arena. He remembers it being returned to Maysilee Donner after the Games. Now, her mother is giving it back to Ember.

(What do her parents mean by that?)

And finally, from Cato.

For several weeks, a construction crew has been coming into the backyard to build what Cato claimed was going to be a shed. All the tarps are gone now, to reveal that there is, in fact, no shed.

It’s a greenhouse, ready to be filled with seeds and potted plants and flower bulbs and anything Ember ends up choosing from the catalog of everything available at the local nursery.

(Ember doesn’t talk about her garden in Twelve much—you can only chat about plants for so long—but Cato sees the look in her eye when she does, and he sees the look in her face whenever she’s investigating a strange new bloom, like with the columbines on their hike.)

She tackles him to the ground, and neither cares about the grass stains on their clothes as they kiss.
Cato is asked to visit the Academy, where he trained for most of his life, so he can talk to the current students and answer any questions.

Ember is invited as well.

She has to think about it, but eventually she decides to go. She’s curious about how the Academy runs.

Aside from a quick introduction, Cato does all the talking, as Ember shows no inclination to speak before a crowd of Career hopefuls. He can tell that she’s also unnerved by the former Victors lined up against the wall in the back, watching them both with intense stares.

Cato’s spiel is essentially the same speech that every new Victor from Two gives when asked to speak to the students, and most of their questions are the same ones asked every time.

Then one of them has a question for Ember.

“How does it feel to be a Victor knowing that you didn’t deserve it?”

Cato recognizes the asker as an obnoxious punk from the year below him. The giggles scattered through the audience, and the smug looks on some of the previous Victors’ faces, tell him that the punk is not alone in this sentiment.

Ember handles it masterfully. “Why don’t you come onstage for a minute?”

The boy swaggers up and deliberately checks her out. Cato clenches his jaw, but he waits. Ember has a plan.

“Spar with me.”

The punk, who clearly thinks Ember is no challenge—Ember did kill in the arena, but only in self-defense, and the Academy trainees see that as weak—swings half-heartedly for her. She nimbly dodges and clocks him, unawares, in the face so he’s sprawled on his back on the ground.

No one asks anymore questions.

They go to his family’s house for dinner. Tiberius has excused himself, claiming something at work is holding him up, but everyone knows even after all this time, he just doesn’t want to face Ember again, after the way she verbally burned him.

Cato’s father pulls him aside after the meal, and they go to his study. “I see you’re becoming quite attached to her.”

He’s not becoming attached. He’s already attached, and has been for quite some time. But Cato knows his father has a point to make, so he waits.

“Don’t be.”

Cato frowns. “Why?”

“No good will arise from getting entangled with any Aberthathys, I promise you that, Cato. That family has no future in Panem.”
He narrows his eyes. “What are you getting at, Father?”

“Troubled times are coming. You don’t want to be on the wrong side when they do. And the Abernathys will be on the wrong side. The girl has a pretty face, and I can see why you’re so fond of her. But don’t let it become anything serious. You’ll want to be able to sever ties with her when the time comes.”

Cato stands there, still as a statue. Finally, he says stiffly, “Please excuse me, it’s getting quite late. Good night, sir.” He leaves the study. When he and Ember leave the house, and he reaches out for her hand, he can feel his father’s glare boring into his back.

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XXI

On his birthday, he declines his family’s invitation to dinner again. There’s only one person with whom he wants to spend the day.

They go hiking, as they usually do when the weather suits and they have no other demands on their time. They discover a new trail, which takes them to a small waterfall, and the two of them have a water fight. In the end, both are thoroughly drenched, and both are thoroughly happy.

Upon returning home, Cato showers. Drying his hair with a towel, he emerges into his room, where he finds Ember snuggled on his bed, reading a book and wearing one of his shirts, which is clearly oversized on her.

(His shirt, and nothing else.)

Her smile beckons him. He accepts the invitation and joins her. The book is tossed onto the floor. The shirt follows.

“This is just as much a present for me as it is for you,” she tells him.

All the better.

If there is such a thing as paradise, Cato thinks later that night, as Ember sleeps in his arms, this is it. And he doesn’t ever want to give it up.
Soon before the Victory Tour, reporters from the Capitol swarm to Two to interview the new star-crossed lovers, whom they have graciously left alone the last few months. All are delighted that Ember is actually talking this time. They ooh over her greenhouse and ahh over Cato’s fledgling forays into blacksmithing, something he’s always had an interest in but never had time for before the Games. Every time they do or say something remotely romantic, the reporters and cameramen—fully-grown adult men and women—giggle like schoolchildren.

Both of them are exhausted by the time the pests leave. When another train arrives, they’re wary at first.

Then Cinna, Ember’s designer, steps off.

Cato sees her eyes filling with tears, but none of them fall as she hugs Cinna tightly. Cato leaves the two of them to catch up and goes to practice in his personal gym. After several rounds, he figures he’s been gone long enough, and he catches the tail end of their conversation.

“Rain wants to speak with you.”

“I don’t.”

“She knows you blame her for Cedric, but she says if you’d only give her five minutes—”

“What, she’ll try to convince me otherwise? Cinna, you saw just as clearly as I did that the bird they sent, however garishly pink, was a crane. Just like that fiance of hers. The future Mrs. Seneca Crane has nothing of value she can say to me.”

“Husband. Current Mrs. Seneca Crane.”

“...What? When did that happen?”

“It was a quiet ceremony. Rain insisted. And they wanted to marry before she gave birth. You have a niece, Ember.”
The ensuing uncomfortable silence convinces Cato it’s time to interrupt. Ember looks up at his entrance and forces a smile. He doesn’t know why she bothers to pretend. They both know he can tell if her happiness is real or fake.

XXIII

The night before they depart for the Victory Tour, Ember’s parents and little sister arrive. Cato heads out of the house to give them privacy. He wanders into Ember’s greenhouse and admires how well it’s all coming together. Plants aren’t his thing, but he can at least appreciate the aesthetics.

Maysilee Donner joins him. “Ember told me you commissioned this for her birthday.”

“I did.”

“When she told me about it over the phone, she sounded happier than I’d ever heard her.”

“I knew she liked gardening.”

“It isn’t just that. What touched her was how you picked up on something she would enjoy so much, despite how few clues she gave you.” Ember’s mother’s eyes bore into him, as if she’s reading his soul. “You aren’t who I thought you were before the Games, or even who I thought you were the day we left the Capitol, when I asked you to look after her.”

Cato feigns nonchalance. “Is that right?”

“You love my daughter.”

He stares at the vines of morning glories that Ember insisted on planting, even though the owner of the nursery told her they’re more akin to weeds than anything.

“You’re good for her. And she loves you.”

“Did she tell you that?” he asks quietly.

“She doesn’t need to. I could see it in her eyes and her face. She thinks the world of you.”

Cato snorts, amused. “Ember is always the very first person to let me know in no uncertain terms that I’m wrong, or that I’m being an idiot. She knows my every fault, all too well.”

“And in spite of them—or should I say, because of them—she loves you.”

“Is there something you’re trying to get at, Mrs. Abernathy?”

Maysilee runs her hand along one of the beams supporting the greenhouse. “This is a lovely building. You must be able to get a lot of privacy in here.”

Cato gets what she’s trying to ask. “I personally knew everyone on the construction team that built this. And we have to be careful with electronics in here, because of the sprinklers and hoses.”

In other words, not bugged.

Still, Maysilee errs on the side of caution. “Dark times are coming, Cato.” He is eerily reminded of his own father’s words. “I’m not entirely sure what will be coming, but it won’t be good. Whatever happens...can I still count on you to keep Ember safe?”
That isn’t even a question.

“Always.”

XXIV

The first stop on their Victory Tour is District 11. All Cato can think about on the way there is how he killed Thresh. It had to be done, but he’d found no enjoyment in it, no sense of satisfaction like he’d found, to his shame, with his earlier kills. Now all these months of ignoring his memories of murdering all those children come crashing down upon him.

Ember is also pale and quiet, and he remembers Rue, the little girl whom she and her brother mourned.

Their escorts have given them speech cards, but Cato feel sick as he looks at Thresh’s sister and grandmother, then Rue’s sprawling family filled with younger siblings. How is he supposed to tell them that it was an honor for Thresh to have died by his hand? For Rue to have died with Ember watching over her?

“Fighting Thresh was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. He hadn’t trained like I had, but it was a close match. And I didn’t want to kill Thresh.” All eyes are on him. “All I wanted was the pack that was supposed to be mine, which he took. I don’t blame him for taking it. It’s all part of the Games. You do what you can to survive. That’s what Thresh did. That’s what I did. That’s what we all did. Now I’m alive, because Thresh is dead, and that’s a fact I’ll have to live with.” He feels Ember taking his hand, and it gives him the strength to muster two more words. “I’m sorry.”

Whispers ripple across the crowd.

Then it’s Ember’s turn. “Rue had one of the most beautiful souls I’ve ever seen. She lived for things like the warmth of the sun on her face, the wind in the trees as she climbed, the song of mockingjays. She was the closest you could be to happy in the arena.” A sad smile crosses her face. “Cedric thought she was beautiful, too. It broke his heart when she died. The flowers were his idea; he didn’t want her body to be taken away as if she meant nothing to him, to us. Although we only knew Rue for a few days, she touched our hearts. I wish more people could have known her goodness, but she was taken from us too soon. As was Thresh, and—” her voice chokes up “and Cedric, and all the other children who died there.” Ember closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “Thank you for giving us the chance to know Rue.”

The crowd is silent. The one old man whistles Rue’s little melody, and he raises his hand in the three-fingered salute that Ember and Cedric publicized in the Games, and all hell breaks loose.

XXV

Brutus leaves it to Ember’s parents to explain how the two of them fucked up the speeches in Eleven. But Cato’s mentor probably wasn’t expecting exactly what Haymitch and Maysilee tell them.

“Snow’s plan backfired,” Haymitch whispers, barely audibly. “He let the two of you live, and he...he had Cedric killed, to demonstrate his power, the Capitol’s power: we all live and die as the Capitol tells us, whether or not we want to either way. He wanted to remind the Districts that the Capitol is God, that our lives belong to them, that no one is safe. Not even the Abernathys, especially not the Abernathys.” Ember’s father smiles bitterly. “But all those times he had our
family’s private lives open to public consumption did him a disservice in the end. The people remembered that we’re human, that the twenty-four kids sacrificed every year are all real children with real families and real lives and real interests and real skills, just like Cedric. And they will no longer stand for it.”

“So, what, are you saying people are thinking of rebelling?” Cato asks.

Maysilee shakes her head. “Cato, Ember. People are already rebelling. And they see the two of you as symbols. Ember represents our family and everything that we’ve won and lost and suffered for. Cato shows how even the staunchest Capitol loyalists can be swayed and turned against them. Snow knows this, and he’s afraid of what you two may incite the Districts into doing, whether or not you mean to. And that makes me afraid of what he has planned.”

XXVI

Cato and Ember stick to the script for the remaining Districts. He finds many of those Districts painful, because he killed so many tributes in the Games, and now he must face his demons. It’s easier to ignore them when he’s reading from a card, even as the crowds murmur angrily—but not at him. At the Capitol. And try as he and Ember might, they can’t stop citizens in some of the Districts from exploding, to violent and deadly ends.

They reach Four.

“Cato, my friend, let’s have a chat.” Finnick Odair slings his arm around his shoulders. “It’s nice to walk along the beach at night.”

Ember is being beset by Capitolites—who attend the Victory Tour parties in greater and greater numbers, the closer they get the Capitol—but she nods when their eyes meet. So Cato agrees to go outside.

Once away and alone, Finnick, usually such a smooth-talker and charmer, doesn’t bother with pleasantries. “You need to marry Ember.”

Cato doesn’t know how to respond to that. “Any particular reason?”

And again, Finnick cuts to the chase. “Snow likes to take the most in-demand Victors and sell them to anyone willing to pay the price for a night with them. I would know. And Ember has been in-demand since before she was even in the Games, when she was just one of Haymitch and Maysilee Abernathy’s kids. People were asking for her when she should have been much too young to be on anyone’s radar. Those are the depraved souls who will be going after her when you reach the Capitol. Some of them are talking to her as we speak.” Finnick grabs Cato’s shoulder before he can storm back inside. “Listen to me. If you don’t do anything by the time you get to the Capitol, even though you two will only be in the city for one night, Snow is going to milk it for all it’s worth. You don’t want that.”

Cato tries to tamp down his surging rage. “How is marrying her going to help?”

“You probably don’t have to marry her right now, just as long as you make it clear to the Capitol, to Panem, to Snow, that you intend to. A lot of people didn’t buy your star-crossed lover story the first time around, at least not the people who’ll want her. But if you make them see it’s real now, if you publicly make your claim—as chauvinistic as that may be—that will make a lot of them back off. You’re a pretty frightening guy. They’ll think twice when they realize they’ll have to get past you.”
His head spins with plan after plan, how he can keep Ember safe from this. “Why do you care, Odair?” Suspicion dawns on him. “Why do you care about Ember?”

Finnick chuckles. “No need to be jealous. I’m not interested in her that way. But...well, I know her brother, Ashton. Remember him? Won the Sixty-Fourth Hunger Games, right before I did, at age twelve? Relies on booze and drugs to get by now? When he’s in his right mind, he talks about his family. And I’ve always liked Ember and Cedric and Summer. They were cute kids—Summer still is, of course. I try to look out for them on his behalf.” His sea green eyes darken. “And no one should have to endure the same things I do, especially not someone who’s already lost as much as Ember.”

Perhaps against his better judgment, Cato decides to trust Finnick. “We reach the Capitol in three days.” So little time.

“If you plan to ask Ember, the best time will be onstage, during your interview in the city. Snow won’t have much time to react, and she’ll at least be safe this time around.”

Cato hates that he can’t ask Ember on his own terms. He hates that he’ll have to do it on TV. But it’s necessary, and when it comes to Ember, he does what has to be done. “Know if I can buy a ring in One?”

Finnick’s expression shifts. “I have something you can use. Only a loan, mind you, and I expect it back when we next see each other.”

XXVII

Cato and Ember manage to escape the party before they have to board the train again and head to Three. (That’ll be another painful stop. Cato snapped the boy’s neck in a fit of rage.) They stroll to a different part of the beach, the full moon illuminating their path. It lends her an ethereal glow, makes her look too beautiful for this world, and Cato vows that he will not let the Capitol break her again.

“Ember?”

She stops and looks at him. “Yes, Cato?”

“Whatever your parents think is coming, whatever we think is coming, whatever Snow and the Capitol have in mind for us...regardless of all that, would you want to marry me?”

He hears her breath catch. “God, yes, Cato, yes.”

Cato laughs quietly and pulls her close. “Ember Abernathy, will you marry me?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.”

Their escorts are not happy when they return with their clothes covered in sand.

XXVIII

District 1 is painful in its own way. For Ember, it’s because Glimmer was her one and only kill. For Cato, it’s because Marvel was the closest thing he had to a friend in the arena. And despite his resolve to read only from the speech cards, he feels it would be a disservice to not mention that. So he does, briefly.
“Marvel could have been my friend.”

Six small words. But they help spark the fire again.

XXIX

As the two of them planned, with her parents’ help, Cato proposes to Ember onstage, with Caesar Flickerman dramatically gasping beside them. The Capitol goes wild.

At the party that night, Cato is inseparable from Ember. He doesn’t trust Snow not to try anything, even after that spectacle. So it’s with his hand placed possessively on Ember’s waist that he meets Mrs. Lorraine Crane, formerly Abernathy, for the first time.

She looks different from when he glimpsed her on the Gamemakers’ balcony so long ago, when Ember asked him to help piss her off. Older, more tired. Cato supposes having a kid will do that to you, as will watching your little brother die on TV.

(And possibly being responsible for his death, as Ember has accused.)

“I have nothing to say to you,” Ember hisses, as harshly as she can without drawing undue attention from the partygoers around them.

“Ember, please—”

“You killed Cedric.” That stops Rain cold. “You killed your own brother.”

“I didn’t—”

“They sent a crane for him, and I don’t think that bird was supposed to represent Mr. Seneca Crane.”

Speak of the devil. Mr. Seneca Crane himself appears, standing by his wife’s side. “Ember, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. And you, too, Cato.” Then, the Head Gamemaker, the one who orchestrated the deaths of twenty-two children (including his own wife’s brother) this summer and of many more in the summers before that, in a move utterly stereotypical of a proud new father, queries, “Has Rain showed you pictures of your niece yet, Ember? I’m biased, but I think Priscilla may be the most beautiful child ever.” And he pulls out not a digital device but an old-fashioned booklet of printed photos.

Priscilla Crane, who looks to be one or two months old, is indeed a very pretty baby.

Ember stares at one photo in particular, of little Priscilla cuddling what looks to be a plush mockingjay. Rain notices. “Would you like that photo, Ember? We have copies.” Ember says nothing, but she accepts the photo without complaint when her sister presses it into her hand. “It’s her favorite toy,” Rain tells them. “I want Priscilla to grow up knowing her family and everything that’s important to us. Like the mockingjay.”

XXX

Snow summons Cato, just as the party is ending. Ember looks worried.

“I’ll be fine,” he assures her—empty promises—and makes sure she leaves safely with her parents before heeding the summons.
As before, the president offers him wine. As before, Cato declines.

“I’m rather disappointed, Cato. I expected better from you.” Hologram projectors play clips of his and Ember’s speeches during the Victory Tour, specifically those where they deviated from the script. “You’ve gone and fallen in love with Miss Abernathy for real. What am I to do with you now?”

His hackles rise. “Perhaps, sir, if you didn’t want me to fall in love, you shouldn’t have sent her to Two with me.”

“Very true,” Snow concedes. “I was planning for the opposite to happen: you would tire of Ember’s presence, and she would grow to fear you, and the world would watch the two of you trying and failing to appear happy together.”

“I would never have hurt her.”

“I realize now that is true, unfortunately.”

Cato clenches his jaw. “Did you want something, sir?”

“I did. Cato, it’s time to send Ember home.”

“To Two?”

“No. To Twelve.”

XXXI

They stop at Two before Twelve on the Victory Tour. Cato and Ember manage to escape to their house, to his room—or rather, their room.

She’s curled up in his arms. “I don’t want to leave you.”

He runs his fingers through her hair. “It’ll be okay. You’ll go back to Twelve. You’ll see your cousin. You’ll see your friends. You’ll be going home.”

“I am home.”

XXXII

Cato imagines that normally, District 12 is much grayer and gloomier. But welcoming home their fifth ever Victor—a miraculously high number for such an outlying district—and their fourth Abernathy Victor, specifically, is not normal.

He finally meets Ember’s closest friends in person. Madge, her cousin who looks unnervingly like Ember, but blond. Katniss, possibly the most laconic person he’s ever met. Peeta, who’s always smiling but it never feels fake. And Gale, who would be even more reticent than Katniss if he weren’t constantly whispering with Madge.

Ember clearly wants him to get along with them, and them with him, and they all try for her sake. It’s a fair success. Cato isn’t good at making friends, and neither is three out of the four others, but Peeta’s natural amicability compensates for them all.

When Ember is called away so she and her family can have their pictures taken by the paparazzi,
Cato looks at her friends. “Will you guys watch over her?”

They exchange glances with each other. “We will,” they say.

XXXIII

The spacious house is lonely without Ember. Cato knows nothing about gardening, so he’s had to hire someone to take care of her greenhouse for her. He goes home to eat with his family more frequently now, but he hates how his father looks at him knowingly, so more often than not he stays in and scrounges up whatever he can find for dinner.

During one of those uncomfortable family dinners, he hears about Romulus Thread. “They’re sending that sadist to Twelve?” Thread, originally from the Capitol, once wanted to be a Gamemaker, but his cruelty was too much for even the cruelest. So it was decided that the Districts would benefit from his profound capacity for violence, and he was sent to District 2 to train future generations of Peacekeepers.

“The president thinks District 12 could benefit from a firmer hand,” Tiberius replies. As not only a Peacekeeper, but also their father’s son—their father, the most powerful man in Two—he has the privilege of knowing information before the general population is aware. Sometimes, information the general population will never know. “Old Cray is going soft.”

Cato feels a sense of foreboding.

XXXIV

It’s Madge Undersee who tells Cato what happened, and he can barely understand her frantic garblings over the phone.

He hears Thread. He hears Ember. He hears whipping.

“Tiberius!”

His brother eyes him suspiciously. “What do you want, Cato?”

“Get me to District 12. The very next train.”

“I can’t do that, it’s against—”

“I don’t give a fuck. I need to go to Twelve. Please, Ty.”

Tiberius scrunches his face. “You’re really head over heels for her, aren’t you? Fine, I’ll help, but you owe me big, kitty-cat.”

The next morning, Tiberius lends Cato a spare Peacekeeper uniform and smuggles him amongst the batch of new Peacekeepers being sent to reinforce Thread’s new dictatorship in Twelve.

XXXV

Cato manages to separate from the Peacekeepers and runs to the Victors’ Village. He hammers on the Abernathys’ door, and it’s answered by a wary Haymitch. “What does that sick fuck Thread want from us now?” Ember’s father growls.

Cato takes off the helmet.
Haymitch blinks. “Oh. It’s you.” He scans their surroundings and quickly pulls Cato inside.

“Did Thread whip Ember?” he demands as soon as the door shuts.

“Yes,” Haymitch answers tersely. “Em’s friends were about to be caught red-handed with illegal game, so Ember incriminated herself instead. Well, rather than being lenient on one of the newest Victors, Thread decided she needed to be taught a lesson, that he’d make an example out of her, to show that nobody is exempt from punishment. He only got a few blows in before May stormed in there to put a stop to it. So Thread stopped whipping my daughter...and started beating my wife instead.” Cato thinks he sees a faint scar from a whip across Haymitch’s cheek, and he wonders if it was Ember’s father who finally put a stop to the madness.

“How are they?”

“Ember is more or less okay. Mrs. Everdeen thinks she’ll fully heal soon, no problem, but she’ll be in some pain until then. It’s May we’re worried about.”

The Abernathys’ kitchen has been turned into a sick room, and the faint scent of blood lingers in the air. Maysilee lies on the table, unconscious, and Cato sees more bandages than he does skin. Used and unused vials of morphling are lined neatly on a nearby counter. Katniss’s mother and sister tend to their patient, grave expressions on their faces.

“Ember is in her room with Madge and their friends,” Haymitch tells him, and Cato goes.

When he arrives at the threshold, Ember’s cousin and friends wisely depart to give them space. Ember, who’s wearing an oversized shirt—one of his—and shorts, careens into his arms. He can feel the bandages on her back.

“I thought she was going to die,” she sobs into his chest. “I thought my mom was going to die because of me.”

“She’s your mother,” Cato promises her. “She’s strong like you. She’ll pull through.”

(He needs to stop making promises he doesn’t know he can keep. They’re going to come back and haunt him one day.)

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XXXVI

Maysilee wakes up.

Mrs. Everdeen doesn’t think her leg—which Thread stomped on at one point—will ever be the same.

But she’s alive, and she refuses to hear Ember and Gale and Katniss’s apologies.

“It isn’t your fault.”

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XXXVII

Cato doesn’t want to leave, but the worst is over, and his absence from Two will be noticed soon. He doesn’t know how long Tiberius can cover for him.

Ember shows him an abandoned lakeside cabin beyond Twelve’s fence, and as they lie there on
his last night in the district, she tells him:

“District 13 still exists.”

And if there is going to be a full-scale rebellion, as so many are whispering, then Thirteen will be at its core.

So will the Abernathys.

Cato holds her tighter.

XXXVIII:

He’s with his family when they watch Snow announce this year’s Quarter Quell.

“On the seventy-fifth anniversary, as a reminder to the rebels that even the strongest among them cannot overcome the power of the Capitol, the male and female tributes will be reaped from their existing pool of Victors.”

For several long moments, no one reacts.

Tiberius, the District 2 volunteer that never was, smiles bitterly. “Look at that, kitty-cat. You might get to be a Victor twice-over.”

But Cato is too busy processing what Snow’s pronouncement really means.

District 12 only has four living Victors, and they are all Abernathys. Two male, two female. Haymitch and Maysilee. Ashton and Ember.

Snow has realized his error in letting the Abernathys live, and now he is doing his utmost to wipe them out.

XXXIX

This time, it’s Ember who illegally travels to see Cato. (Yet, despite the lack of permission, in the following weeks no one comes to bring her back to Twelve, even though Snow surely knows.) “I want to spend my last few months at home.”

Cato is alarmed by her words. “What do you mean, your last few months?”

“There’s no way I’m letting my mom go into the arena. You heard what Mrs. Everdeen said about her leg. She’d never make it. So that leaves me.”

“Ember. “ He grips her shoulders. “You can’t do this. You’re going to make your parents lose another child.”

“And how is losing my parent any better?” she shoots back. “The other tribute from Twelve is going to be either my dad or my brother. I can’t lose two more people, Cato, I can’t.”

“And I can’t lose you.” He sets his jaw. “Ember, if you go back in there, then so do I.”

“What? No, Cato, no! Not you, too. Stay out of it, stay safe—”

“How can you ask that of me when you refuse to do the same yourself?”
Her bottom lip trembles. “I’m going to lose everybody, aren’t I?”

“Not everybody,” he tells her. “Not everybody.”

Empty promises.

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XL

They train at the Academy in Two. Ember’s parents did a good job preparing her—and her siblings—for the Games, but it’s nothing to the regime perfected by District 2 over the decades. Cato himself works with her the most, teaching her how to use her small size—compared to him—to her advantage in a fight, how to be deadlier with a knife, how to quickly adapt to strange new weapons.

He doesn’t expect Sergius Graylee to join in.

Sergius, the winner of the Sixty-Ninth Hunger Games, is his sister Vespasia’s fiance. Cato, who had zero free time before his own Games, never got to know Sergius that well, and he’s barely seen Sergius since the Games, but he’s always had an alright impression of him.

Cato is suspicious as he watches Sergius give Ember tips and help adjust her grip. When Ember goes to take a break, Cato rounds on the older Victor. “What are you up to?”

“I’m helping her.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because Vespasia likes her. She loves you more, even though you’re a little brat, but she knows you’d sooner die than let Ember Abernathy be harmed. So being the ridiculous romantic she is, she asked me to lend a hand.” Sergius tilts his head. “Cato, would you be opposed to my being your mentor this year?”

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XLI

Both of them are still hoping that they can convince the other not to go into the arena. And they’re both so stubborn that they’re both bound to fail, which is inevitably going to lead to heartache.

But Cato won’t let Ember go back without him, and she won’t let her mother go back instead of her. So all they can do is savor the time they have left with each other, be as prepared as they can, and hope against hope for the best.

Ember tells Cato about Twelve’s wedding tradition of the Toasting. “Maybe, since we won’t have a real wedding...”

They toast some of the bread his mother made over the fireplace, and for one night they pretend that everything will be okay.

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XLII

Cato nearly has to punch out Brutus in order to be District 2’s volunteer. Onstage, he and Enobaria don’t bother to shake hands. He’s never liked her, and she doesn’t give a fuck about him.
Ember was finally ordered to return to Twelve several days ago, to ensure she would be present at
the Reaping. Cato watches the recap on the train. District 12’s square is even more deathly silent
than it is in normal years, and the Abernathy family, instead of segregating themselves by gender,
has chosen to ignore the ropes the Capitol set up and stands together as one.

From the girls’ bowl, Effie Trinket draws Maysilee Donner.

“I volunteer as tribute.” Ember squeezes her mother’s hand—her mother, who leans on a cane and
looks like she’s in constant pain—and steps forward.

From the boys’ bowl, Effie Trinket draws Haymitch Abernathy.

“I volunteer as tribute.” Cato can hear some of the crowd gasping as Ashton Abernathy, looking
more sober than he has in years, takes his father’s place.

Onstage, Ember and Ashton don’t bother to shake hands. Instead, Ember embraces her older
brother, just as she did her younger brother this time last year, on the exact same stage. Then
something must be happening in the crowd, something the Capitol doesn’t like, because the feed
abruptly cuts off.

XLIII

He has no time to find Ember before the Parade, but she’s his very first priority the second he
steps off the chariot. He saw how pale she looked on the giant screens; not even the illumination
of the fake flames surrounding her and her brother could have hidden that fact, not from his eyes.
Her parents and brother appear grave, and they readily let the two of them go.

Cato and Ember ascend to this new Tribute Center’s rooftop garden, and her next words change
everything.

“Cato, the doctors told me I’m pregnant.”

XLIV

Sergius seems to get along with the Abernathys. It helps that he makes it clear that his goals align
with theirs and with Cato’s: they want Ember to come out of the arena in the end. Together, the
three mentors concur that they—Cato, Ember, Ashton—will need to make strategic alliances.

Ashton nominates Finnick (and with Finnick comes Mags). Cato and Ember agree.

When asked for his input, Cato says, “Not the other Careers. Not this year.” Enobaria, he knows,
would be delighted to kill Ember Abernathy, the Girl on Fire, one half of the second pair of star-
crossed lovers and daughter of the first.

Training is different than last year. Many of the tributes are mingling, having known each other for
quite some time. Cato and Ember watch her brother greet Finnick before motioning for them to
join.

Cato surreptitiously returns Finnick’s ring. “Sorry you couldn’t use it yourself.”

Finnick smiles sadly. “Yeah. I’m sorry, too.”

All the tributes already know everyone else’s strengths and weaknesses, so there’s no point
holding back. Ember decides to go with Mags and learn new skills—“Cedric was responsible for
knowing most of them last year, I just listened to him”—while Cato practices sparring.

He pretends the sparring instructor is Snow, and Finnick and Ashton have to pull him off the hapless teacher when he forgets himself. When they return to District 12’s apartment, they find that after that violent display, many of the other tributes want an alliance with them.

XLV

Although the bodice of Ember’s interview dress (her wedding dress) is tight against her curves, her belly doesn’t show. She’s at least twelve weeks along, but it’s still early to be showing, her mother says, and apparently her athleticism will help conceal it for some time yet.

Caesar commiserates with Cato during his interview. “It’s a shame about the wedding.” The Capitol makes sympathetic, heartbroken noises.

The words “We’re already married” slip out of his mouth, and then the Capitol makes shrieking noises.

Caesar demands an explanation. Cato tersely explains the Toasting.

“But Cato, you volunteered, knowing that you would be facing Ember’s family, or Ember herself, in the arena. Why did you do it?”

His eyes meet hers. “Because a world without Ember Abernathy is not a world worth living in.”

The Capitol screams in misery.

Caesar asks Ember how she feels to be going into the arena with her other brother. “Ash says he’ll be the one taking care of me this time. I believe him. And this time, I won’t be so foolish as to believe I can save anyone I love.”

The Capitol weeps.

The weeping turns into gasps as Caesar asks Ember to twirl in her wedding dress, and soon she is no longer a bride-ne’er-to-be but a mockingjay. In this new costume, Ember looks fiercer, bolder, more defiant. She is beyond beautiful.

Then Ashton mercilessly carves out the Capitol’s hearts. “It’s unfortunate that I won’t be able to see myself become an uncle twice-over.” He pointedly looks at Ember, and the crowd’s reaction is deafening. There are calls for the Games to be stopped, tears, shocked realizations that this is really happening.

The Victors hold hands, and the stage goes dark.

XLVI

Fortunately, swimming is a skill that everyone learns at the Academy. Cato is one of the first to reach the Cornucopia. Finnick gets there at the same time, and Ember and Ashton aren’t far behind.

The Cornucopia has weapons, and nothing else. The Gamemakers don’t anticipate a long Games this year.

Once the four of them and Mags grab everything they need, they hightail it into the jungle. Ashton
leads the way, followed by Finnick, who carries Mags as if she weighs nothing, then Ember, and finally Cato at the rear.

He sees Ember growing exhausted more quickly than she usually does. “Do you need a break?” he asks quietly.

She shakes her head, determinedly forging on. “We have to put distance behind us. We can rest later.”

Cato is grateful when a mile into their climb, Finnick asks to rest, although the Victor from Four doesn’t look all that fatigued.


He observes how Finnick interacts with Ember in the same fraternal way that Ashton does—more brotherly than her actual brother, even. Their break is only a few minutes long, but Cato can see that where Finnick’s playful banter, even now, comes to him as easily as breathing—and it’s readily returned by Ember—Ashton is quiet and more awkward around his sister. Sometimes, Cato catches him watching Finnick and Ember with envy.

Yet another relationship the Capitol has stolen from the Abernathys.

As they near what appears to be the top of the hill, Ashton begins to randomly toss some nuts that he cut down from a tree. “During my parents’ games,” he explains when Cato asks, “they made it to the edge of the arena and discovered there was a force field surrounding it. Not something I want to run into accidentally.” Ashton’s caution pays off when one nut is repelled by an invisible barrier and lands on the ground, singed.

Mags happily picks it up, peels it, and begins to snack. She does this with all the nuts that come back burned, with no apparent side effects. Good to know there’s something they can eat in the arena.

What’s worrisome is the lack of water. Dehydration is not good for any of them, especially not for Ember, who looks worse by the minute.

XLVII

Hot, tired, and thirsty, they make camp. Finnick and Mags turn out to be pretty good homemakers. They make a hut out of grass mats, and Cato makes Ember lie down in its shade. “I feel like a useless damsel in distress,” she murmurs as he brushes sweat-soaked hair from her face.

He cracks a smile, despite the direness of their situation. “Just this once, will you let me be your knight covered in shining sweat?” She laughs, and he feels temporarily satisfied.

Ashton, like his brother, is a fair hand with the bow, if not quite as flawless as Cedric was. He returns with a dead rodent and suspicions that there is indeed water nearby—he just doesn’t know where it is.

Ember emerges when the anthem begins to play, and she wraps Cato’s arms around herself as they watch the faces flashing in the sky. The two of them don’t know many of the other Victors, so the faces they see don’t strike much of a chord with them. It’s the faces they don’t see that resonate. Enobaria is alive, and Cato doesn’t think he likes that very much.

“Chaff’s alive,” Ember murmurs. “He and my dad are friends. And Johanna—she’s weird and not very likable, but I’m glad she isn’t dead yet. And Beetee and Wiress. Cedric loved them. He was
Beetee’s number one fan. The last conversation they ever had was about force fields and their weak spots. Chinks in the armor, they called them. You can exploit them and take down the whole thing. Ced was the biggest science nerd I ever knew, and he followed news about Beetee’s inventions and innovations religiously. He wanted to be just like him.”

Cato looks up in time to see the pained expression on Ashton’s face. Ember isn’t the only one who lost a baby brother last year.

XLVIII

He’s starting to wonder why Ember’s parents aren’t sending water for their pregnant daughter when the gift arrives. Finnick presents it to Ember with a flourish. Cato doesn’t recognize the metal tube inside, but Ember and Ashton do.

“A spile!” they exclaim at the same time, and they look at each other as if silently sharing some memory known only to the Abernathys.

The water is warm, but it’s water. Cato makes sure Ember drinks her fill, and then some. She looks much better once her thirst is quenched, and Cato relaxes slightly, but just a bit. Water was only one of their many problems.

Finnick takes the first shift, but later, Cato—and Ashton—are awoken by twelve loud clangs. As Ember and Mags slumber on, the three of them stare at each other. Whatever those twelve tolls mean, it can’t be good. Ashton takes the next shift, and Cato returns to an uneasy sleep beside Ember.

Then he’s woken up, again, by Ashton shouting. Cato sits up and quickly sees what has Ember’s brother riled up: a strange fog drifting their way. It looks harmless, but they all know that nothing in the arena is truly harmless. Ashton’s paranoia gives them enough time to run. The fog’s speed increases, as if determined to catch up.

Ember stumbles.

The fog touches her, and she cries out in pain. Cato wheels around and scoops her up so he’s carrying her like Finnick is carrying Mags. He hisses when the fog makes contact with him, but he forces the pain aside. What matters is getting Ember to safety.

Miraculously, the five of them all make it to the beach. The fog stops several yards behind them, as if confined by an invisible wall. They were all touched by the poison to some extent, and Ashton discovers that the saltwater helps draw it out. The five of them slowly return to rights.

Cato breathes.

Ember has a strange expression on her face. “I don’t feel so well.”

XLIX

Trigger warning: miscarriage.

Finnick’s eyes are sad as he rejoins Cato and Ashton. “Mags says she’s going to lose the baby.”

Ashton’s shoulders slump.

Cato is eerily still. Barely breathing. A meaningless buzzing sound fills his head; he barely
comprehends what Finnick is explaining about Mags’s thoughts on the poisonous fog and its effects on Ember. He doesn’t know what to think. What to feel. So he boxes it all away and puts it aside for later. “What can we do?”

“That’s a lot of cramping.” She reaches for her hand and plays with his fingers. “I feel empty. It’s weird, because I didn’t even know I was pregnant until we got to the Capitol. Now being not-pregnant—or about to be not-pregnant—is the strange feeling.” She looks up at him. “How are you feeling?”

“Don’t mind me.”

“It’s your baby, too.”

And just like that, it shatters. It all shatters. The baby is no longer some abstract, surreal concept. It’s real, it’s something that he and Ember made together, it’s something that they could have loved—and they’re about to lose it before they even had it.

“I wanted it,” he says hoarsely.

She squeezes her eyes shut. “I wanted it, too.”

Soon, the contractions start. Finnick translates for Mags that it’s her body expelling the tissue. It won’t be as bad as actual labor, but it won’t be pleasant, either.

Multiple parachutes fall from the sky—from Two, Four, and Twelve alike. They bear plush towels, soft blankets, hot water bottles, and pads. Mags places towels around Ember’s hips and has Cato and Ashton hold blankets around Ember, to block any cameras’ views. The elderly woman, with surprisingly dexterous motor control, cuts Ember’s wetsuit at the waist, wraps her bottom half in a large towel, then tucks her beneath another blanket. Cato returns to holding Ember, and the others leave them alone.

The contractions become regular, and Ember chokes back a sob as her body ripples. “I want my mom.”

He holds her tighter. “Your mom is with you,” he murmurs. And it’s true. He would bet anything that Maysilee is glued to the screen right now, watching her daughter suffer and wishing she could do something beyond sending linens.

A blood-soaked Johanna, Beetee, and Wiress stumble across them as the contractions begin to subside. “What’s wrong with her?” Cato hears Johanna loudly ask. Finnick murmurs something in
response, and the Victor from Seven grows quiet.

Johanna eventually wanders over, holding a large shell from which steam is rising. “I made tea. It should help with the stomach pain. Drink it when you feel like it.”

Cato’s brow furrows. “Where did you get tea?”

“Whichever dumbfuck designed the arena didn’t get the whole jungle thing completely accurate. I recognized some trees that are clearly native to Seven. We make tea from their bark at home.” When Cato hesitates, Johanna sighs and takes a large gulp of the tea. “See? Not poisoned, by me or by the Gamemakers.”

“It’s fine, Cato, I’ll drink it,” Ember mumbles. She complains about the taste, but she seems to feel better.

Some time later, Ember lifts her head.

“I think it’s over.” She’s quiet as Mags hobbles over.

Cato helps Ember wash with boiled water. Meanwhile, Mags has tenderly folded up the bloody towel and looks questioningly at them upon their return.

“Would you guys like to bury it?” Ashton asks softly.

Cato looks at Ember. Slowly, she nods. She has a death-grip on Cato, and he doesn’t want to leave her alone, so he lets Ashton and Finnick dig up the soil where the beach meets the jungle.

Ember claims to feel well enough to walk, but Cato carries her anyway over to the small grave. Ashton kneels and places the bundle in the hole. “I only knew about you for a few days, but your Uncle Ash loved you anyway,” he says. “Wherever you are now, it’s for sure better than here.”

Johanna shakes her head. “Congratulations, Snow,” she says flatly. “There is actually no more innocence you can tear away. Nothing left after unborn children.”

No one else has any words to say. But Mags kisses her fingers and raises her hand in Twelve’s salute. The rest of them follow suit. After a moment of silence, Ashton and Finnick refill the hole, and the bundle disappears.

Chapter End Notes

To be continued...

The final part will definitely be posted before the end of the month, most likely sooner.

Please let me know your thoughts on Part Two! Did anything make you go awwww, anything thought-provoking, anything make you want to come after me with pitchforks...? Good or bad, I always appreciate hearing from you all. : )
ACT THREE: RESURRECTION

Song Suggestion: “21 Guns” by Green Day

LI

Mags is of the opinion that, while Ember will be mildly bleeding for a week or two, the pain and cramping should be gone soon.

They’re gone soon enough for Ember to join them in the fight against the Careers. Although Cato tells Ember to stay put with Wiress, whom he barely saved in time from a slit throat, she insists on burying a knife in Gloss anyway.

He can tell she regrets it, when they stumble ashore after the Cornucopia spins and they lose their advantage of knowing the clock. Ember rubs her abdomen as she sits against a tree. “Don’t say ‘I told you so,’” she grouses.

“Can I think it?” Cato asks cheekily, and she sticks her tongue out at him, as they carefully dance around the elephant in the arena. There will be a time to mourn, but for now, they have to keep it together.

(Although, Cato doesn’t know when exactly it is the two of them are planning to mourn together. Because only one of them will be around after the Games—and if he has his way, it won’t be him.)

Finnick’s easy cheer seems good for Ember, so Cato leaves them to go find water while he joins the others in trying to map the arena again. Then they hear the scream.

“Ember!” Cedric Abernathy’s voice shrieks.

He hears her returning cry—“Ced?”—and spins around, but he sees neither her nor Finnick. Cursing, he runs to the jungle after them, only to be rebuffed by a transparent wall.

The others join him at the invisible barrier, but none of them can breach it. Cato spots one of the jabberjays, flitting through the air, and realizes that was what imitated Cedric’s scream so uncannily. He hears no more screams—he hears nothing from the other side of the wall—but judging by the expression of intense agony on Ember’s face, there are most certainly more screams. Who? Her parents? Her little sister? Her cousin? Her friends? All of them, most likely. Something is causing Finnick pain, as well.
The two of them come running toward the wall, but they don’t understand Cato’s and the others’ gestures to stop and they slam into it.

Ember curls into a ball beside Finnick, and all Cato can do is watch helplessly as jabberjays perch on nearby branches and open their damned beaks. But finally, the hour passes, and the wall vanishes. Cato crouches beside her. “Ember,” he calls gently. She trembles, not looking up. When he touches her arm, she flinches, before she recognizes the touch and leans in. “They’re gone now. It wasn’t real.”

“I thought it was Ced,” she whispers. “I heard his scream, and as I was running, I thought about how I never went to his funeral, and I never saw his body, and maybe...maybe…” She shakes her head. “I feel like I’ve lost him all over again.”

“Cato?” He looks up at Ashton. “Do you mind if I talk to Em?”

He senses that this is a long overdue conversation, and while the arena isn’t the best place for it, it’s the only place for it at this point. Cato lets Ashton take his place, so he and his sister can finally mourn together for their little brother.

LII

The arrival of the bread sets Cato on edge.

“An even two dozen, then?” Beetee asks.

“Twenty-four on the nose,” Finnick confirms.

Both the older Victors are casual and natural in their speech, but he can see how they glance at each other for half a second, and that half a second is enough for Cato to realize there’s a deeper meaning to their exchange than just figuring out how to divide the food.


Does anything else?

LIII

During normal Games, their group would have splintered by now, considering its sheer size—him and Ember, Ashton, Finnick and Mags, Johanna, Beetee and Wiress—versus a smattering of other tributes left in the arena, the only ones among them whom Cato knows by name being Enobaria and Chaff. And according to Ember and Ashton, Chaff is close enough to their father that they aren’t worried about him attacking the two of them. So it’s really their group against Enobaria and maybe one or two others, then after that...what happens? They turn on each other?

Yet Cato can’t bring himself to take Ember and go. Ashton is her brother; he is one of the last people who will stab Ember in the back, figuratively and literally. Then there’s Finnick, who’s apparently such great friends with Ashton, not to mention the conversation Cato had with him in Two. And Mags was invaluable helping Ember through the miscarriage. If Finnick and Mags wanted them dead, they would have left Ember to suffer.

Johanna, Cato isn’t as sure about. The tea was kind of her, but not enough to get him to trust her.
So far, she’s been about as amicable as Johanna Mason can be, but he remembers watching her Games and how she ruthlessly wielded her axes. If she tries anything, he’ll make sure it’ll be her own axes that kill her.

Beetee and Wiress aren’t huge threats. Cato knows they’re probably two of the smartest people to ever walk this Earth, but if need be, he can take them out easily. The problem is, he doesn’t want to do that. The Victors from Three, while respectively borderline-invalid and halfway-insane, are friendly, and Ember is fond of them because of how Cedric admired District 3.

Midnight, Cato thinks. He sees the glances they all exchange—even Ashton—and he wonders if there’s some grand plot that he and Ember are unaware of. But he knows better than to take her brother aside and ask. There are cameras everywhere.

Beetee lays out his plan to take out the remaining tributes with the lightning and his wire, and Cato thinks it a rather huge gamble that all of the other tributes, none of whom are allied with each other as far as they know, will happen to be on the beach at the right time. Is this part of the mysterious plan that may or may not exist?

He thinks back to what Ember said about District 13, to everything he’s heard from her parents about the rebellion, and he wonders.

LIV

The group splits in half. He, Ashton, and Johanna are fastest moving through the trees, so Beetee sends them down with the wire. One unwinds and sets the trap while the others keep guard.

Ember kisses him before he goes. “I’ll see you at midnight,” she orders him.

“As my lady commands.”

They’re halfway down the jungle when two things happen. First, someone cuts the wire just above them. Second, someone screams back where they left Ember, Finnick, Beetee, Mags, and Wiress.


(The latter is a request that many who love Ember, including Cato, make when about to say goodbye to her.)

Cato runs, scanning the dark foliage for Enobaria or other threats. He encounters no one and reaches the lightning-tree without incident. Ember stands there, spattered in blood, but he quickly realizes it isn’t hers when he spots the body—the male from Nine, he thinks—on the ground. Also on the ground is a prone Beetee, but he looks like he’s still breathing. Mags and Wiress sit a ways behind Ember, as out of harm’s way as they can be. Finnick is nowhere to be seen.

“What happened? What’s going on?” Cato asks, trying to figure out Beetee’s real plan, because it obviously isn’t the one he told them all.

Ember’s eyes are bright. “Cato, do you remember what I told you about Cedric’s last conversation with Beetee?”

Force fields. Weak spots. Cato sees the knife in an unconscious Beetee’s hand, with some of the gold wire wrapped around it. He lifts his eyes and spots the rectangular chink in the force field’s armor. It clicks.
He remembers Ashton’s last orders. Without hesitation, Cato takes one of the blades on his person and digs into his arm where the Capitol implanted the tracker. Ember is doing the same and coaxing Mags and Wiress as well.

On the ground is a spear that must have been dropped by the dead tribute from Nine. As Cato picks it up, a memory comes unbidden to mind, of Marvel, the boy who could have been his friend. Of one of the many conversations they’d had at the Tribute Center during training, when the boy from One had preened over his slightly superior skill with the spear, then deigned to give Cato some tips. *Anyone can aim and throw a spear. The key is follow-through.*

Cato tears the wire from Beetee’s knife, and Ember helps him tie it to the spear. Their eyes meet. As Cato stands, he glimpses Finnick and Enobaria racing over. But he ignores them as he aims.

He throws.

He follows through.

The world explodes.

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LV

He awakens to Ember running her fingers through his hair. “I wanted to make sure I was here when you woke up, so you didn’t assume the worst and do something stupid,” she tells him.

Cato glances around. Lying on the floor near him is Beetee, still out like a light. Their surroundings appear to be the inside of a hovercraft. “Where exactly is here?”

She takes him to another room. The only person within whom he doesn’t recognize is a Gamemaker who introduces himself as Plutarch Heavensbee. Everyone else he knows. Maysilee, with her cane and looking years older than when he last saw her. Haymitch, just as prematurely aged as his wife and holding seven-year-old Summer, the only person who looks untouched by all the events of the past year. Finnick, gaunt and haunted. Mags, contentedly fiddling with some thread. Wiress, seeming more in her right mind than she had been in the arena.

Most surprisingly of all, Rain Abernathy, with her baby daughter in her arms.

“Okay, you can tell us everything now,” Ember announces to the room at large. Cato shoots her a look. She raises her eyebrows, as if to say, *What, you didn’t think I would wait for you?*

Maysilee takes the floor. She confirms what Cato has already suspected or heard from Ember and her parents: District 13 is real, and they are at the heart of the rebellion, which they’ve been planning for years, waiting for the right moment to incite the Districts. But it turns out it wasn’t a single moment, but a series of them, that enflamed the oppressed of Panem.

The Capitol murdered Cedric Abernathy, just to prove they could.

They changed the rules to force Ember to live, when it would have been easier for her to die.

They banned her from home and shipped her off to District 2 instead.

It all backfired on the Victory Tour, when the world realized that Ember and Cato had fallen in love, and what was supposed to be punishment (for what crime?) and suffering ended up the opposite.

Despite everything, Ember stood strong.
Because of everything, Cato changed and began to turn on the Capitol.

Their words, the ones from their hearts, not the speech cards, were the catalysts. District 13 saw all this, and they began to plan. Rain and Plutarch knew what Snow had in mind for the Quarter Quell, so their deeply underground circle of rebels agreed on one thing: Ember and Cato, who had somehow become the symbols of the revolution, must be kept alive at all costs.

They would have told the two of them, Maysilee explains, but the pregnancy complicated things. This was where she and Haymitch pulled the parent card: they wanted Ember, and Cato, to focus on her wellbeing and not be distracted by larger plots about which they would neither benefit from knowing, nor be able to do anything within the arena. And with Ashton and Finnick by their side from the get-go, they trusted that the older Victors would help them.

When Ember lost the baby on camera, the Districts’ rage began to boil, and that rage exploded when the arena did.

“Now we’re all on our way to Thirteen,” Maysilee finishes.

Cato remembers seeing Beetee lying unconscious beside him in the other room, but no one else. “Where are Ashton and Johanna?”

Maysilee’s expression crumples. Haymitch answers him grimly, “The Capitol took them.”

President Coin reminds him of his father, and that puts him on guard. They’re both the distantly charismatic leader, talented at seeming interested in what you have to say, but ultimately it’s their way or nothing. Unfortunately, Cato never quite mastered how to stand up to his father.

So when Coin tells him and Ember, “The miscarriage is prime subject matter for a propo,” Cato doesn’t know how to react. When his father told him to do something and he didn’t want to do it, too bad. He ended up doing it, anyway.

Ember has a different reaction. “The actual miscarriage was caught on camera,” she says coolly. “I’m sure you have plenty of material already.”

“Words from the two of you about it will have power,” Coin insists. “Show the country your grief. Show the country your—”

“It’s bad enough that I had to suffer the miscarriage itself in public,” Ember hisses. “I will not let our grief be available for public consumption either. That’s the end of it.”

Once she and Cato are a safe distance away, she falls to pieces. Cato feels hot tears streaming down his face as well, blinding him, as they finally allow themselves to mourn what they couldn’t mourn in the arena.

With Rain having finally shown her true colors, the relationship between her and Ember seems to be slowly mending. The bond between the two sisters appears sturdy enough that Rain and her daughter can live with Ember and the rest of their family in the same unit without much trouble.

Cato watches how Ember constantly plays with her niece, possibly the only activity that can bring a smile to her face nowadays. He watches them, and although it pains him, he imagines the cousin
with whom Priscilla Crane could have been playing within a year.

“What happened to your husband?” he hears Ember ask her sister.

“I left him a note,” Rain answers miserably. “I wish I could have done more, but there was no way I could have spoken with him before we escaped. I couldn’t tell him much, in case someone else found the letter. All I said was that I was sorry, and that I couldn’t leave Priscilla behind or Snow would use her against us.” Then, in a small voice, “He probably hates me now.”

“If he does, then he’s a fool. Just like I was a fool to hate you all these years.”

And so the Abernathys begin to take back one of the relationships that the Capitol stole from them.

LVIII

Brace yourselves.

They hatch a plan to break the hostages out of the Capitol, because the Abernathys, as one entity, have refused to cooperate any further until Ashton is safe.

Ember will not let Cato volunteer to be on the rescue team. “Knowing you, you’re going to do something stupid and get yourself killed. You’re staying here with me.” She can’t hide the worry in her eyes from him.

He stays.

But she can’t convince Katniss and Gale to do the same.

“You, your parents, your whole family, they’ve done so much for our families in the past,” Katniss tells Ember firmly. “It’s our turn to pay you back.”

Cato doesn’t think Ember or her cousin Madge or their friend Peeta breathes easily again until the whole team makes it back safe and sound, with Annie Cresta, Johanna, and Ashton in tow.

Ashton is in awful shape, and the Abernathys are excited when they’re told he’s finally waking up. All six of them, including Baby Priscilla, are waiting in the room when he stirs.

The first thing he does is try to kill his mother, who was closest to his bed.

Cato hears the commotion from the waiting room and races in. By then, everyone is frozen, because Ashton has his hands around Summer’s little neck.

“Ash,” his father calls softly. “You’re safe here.”


“Ash,” Ember whispers, and he looks at her. “Do you remember, before we went into the arena, when you told me you would sooner die than let anything hurt me?”

Ashton’s gray eyes are wide.

“It’s no different for me.”

His breathing is ragged, but his eyes are starting to clear.
Then someone fucks up. A soldier moves to restrain Ashton. He panics. His hands twist. Maysilee screams.

LIX

Cato is one of the only people, who is not a doctor or a nurse or a soldier, willing to go near Ashton. His arms and legs are bound to the bed, but the restraints are pointless, in Cato’s opinion. Ashton is almost as catatonic as Ember was in the weeks after Cedric’s death, barely alive himself.

But when Cato enters, Ashton’s head lolls so he can look at the younger Victor. “You got Emmy out. She’s safe.”

“Yes. She is.” But in shock and heartbroken like the rest of her family. What’s left of it, at least.


Cato’s silence is answer enough. Ashton’s broken sobs follow him into the hallway.

LX

Going to District 2 is the furthest thing from a homecoming. They force Two’s surrender without much incident on the rebels’ side, and he and Ember are told that Two’s leader is being brought forward.

Cato knows who it is, of course.

Yet he barely recognizes the broken and half-mad man on the ground as his father, who takes one look at Cato and begins to laugh hysterically. “Of course you survived! Of course you’re the only one left!”

His father’s words make the hairs on the back of Cato’s neck stand on end. “What do you mean, I’m the only one left?”

The next words his father speaks sound bone-chillingly sane. “You’re a traitor, Cato,” he says calmly. “You were a traitor the moment you destroyed the arena. The Capitol punishes traitors. The Capitol strikes where it hurts most.”

Cato’s heart almost stops. “Where are they?”

“Your mother. Your brother. Your sisters. They’re all dead. And it’s all because of you.”

LXI

He understands what Ember means now, when she says she feels numb all the time. He thinks he might even understand how she felt in those early days when she first arrived in District 2, lost and alone and grieving.

But he still has enough of his humanity to feel pity for Rain Abernathy when during Snow’s next mandatory broadcast, Seneca Crane stands beside the president—and beside another woman, beautiful in the artificial Capitol way.
“Lorraine Abernathy has committed treason,” Snow announces. “There is no reason to force a loyal citizen to remain chained to a traitor. Therefore, the marriage between Seneca Crane and Lorraine Abernathy is annulled, and Lorraine Abernathy and her offspring are stripped of their citizenship effective immediately.”

Then, as a reward for Seneca’s loyalty, Snow marries him and the other woman—someone named Drusilla, Seneca’s “true love”—right then and there, on live TV. Drusilla smiles winningly, but Seneca’s face is stony and expressionless.

Cato leaves Ember to soothe Rain’s tears.

LXII:

It is decided that, with the exception of Maysilee, who relies on a cane to move, putting all the surviving Abernathys on what is called the “Star Squad” as the main force attacking the Capitol will help incite the rebels to fight harder.

When Ember’s family hesitates, Coin offers to let them kill Snow. They accept, although Cato doesn’t think they would have, had Summer’s death—by Ashton’s hands, but the true murderer was Snow—not been such a fresh wound on their souls.

Cato thinks how Coin and her circle seem to be planning this Star Squad with the idea of putting on a great show, whatever the cost, and he is uncomfortably reminded of the Hunger Games. But the Abernathys are hellbent on revenge, and he can’t convince even Ember to rethink this.

At least Madge, Katniss, Peeta, and Gale agree with him that this is a bad idea, but not even their combined powers of persuasion are enough. They cannot stop any of the Abernathys from going, including Rain, who intends to leave Priscilla behind with Maysilee.

So Cato, Katniss, and Gale join them. They don’t trust Coin’s people to keep them safe.

Boggs guides the Squad through the Capitol, which turns out to be the worst arena that Cato has ever seen or experienced. They lose member after member of the so-called Star Squad to pod after pod, including Boggs himself.

As Boggs lies dying, he looks around at the surviving Star Squad and decides on Cato, whom he apparently judges as holding himself together the best. “Don’t trust them. Don’t go back. Do what you came to do. Do everything you can to protect them,” he croaks as he transfers the holo.

His dying words reinforce what Cato has suspected all this time: Coin doesn’t intend for any of the Abernathys to return alive.

LXIII

The lizard mutts come for them, their sibilant whispers echoing in the sewers.

Ember.

Haymitch.

Ashton.

Lorraine.
Ashton falls in the fight. His father saves him from a grisly death and propels him toward the ladder that the others are climbing. But the lizard mutts keep attacking, pulling them off the rungs and forcing others to jump off to save each other, to the end that none of them are really making it to the safety of the surface because no one wants to leave anyone behind. All the while, the mutts just keep coming and coming.

Cato sees the resolution in Haymitch’s face.

“Dad?” Ember cries when her father jumps down from the ladder. “Dad, what are you doing?”

Haymitch pauses from his position at the base of the ladder, fending off the lizard mutts from yanking any more of them down. “Keep climbing!” he yells, and Cato has to bodily pull Ember up. Gale and Katniss help him with her brother and sister, who have joined Ember in a panicked chorus shouting for their father.

When he sees they’re all safe, Haymitch manages a faint smile. “I love you,” he mouths to his children, before the mutts swarm him.

Cato activates the holo and drops it in the sewer, where it explodes.

LXIV

In Tigris’s shop, the three remaining Abernathy children huddle together, the occasional quiet sob escaping from their corner. Cressida and Pollux, the only ones left of the film crew, sit silently side by side.

Cato sits with Katniss and Gale. “Coin wants the whole family to die,” he murmurs, almost inaudibly.

“What can we do?” Katniss asks.

“Help them survive the war. Then expose Coin for who she truly is.”

“Easier said than done,” Gale mutters, glancing at Ember and her siblings. “I’m starting to worry that they don’t mind the prospect of dying anymore.”

LXV

Seneca Crane is supervising the flood of Capitol refugees fleeing to Snow’s mansion. They can all tell the moment Rain realizes this, when she gives a small gasp and freezes where she stands.

As if by some sixth sense, the Head Gamemaker’s eyes scan the crowd. They see through the outdated Capitol garb Rain has on, and his expression changes from solemn to slackjawed. Cato sees his lips move: *Rain?*

Moments later, the rebels attack, and Seneca, standing heads above the refugees, is a prime target.

“No! Seneca!” Rain breaks free from Ember and Ashton’s grasps and races for her husband—
because despite what Snow declared, despite the different sides of the war they’re on, Seneca Crane is hers, and she is his.

“Rain, come back!” Ember shrieks, as Cato restrains her from pursuing her sister.

Rain glances over her shoulder at them. “Tell Priscilla that her father and I love her.”

Much, much later, they learn that Mr. and Mrs. Seneca Crane’s bodies, riddled with gunshots, were found together, their hands reaching out for each other.

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**LXVI**

Snow summons Cato to the rose garden where the former president is being kept. This time, Cato has a choice whether to accept.

He does, because if nothing else, he wants to give the overthrown president a piece of his mind—and possibly a punch in the face, if he can get away with it—before Snow is executed.

“You’ve surprised me very much these past two years, Cato. I must congratulate you. Few people manage that.”

This time, Cato will not let the old man decide where their conversation goes. “Do you regret it? Any of it? Everything you’ve done?”

Snow continues to de-thorn the rose in his hand. “Perhaps. Like all men, I wonder what if I had made different decisions. What if I had killed Ember, just like her brother, and made you the sole Victor? What if I had made her the sole Victor? What if I had chosen young Cedric? What if I sent her to Twelve instead of Two after the Games? I could go further and further back: what if I never made Lorraine a Gamemaker? What if I’d had their parents killed during their Games? Somewhere along the way, I made the wrong decision, and now I’ve lost. Such is the challenge of being a leader. Now Coin thinks to take on the Sisyphean task herself.”

Cato follows the seemingly random change in subject. “I don’t suppose you like Coin very much.”

“She is quite like me. And none of us ever likes to gaze upon our true reflection.” Snow admires his rose. “I’ve heard that Coin’s ascension will not go unchallenged, however. I’ve been told that Maysilee Donner, whether she wants it or not, has quite a few supporters.” Snow’s cold eyes meet Cato’s. “I would be careful if I were you.”

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**LXVII**

Cato, Ember, Maysilee, Ashton, Finnick, Annie, Mags, Johanna, Beetee, Wiress, Fucking Enobaria. The only eleven Victors who survived the war. Coin surveys them all, and Cato notes how her gaze lingers on Maysilee a touch longer than anyone else.

“A 76th Hunger Games with Capitol children?” Johanna repeats. “Hell yes.”

Enobaria—bitch that she is, who didn’t even do anything in the war except sit on her ass in the Capitol—concurs.

Maysilee stands before anyone else can vote either way. “By suggesting that we should even consider this travesty, this massacre of even more innocent children, when we have lost so much already,” she tells Coin quietly but firmly, “you are proving yourself to be no different from
Snow.”

Cato thinks Coin’s eyes might be even colder than Snow’s were.

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LXVIII

He’s been so careful, with his eyes peeled for the slightest sign of treachery on Coin’s behalf around Maysilee. But he doesn’t see this coming, because it is too, too, too much like Snow, and surely not even Coin would resort to such methods.

But she does.

“A toast,” Coin announces to the room of those who played an invaluable role in the rebellion, “to a new Panem.”

Maysilee begins to choke.

There is screaming. There is crying. There is a flurry of motion. All too late. “Mom! Mom, no, please!” Ember begs. “Not you too, not you too…”

Cato grabs a stricken, temporarily paralyzed Ashton. “Coin,” he hisses, as Ember and Ashton’s mother’s convulsions weaken.

For the first time in a long time, Ashton’s eyes come to life. And they burn with a vengeance.

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LXIX

Ember can barely hold a glass of water these days without spilling it. So as the only other Abernathy left alive—besides little orphaned Priscilla, who is excluded for obvious reasons—the honor of executing Snow goes to Ashton.

Cato stands with Ember and the other Victors, flanking Ashton as he hefts his bow. He doesn’t know how they found it, but it’s the same bow that Cedric had in the arena. The same bow that Cato used to put the young boy out of his misery.

Hatred alights in Ashton’s eyes, and Cato cannot tell if more of it is for Snow or for Coin.

He gets his answer when his arrow flies and pierces Coin’s heart.

Then Ashton’s second arrows spears Snow’s throat, mid-laugh, and Cato realizes that Ashton’s hatred for both is so immense, it cannot be measured or compared.

As her brother is wrestled away, Ember stares blankly at the carnage. Her fingers tighten around Cato’s. “Is it over now?” she asks tiredly.

“It’s over,” he promises her, hoping this time, it won’t be an empty promise.

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LXX

Someone—Plutarch, Cato thinks—pulls some strings to ensure Ashton is released from custody on the grounds of temporary insanity. Ashton says goodbye to his sister—his only remaining sister—and to his niece, who constantly cries for her mother (Priscilla doesn’t remember her father), before he is shipped off to what’s left of District 12 for recuperation.
By the time Cato and Ember (and Priscilla), Madge and Gale, Katniss and Peeta arrive, he’s gone.

I am a broken man, his letter to Ember reads. Summer’s death is on my hands, and it is her death that eventually, tortuously, torturously, led to the deaths of Mom and Dad and Rain. I tried to atone for my sins by killing Coin and Snow, but the blood will never wash from my hands. I bring only pain and heartbreak where I go, and so I go to where there shall be no one to whom I can bring pain and heartbreak.

I am sorry that I didn’t see you one last time, but I knew that if I waited for you, you would be able to convince me to stay. And you, sweet little Emmy, are too full of goodness to deserve a wretched soul like me.

I am supposed to be your brother. I was supposed to protect you, and Rain, and Cedric, and Summer. I failed miserably, and by leaving you now, after the rest of our family has left us, I continue to fail. Finnick has been a better brother to you than I ever was, and he has no reason to be. You’re better off without me haunting you. Priscilla and your children deserve better than to have to live with an alcoholic, kinslaying, addict of an uncle. If you insist on telling them about me—as I’m sure you will, because you love me more than I have ever deserved—I hope you will only tell them the good parts, so they do not live with the knowledge and shame of the bad.

Cato is a good man. He loves you even more than you love him, and that’s saying a lot. I can rest easy, knowing that he’ll watch over and take care of you for the rest of your lives...although I’m sure, you being you, that you don’t really need him to take care of you. But you’ll let him anyway, because the two of you are stupidly infatuated with each other.

One day, many, many, many years from now, after you have lived a long and fulfilling life, when you finally meet our family again in whatever afterlife there is, give them my love. Because I will never be able to repent enough to join you there.

They never see him again.

LXXI

The only houses left standing in Twelve, after the Capitol’s fire-bombs, are those in the Victors’ Village. Including the house that Ember grew up in.

With everyone else at her back, Ember silently explores the dwelling, filled with the ghosts of many years of joy and sorrow and love. When she reaches her parents’ bedroom, she bursts into tears, and Cato takes her to the meadow where she and her friends used to idle away summer afternoons, where she cries and cries until there are no more tears to shed.

There is no question of them taking up residence in that mausoleum of memories.

The six of them, and Priscilla, all set up shop in some of the never-before-lived-in houses in the Victors’ Village. None of them has any desire to live in the Village at all, but it’s the only inhabitable place until they are able to construct new homes.

One day, Ember asks him, “Do you want to go home to Two?”

Cato thinks of the house that they were so happy in. Thinks of the hiking trails they explored. Thinks of the illusion of paradise they’d fallen for, before it was ripped away from them because they’d committed the egregious sin of falling in love.

Twelve is where her cousin and her friends are. Twelve is where, despite the specters of her family and the souls lost in the fire-bombs, she will thrive again one day. And where she goes, so
does Cato, whether that’s in District 2 or 12 or some uncharted backwater of Panem.

“I am home.”

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LXXII

Madge and Gale decide to get married.

So do Katniss and Peeta.

They ask Cato and Ember to join them, make their Toasting from so long ago official.

By now, Gale and Katniss’s families have arrived in Twelve as well, and they are in attendance at the simple triple ceremony. Madge and Peeta lost their families in the fire-bombings, though, so Cato and Ember aren’t alone in their aloneness.

Well, Ember has Priscilla, at least, who squirms in Primrose Everdeen’s arms.

Cato feels no different when all the papers are signed and everything is official. Husband. Wife. It doesn’t matter what they are called, only that he is hers, and she is his.

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LXXIII

It turns out Cato’s nightmares are the worse between the two of them. More often than not, he’s the one waking her as he thrashes at night, reliving memories of the children he murdered (the boy from Three’s neck snapping under his hands, the girl from Eight screaming as he finishes her off), of the children he didn’t murder (Marvel’s expression of surprise as the arrow punctures his neck, Cedric shrieking as the mutts tear at him). He dreams of the deaths of Ember’s family more than the deaths of his own, because he was present for all of hers, and none of his. (His father was executed for being such a high-ranking Capitol loyalist. Cato does not mourn him, because now his memories of his father are poisoned. If his father was like Coin, and Coin was like Snow…)

Often, he is jolted awake and finds his head in Ember’s lap as she strokes his hair, just like when he first awoke on the hovercraft out of the Quell arena, back when they were only half-damned and not yet fully-damned. During one of these episodes, he tells her, “I love you,” and he realizes this is the first time he’s said so out loud, to her.

Her returning “I love you” is also her first. When Cato falls back asleep afterwards, his slumber is restful.

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LXXIV

Madge’s belly grows round, and soon a new little Hawthorne arrives in the world.

Katniss and Peeta don’t immediately follow suit, but that’s out of choice. When they finally do decide to have kids (or rather, Katniss decides she’s ready), it doesn’t take long.

No such miracle comes for Cato and Ember.

Mrs. Everdeen tells them that usually a miscarriage shouldn’t affect a woman’s future childbearing abilities, especially not someone as young and healthy as Ember. But considering the circumstances under which the miscarriage occurred, the unknown toxins in the poisonous fog that triggered it…
Ember avoids Cato for days.

When he finally corners her, brooding in the woods, she is wracked by guilt for something that isn’t her fault. He tells her so.

And he tells her, “We have Priscilla.”

Ember finally looks up at him. “We have Priscilla,” she agrees.

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LXXV

Priscilla comes home from school, distressed. “Daddy, someone said you’re not really my daddy,” she cries. “And that Mommy isn’t my mommy.”

Cato hefts her into his arms and exchanges a look with Ember. *It’s time,* they agree. “Cilla, Mommy and I have a long story to tell you, about two people who loved you very much…”

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LXXVI

It’s many, many, many years later, and they have lived long and fulfilling lives. They saw District 12 be rebuilt. They saw Panem change for the better. They saw Priscilla grow up alongside her “cousins,” the Hawthorne kids and the Mellark kids. They saw Priscilla fall in love—with Finnick and Annie’s eldest son, of all people—and get married. They saw memorials erected, some honoring those who died in the Games, some honoring those who died in the war, some honoring the Abernathys in particular.

They saw a world for which they fought and lost and bled so much, a world they once only dreamed of, come to fruition.

The two of them lie in bed at night, and even in their old age, Ember is still the most beautiful thing Cato has ever seen. “I’m afraid,” Ember whispers. “I’m afraid that I’ll die, and after all this time, I still won’t see any of them again. I’m afraid that there’s nothing left after this.”

“They’ll be there. They’re waiting for you. And they can’t wait to see you.”

This, he believes, is not an empty promise.

Ember manages a tired smile. “I’ll finally see Cedric again.”

His weary hand clasps with hers. “Whatever happens after this,” he vows, “I’ll follow you. I’ll be by your side.”

He can feel his remaining hours ticking away from him. So does she. And they are at peace with it, because for all the sorrows and tears they have endured in their lifetime, and at such young ages, they have experienced many more joys and laughs in the many decades since.

*Watch out for her,* they asked him. *Take care of her,* they asked him. And he has. And even as their souls slip out of their bodies, even as they enter that unknown darkness, he still does. He always has, and he always will.

*Fin*

“Time is a game played beautifully by children.” -Heraclitus
In other news, my beta thinks I'm a sadist now. If you need me, I shall keep an eye out for your approaching pitchforks and torches.

This fic started when Arianna Le Fay, the winner of my first oneshot contest for The Sweetest Mockery, gave me the prompt, What if Ember and Cato had played out the 74th HG after all? This was SUPPOSED to be a oneshot (and I guess you can pretend the story ended at the end of Part One and ignore everything that comes after, if you'd prefer a much happier ending), but as you can see, my imagination got away from me and this ended up a rather lengthy threeshot.

AGPBBC, especially Part Three, was hard to write. Contrary to what you may now believe, I don't enjoy making the characters suffer. :P Everything that happened in this fic happened for a reason, and hopefully I managed to convey that well enough to all you lovely readers, but in case I didn't, definitely feel free to leave me a comment or a message and I'll be happy to discuss it.

To my Sweetest Mockery readers: Don't fret! I'm not going the way of George R. R. Martin/Game of Thrones and planning on killing everyone you ever loved in that story. I dislike recycling storylines/plot points/plot devices, so I won't make the Sweetest Mockery-verse characters suffer the same way. That is not to say they won't suffer at all (muahaha-I mean, sorry), but rest assured I'm not going to copy what I did here in AGPBBC.

Thank you so much for reading this story. And I'd be much obliged if you would leave one last comment. :)

End Notes

To be continued...

Comments are much appreciated. Thank you for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!