Underneath it All

by brumously

Summary

Haymitch and Effie share a quiet moment after another year of losing.

"This is our year, I have a very good instinct about these things!" he’d rolled his eyes when she’d announced it on the train, but withheld commentary until much later, after their tributes lost. He ignores most of what Effie says, it’s all self-congratulating, horrific, or idiotic, sometimes all three.

"You’ve got as much instinct as you do sense, Trinket," he’d snapped after the cannon fired and felt a little satisfied when she huffed away to sulk in her bedroom. When she disappears, he ignores it because Effie cries every year and he still thinks she’s more upset about losing out on a promotion than on the loss of life. He tries not to indulge her when she acts so petty.

But that was hours ago and Effie missed dinner, which either meant she was furious at him or she’d snuck out to one of her precious parties with all the other garishly dressed morons in the city. Standing outside her door with a bottle of liquor in one hand, two glasses in the other, he’s still not sure which it is or which one he’d prefer.

There’s silence after he knocks at the door - two, three seconds and then he gets his answer.

"Go away, Haymitch," her voice is shrill as always, but there’s an echo of self-doubt that’s not usually there. He feels sorry for her and he hates that.

He tries the door - it’s locked - and knocks again. “Come on, Effie.” He should just leave her alone, let her be miserable until she grows bored of it. He doesn’t owe her anything, and it pisses him off that he cares enough to be outside her door. “You can’t stay in there all night. People will wonder where you went.”
More silence, and he’s almost ready to give up when the door slides open. When it does, she’s there barefaced and barefooted. He’s seen her in various states of undress: no makeup, no wig, no stupid Capitol clothes but it’s the first time she’s been all three at once and in his drunkenness he can’t hide his surprise fast enough. She almost looks real. Her eyes are red and it’s obvious she’s been crying but there’s no arguing that she’s beautiful.

She catches his look and sighs heavily, rolling her eyes. “It’s rude to stare,” she chides but her heart obviously isn’t in it and she turns away from him, returning to her spot on the bed. It’s not an invitation, but it also isn’t not an invitation and he follows, the door closing silently behind him.

"Don’t worry, you can always get your promotion next year.” Haymitch makes use of her mahogany makeup vanity to pour them each a drink. "At least you got your big, big, big interview. There’s something for your scrapbook." Haymitch’s tone is acidic as he tries to forget the bare-faced young woman behind him and imagine her instead as the fluttery clown she usually is. He might feel a little sorry for her but it doesn’t mean he’s ready to offer up sympathies for her self-created melodrama.

If Effie’s heard his snide comments she doesn’t react to them, speaking soft enough that the sharper edges of her accent disappear. “I think I’m going to quit.”

"You’re not going to quit," his reply is immediate and he doesn’t look at Effie as he crosses the short distance to hand her the glass he hasn’t already been drinking out of. Their hands brush and he wishes he didn’t notice.

"I am," she disagrees with a shake of her head. "I can’t do this anymore, Haymitch. I can’t -" her voice cracks. She shakes her head again and leaves what’s still unsaid hanging between them. It’s treason to not want this: the glory, the excitement. Effie’s not a traitor, even if she does cry when they lose.

It’s the most human he’s ever seen her. They’ve worked together a long time and have even grown to not completely loathe each other. He’s learned a lot of things about her without meaning to: her real hair color, the way she takes her tea, which side of the bed she prefers. Deep down in there somewhere is a spark of human decency that he’s done his best to fan into a larger flame. Sometimes he thinks he can see it, smothered under all the layers of fluff and lace and inches of makeup. She never used to talk like this before and he knows he’s to blame. Any doubts she has about the Games are there because he planted them.

"Don’t be stupid." He’s been standing this whole time and finally takes a seat, mindful to not touch her. He has to remind himself that she’s Capitol even when she doesn’t look it, and he shouldn’t want her as a friend, much less a lover. The truth is he’d miss her but he would rather not admit it to himself. "You ever hear of an escort who quit?"

She hasn’t. People marry Gamemakers or politicians and retire, but they never quit. She sips delicately at her drink and grimaces at the taste. It burns all the way down and she takes another sip before she answers. “I don’t want to go to any parties tonight.” Effie sounds weary and it makes him wonder if there’s more going on in that head of her’s than she lets on.

"So don’t go." Her eyes meet his and she smiles, just a faint curl of her lips instead of the manic grin most people associate her with. Haymitch places his free hand on her’s and he squeezes it gently. It feels more intimate than any moment they’ve ever shared. "Take the night off. I won’t tell."

Effie’s smile spreads, and he smiles back.
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