**Broken Dam**

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**Summary**

Johanna Mason has been through hell and back more times than she cares to count, but even her tenacity has its limitations. And once you've been drowned, how do you learn to trust water again? Post-Mockingjay.
Sometimes her days are excruciating. Sometimes she has problems simply washing her hands or sits in darkness of her house on end for fear of the electricity’s soft, ominous hum, huddling her body of screams when her vision becomes flooded with tides of torture and sparks, or sitting on her porch tying knots in the soft, compliant bark when she remembers the tides swallowed him too.

Flood... tides... swallow... her vocabulary is curiously brimming with water these days.

Brimming...

Part of her keeps reminding herself that she hasn’t had the worst of it, that they reserved that for him. But they still made her unnatural.

What is it that Katniss called herself? A fire mutt?

Maybe she is just that, only for different element.

At times, she tries to live a normal life, spends mornings hauling lumber and firewood for her house. Fire, she likes. Fire is safe. It mirrors her temper, her soul. It’s the water she fears; water that extinguishes the heat, spreads out like nightmare across her skin, absorbing her, flooding her. And after... the dancing light that curdles her blood.

Sometimes she goes out into the woods and practices throwing axes at trees only to realise that there’s no reason to keep it up anymore. She’s safe. The Capitol’s no more. Snow’s no more. I am no more.

The words surface in her mind: “You’re totally safe, Johanna...” The words of the head doctor always make her snort. What did he know about safety, of lack of it? You can’t appreciate what you have... until you don’t have it.

Like her family.

She remembers how she used to hammer her little sister’s braid to the bed post when she didn’t want to babysit her. How her older brother used to smack her on the head before he went to the woods every morning and how she always got him in a headlock when he came back in the evening. They, too, were taken away.

And just when she built a surrogate one with the mentors, she was forced into arena to fight them. Killed a few, too. Friendship can only go so far, it seems.

Cecelia had three kids...

She remembers how her brother went out. A tree fell on him, supposedly. There were no witnesses to the accident. For the vast expanses of forest and not one man in sight? If word weird ever had meaning, this was it.

More followed then. More accidents. Her sister drowning in a river one unfortunate morning. Her
father shot by a drunken Peacekeeper. Her mother slitting her wrists...

That one was not an accident but the last line of defence.

Each time she refused to sell herself, more corpses grew ripe for the graveyard. All she loved was soon flushed out.

Then she had only her own life to make a living hell.

Sometimes they took it out on her tributes.

Too many kids from 7 died under her guidance. In a suspicious bout of wildfire or a landslide, sometimes they made their shelters in crevices that came swarming with vipers at night, others made a meal out of innocent looking treeworms that somehow combusted their stomachs later—that was a particularly gruesome year.

They may pretend not to notice, but all mentors bear the scars.

Grove—that was the name of the last girl she mentored. She had gotten six in the training. Only sixteen. Naïve, harmless kid. Not too skilled with an axe. But like others, she was fair game.

Like me.

“You know, Gale, their faces never really go away.” she says. “But it’s pathetic to admit it, so you just toughen up and brag about invincibility, pretend not to see them when they creep up on you.”

“That’s what you do.”

“And isn’t that preferable to sniffling like a little brat?”

She once sniffled that way, during her games—a mask she wore to fool her enemies. But has she ever stopped wearing masks?

Gale just says, “Think she’ll ever forgive me?”

She almost growls. They’ve been over this a hundred times already, and frankly she’s tired of digging up ghosts.

“Think you should stop thinking about her. Let her live. She’s got little enough reason to already.”

“She’s got him.” A frown comes with the statement and Johanna feels a scowl tugging at her lips.

“And?” she raises an eyebrow. “You’re the one who turned tail, moron.”

“Yeah, nice of you to remind me,”

She smirks, “That’s what I’m here for.”

“Is that the only thing you’re here for?”

It’s a question she’s asked herself often. What is she doing here, in District 2, of all places? The answer is hard to admit without embarrassment. Escape would be a sufficient word, she guesses.
She couldn’t bear 7 with its ghosts and water.

Water.

When she came back to her home district she found it overrun. Flooded. Soil turned into lakes and puddles, trees uprooted—young sequoias and birches and pine. Pine. Her favourite. If she ever had a child, she would’ve named her Pine. Why her, you ask? Because girls are a lot less trouble to hear her speak it. Ironic, considering all the mess she and Katniss have caused over last few years.

A broken dam. A dam broke during an attack on 7. She doesn’t know how it happened or who did it. The rebels blamed it on Capitol and the Capitol blamed it on rebels and so forth, the same old dance, same dull moves.

The first time she saw it, it felt something of a joke. A sick, twisted joke someone like Snow would play on her and she felt the chill and panicked, cried, and it didn’t help that the man was already dead to cause any harm. He sank in a pool of his own poison.

It’s funny how water has dominated all aspects of her life lately, from simple bathroom issues to her vocabulary and home. If only the memories would wash away so easily...

“Maybe.” she retorts, choosing not to reveal her thoughts. “What’s it to you?”

“Just curious,” he shrugs, not pushing it.

Maybe that’s why she likes his company. Obviously he’s not too hard to look at, but it’s the fact that he knows to shut up when she needs him to is what makes him that much of a valuable companion. Plus he’s about the only person she knows in this damn place. It sure beats being alone.

But she’s never alone, not really, and that’s what terrifies her the most. If she doesn’t seek out people, the ghosts will seek her and those you can’t flush out with rude comments.

Today, Gale offered her to teach her to fish. At first she threatened to chop him down to a splinter, then to shove her axe helve so far up his ass he’d be shitting timber for weeks and added that he’ll be pissing resin, if he ever suggests anything so idiotic ever again, from the kneejerk she’d deliver to his crotch, just for a good measure. Her big brother would’ve been so proud. Though some of these she actually heard from Blight.

Then, she thought about what his offer meant.

Water is safe, life-sustaining, it provides food and drink. That’s what he wanted to show her and that can only be achieved by having no other choice but to depend on it.

And so she found herself here, strolling the woods high in the hills of District 2, following a brisk mountain torrent upstream with Gale Hawthorne as her guide, searching for a place with current wide and shallow enough for them to start.

They set up camp on a clearing under the open sky. Gale prepares the necessary equipment—the weapons, his game bag... he even sets up a tent—the only one they have, but big enough to hold three,—while she gathers firewood.

There’s very little Johanna knows as much about—besides killing—as wood. Her brother may have been a lumberjack, but her father was a carpenter as was her sister—her brother lacked the delicate skill for fashioning wood into anything other than a stump. Though a mere apprentice, Johanna remembers just what lustres her sister could carve before the Capitol’s revenge engulfed
and consumed her. The ornate chess set she made for their mother’s birthday, for one. The thought of her sister brings out a sparingly familiar sense of longing, of emotional drought left in her absence.

*Water... it was water that took her away too.*

She re-joins Gale just as he’s working away at a thick branch with his knife. He can kill fish with his bow and arrow, but makes a forked spear for her to use. She misses her first catch just barely.
Chapter 2

Gale was the first one to climb into the chilly waters of the mountain spring, taking off his boots before he did so, allowing his toes to sink into a mixture of gravel and sand made meek by the current.

"See? It's completely safe." he said.

It's meant to be reassuring, but his words merely set off the memory of 13's head doctor "You're totally safe..." address, tinged with lightning-quick flashes of sweat-soiled Peacekeeper uniforms and excruciating tingle of electricity.

For that moment in time, Johanna stands on the bank paralysed. What could a guy hiding in a city of caverns know about safety anyway?

For anyone in Panem, safety is an alien concept—Gale should know better than to say that.

She barely suppresses a snide comment.

She takes his hand when he reaches out, though, and follows him into the stream, unlike him leaving her boots on. For the start, she wishes to have as little contact with the liquid as possible and to his credit, he knows better than to protest.

Her soles send soft splashes rippling across the steady surface of the river and Johanna is mortified as stray droplets worm their way through the chinks and crevices in her worn leather boots, raising her hands to her mouth as if to chew on her fingers. A detail of the stubs adorning her fingers does not escape Gale as he firmly grasps her stiff hand. In the past weeks, Johanna has gnawed through all ten of her nails, including her lower lip.

His free arm coils around her waist as he eases Johanna further away from the bank and into the stream. She doesn't shrug him off once she regains her senses, nor does she try to move away.

The water is cool, she notes, as cool as the morphling that eased her trauma back in District 13, not ice-cold the Capitol has used, not lukewarm like freshwater in the arena. It's clear and smooth across the round rocks, almost soothing... Or perhaps that's merely the result of the comfort of not facing this menace alone, emanating from the closeness of Gale's body.

He hands her the spear and leans forward to guide her hands toward prey swimming by.

"You don't have to baby me," she huffs and he instantly lets go.

And truth is he doesn't, she's watched Finnick do this countless times during his games and the Quell. He made it seem easy and graceful—how hard could it be, and could there ever be a better teacher?

But it turns out that despite her reflexes and prowess with an axe, and the weeks of training for battle she had to miss out on in the end, give her no edge. The moves stretch and strain muscles sparsely before used. She misses the first fish just barely, the second with much wider angle.

Gale, however, nocks an arrow attached to a thin trace and kills the first fish of the day easily.
Weary frustration is quickly replaced by anger once she notices the smug grin crowning his lips and there's nothing to fuel Johanna's killer instincts more effectively than rage in its starkest form. She slashes viciously with her spear, piercing surface in a succession of abrupt moves and soon impales her third fish.

Gale simply chuckles as he removes an arrow from his fifth. Johanna makes it a point to wipe all hints of amusement off his face when the butt of her spear flies out to greet his jaw, but soon after chuckles, too. She's made more progress in one afternoon where entire months of therapy failed her.

In silence, Gale cleans their catch, with her watching his knife work at the scales attentively. She finds her eyes skipping from his fingers to his furrowed brows and the tense line of his mouth as he concentrates and smirks when he doesn't notice her staring.

She finds that she enjoys his particular brand of silence, filled with scraping noises of metal on bones, the shallow hiss his nose makes upon breath, the rustling of his jacket and pants as he shifts seated on the soft moss covering the ground. It blends perfectly with the mild air and chiming leaves, the occasional trill of a songbird. There's no doubt that this is where he belongs—the woods, and the familiarity of their surroundings and smells gives her a sense of home, but it's the qualities that are so distinctly his that break the isolation and loneliness of the weeks passed, the terror of her self-induced solitary confinement. Ultimately it is his presence that really grants her the long desired peace.

They make tea of pine needles and roast a few fish over the fire, eating them with baked chestnuts and fresh blueberries.

They tell each other stories and laugh, and avoid thoughts people that would pull them back into their worlds of grief. Drink from a flask of liquor he brought for emergency purposes, but even Johanna doubts it was ever honestly meant to be used as disinfectant.

She tells him of her family and he of his, of trouble his brothers used to get up to, of Posy's stubbornness, of his childhood friends and the afternoons they skipped school and led girls onto slag heap to be kissed...

Nobody mentions Katniss. Nobody thinks of Prim.

Right then, right there, they're almost healed with barely visible scars.

Not until the night pulls them under surface.

"You're not coming in?" Johanna asks as she retires into the tent for the night.

"Sure," is all he says.

They scoot close for heat and don't bother setting up a watch.

This is not an arena, Johanna reminds herself. There's no Careers to rip you apart, even if it's their District.

She closes her eyes with a light head.

Nightmares with children standing on the dam and falling to their deaths invade her sleep, sirens calling them; she's never seen sirens, only heard of them from Finnick's stories, but in her mind they were horrible beasts of foam and lightning that gnawed the skin off her charges with pointed, prodding teeth. Then the dam breaks apart and the roar of water drags her down among the corpses where Snow surfaces, splashing along, with his puffy lips still coated with blood from the
feast. A merry, gurgling laughter erupts from his mouth, spraying her with rose-scented blood, and she screams.

The gurgling does not fade when she wakes.

That night neither of them sleeps, though they pretend to for a long while.

He may be wondering if she still wants to carry through her threats and intends to strategically do it in the dead of the night, but the truth is he has ghosts of his own to occupy him till dawn.

"I can hear the river all the way over here." she says at last. The sound reminds her of thousand bath taps running at once, gurgling water and splashing it against ground. Against her.

He grips her hand and she's not sure whether to comfort her or steady himself instead.

"I saw her," he whispers, face pale and sprinkled with droplets of cold sweat.

He doesn't have to elaborate; she knows exactly who he meant.

She spares no sympathy for him when she speaks, "So you get hunted by a kid in your sleep. Terrific! Multiply the number by a few dozen and join the damn club."

He sits up as speedily as if she had slapped him. She might as well could've, if her tone was any indication. She can see his fists clench and unclench in the dimness of the tent.

"It's not that," he says when silence washes over them. "Everyone gets bad dreams, having seen as much as we did, but... by far the worst nightmare is being awake, knowing that this is reality you can't wake up from. That I'm the one who caused it, that it was my bomb and I know it... she knows it—that's the worst of all."

Johanna thinks back to her Victory Tour, how it was to face the families of the kids that died to put her there on the pedestal across from the elevated platforms of their loved ones, the screens projecting the faces of the dead... The first two districts—Twelve, Eleven—were horrible, as was Nine, but as the days went on she built up certain immunity to pathos, became number as the banquet in the President's mansion drew near. By the end, she merely stood with her shoulders slouched slightly and recited her script in droning monotone, her eyes looking but not seeing. All the districts blurred into something surreal, something so excluding her presence, she could've sworn she's only seen it all on television.

Her voice sounds almost weary by the time she speaks again, "There was a war. People die all the time in wars; they're always someone's children, loved ones..." But then she thinks of what she has lost and what he has yet to loose and finds the boiling point of her temper again. "So stop pitying yourself like you're the first person life screwed over. It's pretty insulting." she finally snaps.

Her words resonate in the relative silence of the night for a moment, echoed only by the insistent creaking of the cicadas, questioned by an occasional howl of an owl.

Then, in a calm voice, almost timid in its quality, he says: "You don't understand, Johanna, Katniss was my best friend."

"And now you'll have to find new friends. Big deal," she rolls her eyes. "People leave all the time, Gale; they don't need their siblings blown up for that to happen."

She's disgusted. She knows she's being too harsh with him, that he's new to this whole guilt and nightmare business, but if she despises something more than the shell she's become, then it's
whiners and he needs to learn.

"But Prim was like a sister to me and I'm—" he starts, but she never lets him finish.

"Damnit, Gale, are you so caught up in obsession with a single person that you can't see what you have?"

When he makes no effort to respond, she decides on expanding her argument further: "You have your brothers, your sister, a mother... I have nothing. They took them all and didn't even leave the scraps." Finally, she sits up, looking him hard in the eye, "You have everything to live for. What does Katniss have? And Annie? What do I have?"

"You have me." he suggests.

"For these five minutes, tops." she scoffs, yet can't help but grin slightly.

Somehow they find themselves only inches apart, their bodies tense with anticipation and breath almost non-existent. He's the first one to move forward, closing the distance in between as he presses his lips onto hers lightly and inquisitively, as if only testing her response.

It's her who grabs him by the shoulders and kisses him back with fervour. It's she who climbs onto his lap, effectively pinning him underneath. She's not the one of idle affections; Johanna Mason is the force of nature and Gale Hawthorne seems to be okay with it as their lips collide repeatedly.

"Well, here's hoping that'll last more than five minutes." she mutters in between ragged breaths.

Gale chuckles and rolls over and this time it's she who's been dominated, and Johanna Mason seems to be oddly okay with that.

At the peak of their passion he calls her Katniss, but what does she care?

She's nothing but a broken dam.

Chapter End Notes

Finished for all intended purposes, but shall be continued if there is inspiration and interest.
Dawn rolls over and they have barely slept.

Their bodies united to fight off the midnight ghosts, but does the hour of ghosts ever really end? It’s their hearts that house them, not the night. The dark merely makes their pale forms visible.

When Johanna rises from the tent, Gale has already stirred the ashes into a steady fire and sits by bare-chested, waiting for his freshly washed shirt to dry.

She gives him a long appreciative look before she speaks.

“Hey, gorgeous,” she pipes up casually, as if to cover that she had just spent several seconds more on observing the muscles of his shoulders loosen and clench than to raise any suspicion.

He turns his head slightly to meet her eye, “Hey.”

Johanna suspects that this is purely deliberate and the shirt didn’t really need washing at all, but she isn’t about to complain.

“So what’s for breakfast?” she asks, squatting down next to him.

“Leftovers.” he shrugs. That moment of negligence is quickly followed by a playful smirk, however, “Need something washed too?”

Her eyebrow rises high above the arc of its socket, “That a way to coerce me into a striptease in the bright of day?”

“Maybe.” he admits.

His impish honesty makes her giggle, of all things, “Not a chance, Hawthorne.” she says and almost entertains the idea of sticking out her tongue for dramatic effect.

He, however, leans in closer, his nose barely touching hers, “I’ll take my chances.” as his mouth starts descending to meet hers, though, Johanna pushes him away—gently, not enough to come across as prudish or aggressive, but enough to show her discomfort, enough to provoke a brisk retreat.

“Let’s not make this a habit, Gale.” she says simply, robbing him of explanation. He simply nods and starts preparing their morning meal.

It's different, she finds, when the sun is sneaking its beams through the needles and leaves of trees around with its pale morning tint swirling the wispy clouds forward. They’re no longer two shadows blotting into one another in the greyish night. The daylight makes their closeness more intimate and conscious and that is simply way beyond Johanna’s usual comfort zone.

The fact that a certain Mockingjay has interfered on her sex life might also be a contributing factor.

It was her name that he moaned when the lights of day went out. Katniss, he said. Not Johanna.
Maybe that name had a better ring to it and might even be all around cooler, but Johanna was hardly amused by the slip up.

At least it had prevented her from bedding with the cadavers for one night, if nothing else.

Gale warms up the rest of the roasted fish over fire and she digs through her pack for supplies she’d brought along. She lays out a small loaf of bread shaped like a leaf and made with coarse acorn meal of 7. It has gone a little stale, so they break it off to bits, toast it and smother it in honey. It tastes just the slightest bit bitter on its own, but the sugary substance enhances it into a treat. They eat the fish and wash it down with water boiled with raspberry leaves, then pop a few fresh berries into their mouths. For a little moment, with her belly warm and full, Johanna feels almost at home.

She lays her head on Gale’s bare shoulder and heaves out a sigh of what appears to be content. He makes no move to touch her, worrying, perhaps, that she would refuse his fingers just like she had his lips mere minutes ago. For now, he settles for the song of finches high up in the trees and she seems to do the same.

“So,” she finally speaks, straightening herself up. “Was that your first time?”

He’s not as dumbstruck as he should be, considering. He merely shrugs at first, then says, “No, not really.”

Her arched eyebrow demands details, so hesitantly, he provides them, a hint of blush darkening his olive face, “There was a girl in the Capitol, a few nights after the war had ended. I got drunk and... just needed a way to cope that didn’t involve violent tantrums or suicidal tendencies.” She nods, knowing her temper required the same at times. He continues: “There wasn’t any point trying to save it up for a special someone after...” he trails off before his mind can put the image to the thought. He grimaces, “Never saw her again. Guess I was pretty spectacular.”

She laughs at the expense of his self-deprecation, but somehow during his talk her hand snaked its way up to squeeze his shoulder reassuringly.

“So what’s her name?” she quips to keep the conversation going.

“Is it really horrible of me to say that I have no idea?” he asks. “I wasn’t really into researching her family tree there and then.”

She smirks, “Hey, so long as you remember my name the next time, it should be fine.”

The blush on his tawny skin deepens at that. “Sorry.”

A single word. That’s all he has to say about last night’s incident. She expected no less but even so his response feels rather underwhelming; Gale is a man of few words and even less apologies. Considering the trauma of the last few months, the losses and the stress they’d been going through, she decides not to hold a grudge.

Old trees are hardest to cut, she tells herself. They grow thick and sprout too deep to uproot.

In the end, they all end as tinder or paste to make into paper, but it’ll take more than one night of desperation to fell this one.

A silence follows in which finches’ song again fills their ears.

Then she asks, “Was there any girl besides Katniss you liked?”
It may sound as prying, but Johanna doesn’t care, she’s genuinely curious. Gale doesn’t seem to mind. It’s another distraction, like their little midnight tryst. For him, though, it means a chance to finally open up.

“A few.” he says and she’s not surprised. He has never struck her as a single woman type of guy the way Peeta had. “Took some of them to the slag heap, stole a few kisses but it largely meant nothing. Just something to brag about.” He pauses and his facial muscles convulse in something like anger and grief mingling with guilt and perhaps a pinch of fear, and for a moment she almost regrets the choice of subject. Briefly.

“There was one girl, though. I was kind of a jerk to her.” his voice sounds strained and he’s visibly struggling to push the words from his throat, searching hard for those shreds of vocabulary that do not conjure up a visual. “She was beautiful and rich and played the piano and loved strawberries. And I hated her guts. Not because she was stuck up, popular and classist mayor’s daughter—but because she should’ve been. You see, Johanna, she was anything but. She was kind, she was quiet and ridiculously overpaid Katniss and I for those strawberries. I insulted her and she returned the burns in witty banter. There was nothing pretentious about her—except that she had a hot shower and full meal to put on the table each evening. That she spent idle hours creating melodies instead of snares to catch game with. There was nothing spoiled or coddled about her—except she lived in a house with a roof that did not leak on rainy days, with a fireplace that never really went cold when weather called for heat. She suffered just like any of us, really, but I needed something to blame—something closer and more tangible than the pampered folks at the Capitol of which I saw only one person per year. You see, I didn’t really hate her, but I felt I had to.” He laughs with a certain perplexity to his voice when he admits: “The fact her soft blue eyes could see right through me didn’t help either.”

Johanna is nearly certain she knows who he’s talking about—back in Thirteen, Katniss and her used to talk about those they had lost in those rare moments of unguarded sentimentality—still, she wants to be certain when she says, “Madge.”

She can see his body tense up at the cluster of sounds, moving a few inches aback as if burnt by a stray flicker of the flame in the front. “Yeah,” he says softly. “Suffice to say, I never took that one to the slag heap, but, man, did I want to.” After a moment of consideration, he adds, “I never got the chance to say thanks either.”

It’s the longest Johanna’s ever heard him talk, though, of course, she knew him briefly compared to most. But his words rang with honesty she doubts he ever shared with anyone before. Certainly not with Katniss. Even as a friend she was territorial, overprotective and possessive, Johanna suspected that breaching this subject would hardly win Gale any patient friendly advice.

“She died in the bombing, hadn’t she?” she asks.

He nods, swallowing hard. And maybe her eyes are playing tricks on her, but she seems to notice that he’s shivering. Droplets of cold sweat glisten on his brow and his fists clench in attempt to steady his temper. “I couldn’t save her. Her house took the first bomb that they dropped.” His nails dig into the calloused flesh of his palm. “She saved my life with the morphling for my back and I couldn’t repay her. I wasted time by being a jerk and brooding in the woods!”

With eyes wide, she tries to console him, “Hey, Gale, it’s okay.” she says. “It’s all past now, there’s nothing you could do.”

But he shrugs her off, “No, Johanna, I could. I could’ve been honest with myself. I could’ve stopped my social injustice diatribes just for a second and say something nice, smile maybe. Admit that the only reason I tried so hard to hate her was because there was no way I could ever have her. Me, a guy from the Seam...” he trails off, shocked that he’s revealed so much already. He had
hoped that saying those things, exposing the chinks in his armour, would lift the invisible burden of guilt off his shoulders, but all he feels is emptiness and nagging voices of thousands that accompany him each day. “That’s what bothers me the most, Johanna. Not Prim. She was the last straw, the nail in the coffin, but not the first one I killed. I let her down, Johanna, I let them down. I let thousands of people die back in Twelve, then killed hundreds with my own hands and snares, I... I can’t go on like this, seeing them grimace at night as flames engulf them, their voices accusing and gloating at me or screaming in agony, crying that it’s my fault... I’m not that strong, I can’t take it... because they’re right, I failed them, I became a tool, a murderer... a... a...” he struggles for words, searching for some that would convey his predicament.

“A victor,” Johanna finishes. He stares at her as if her speech was impeded beyond recognition or foreign like those who once inhabited the lands long before Panem. “You became a victor.” she repeats.

She knows the symptoms, having lived that life for over four years. She knows Gale’s despair. He was whipped, she was tortured; they have both killed and revelled in it—up until the conscience took over. They’re both broken. They’ve both been used and their hands are dripping with red that is not their own.

“Yeah,” he says, confirming her assessment.

Her hand moves forward to cup his cheek gently; her brown eyes instantly seek his.

“Don’t do that.” he says and pulls her hand away yet doesn’t let go.

“Why?” her shrill voice makes the simple pronoun a command rather than a question.

“Because I’m in pain.” he explains. “It doesn’t count if I’m in pain.”

“As was I yesterday,” There’s insistence in her voice that won’t accept a refusal. In their eyes, wood and grey sky meet and from their lips they taste individual torment and grief, pain and abnegation. Not passion, but desperation of a drowning man clinging onto a thread of life that cuts and burns hands yet barely keeps him alive. That is what they feel when their mouths collide. Sweat and blood and screams, flame and water and little sparks that hum and paralyze.

It’s a long kiss.

Her fingers trail the path of scars that zigzag his back. She saw how he got them—it was broadcasted live on the national television, after all. He recoils at the touch as if they still hurt, as if her fingers are made of flaming pain the lash has stirred. He breaks the kiss and stands upright.

“We should go hunting.” he says. “If we want to eat tonight,”

He strolls over to the low bush at the edge of their camp where his shirt has been hung out to dry and puts it on at last.

“What time is it?” she asks.

He peeks at the sun, then the position of shadows mirrored on the ground. “Sometime after noon,” he guesses. “Let’s go.”

Johanna grabs her weapons and follows.
I have decided to continue this story when I happen to have time. It should have six to seven chapters in total. Hope you've enjoyed it so far.
Chapter 4

Johanna decides that she doesn’t want to fish that day. Though she considers yesterday’s activities a small victory in their own right, that doesn’t mean she trusts water any more. What little contact she makes with it today is to rid her face of grime and fill her bottle before her and Gale venture deeper on into the forest to hunt for game. Not less and certainly not more.

He lends her a spare set of bow and arrows and instructs her on the use. He’s hardly as good a shot as Katniss is, but he thinks he makes for a passable teacher. He has Johanna try to shoot cones off the branches of pine trees and chuckles at her frustration when she fails to hit at all or when the arrows get stuck in wood instead, or when the cones fail to fall down. When that happens, he climbs the wide low boughs of the tree to recover them and has her try again. Her aim improves slightly but they still lose a couple of arrows—either they fly off into the great unknown or snap in half due to her marksmanship clumsiness. He shrugs it off, saying that he can always make more of them later.

What he doesn’t need to teach her is how to move silently once the real hunt begins. Her feet tread soundlessly as if her body was one with the earth, merely an extension of the moss and soil underfoot. She is like a dryad, he realises, a creature from stories that she has told him about yesterday around the fire. They’re like the souls of the trees, the guardians of the forest that superstitious people of 7 hold in awe. He had thought that she would not be the type, but hearing her speak of them with such childlike ferocity, Gale was convinced that the remnants of the little girl inside her might believe in them.

For a moment, it almost feels like Katniss is by his side, but he quickly banishes the thought. The eyes of the girl beside him are wooden brown and her hair short, her body leaner and taller than Katniss has ever been, and he finds he rather likes Johanna’s company.

He spots the first squirrel and points it out to her, but when she tries to shoot it, the arrow barely brushes against its tail. She hisses and almost sends the bow smashing against the tree, but thinks better of it in time.

“We’ll go hungry if you keep waiting on my aim to improve.”

He nods, barely suppressing his amusement.

So he teaches her how to tie a twitch up snare instead and allows her to find a suitable game trail. He shoots down a curious pigeon peeping at them from its hideout in the beech leaves. He decides to make a small fire and roast it there and then as they’ve still got a lot of daylight left before they’d have to retreat to their camp. Johanna climbs the beech tree and discovers the pigeon had been warming a number of eggs. They suck them raw and chew on sorrel leaves that they’ve discovered nearby, while the bird roasts.

“So,” she speaks up after a while. “Madge, huh?”

“She was like sunshine,” he says. He pretends to gulp down some water so that he doesn’t have to
elaborate.

Johanna realises that Katniss is by far not the girl whose loss Gale needs to get over.

“So what about you? By now you know all my dark secrets and I hardly know anything about you except that you sometimes kill people and can be pretty rude.” It was his time to ask questions now.

“You got that part down pat.” she smirks, but that fades when it’s time for her share of honesty. “What’d you wanna know?”

He grins, “Tell me about your love life.”

Her tone hints at inner venom and she crosses her arms on her chest. “What’s there to talk about? I don’t really get attached to people like that.”

“I never told that to anyone before, you know.” he stresses in attempt to convince her to open up.

“Then maybe I should open a practice—Johanna Mason, M.D., therapist.” The joke rings hollow when her voice is clanging with annoyance.

He grips her hand and squeezes gently. She tries to resists but finally sighs, “Okay, fine.” She takes a deep breath before beginning her own story. “My first kiss was with a girl—and a fair few after that.”

He quirks his eyebrow quizzically.

“Oh don’t act like that’s a big secret, everyone knows that.”

Not everyone, he thinks. He honestly didn’t, but he doesn’t interfere with her tale.

“So that’s that. And then I also had a crush on Finnick Odair for a few years after he’d won his games, believe it or not.” Her hands dart up to her mouth, but not for the reason Gale might believe. I’ve said his name... she thinks to herself. The name renews her pain. And though her dark eyes are widened and she is visibly shaken, she continues in a seemingly even tone that would fool no one despite her efforts. “When I finally met him after my games, I immediately recognised that I could never think of him as anything else than a friend. A sibling almost,” Another dangerous word, she notes. “He’s just so... not what’d you think he is from the television.” She presses her eyelids together, “Was.” she corrects herself.

Gale nods. “I got to know him, a bit, when we were in the Capitol. He seemed like a good guy.”

“The best.” she mutters.

He notices her swallow uncomfortably and attempts to divert subject. “So you’re—”

“Incredibly warm and welcoming? Yes.” she quips with a small smirk, not caring to wait for what he was going to ask.

”Something like that.” he chuckles. “Anyone special to you?”

She shakes her head, “No, not really. I hardly ever thought of it before the Games and after... well, I had other things to worry about.” Mentoring, waking up screaming from the terrors of the night, threats and her family’s deaths. She mentions none of that, however, she’s not ready to confine in Gale like that. Perhaps she never will. “Never went much further beyond one night stands.”
He doesn’t know what to say. He feels no pity, merely understanding. Wasn’t he ultimately the same? But he knows Johanna doesn’t care for his sympathy—or anyone else’s, so he simply cuts up the pigeon once it’s ready and hands her a piece.

“So why aren’t you returning to 12?” she says while nibbling at the juicy flesh of the bird.

“You know why.” he mutters.

She nods. His logic isn’t really hard to follow.

With a sigh, he continues, “My family went back there when I got the job here. I feel like I should visit, but I wouldn’t even know how to begin to say hello. Or look them in the eye.” He steadies himself by drawing in a shallow breath. “I mean, I did what I had to... doesn’t make it any less horrible in the hindsight, though.”

Just who the pronoun them includes remains unsaid—a mystery to both him and her, dangling in the air like on a silver thread of a spider’s web.

Johanna doesn’t say so, but thinks him a coward for refusing to confront his shame face on. Yet when she realises how she refuses to shower on the best days and can’t turn the tap on the worst of them, how Katniss had to force her into the rain at training in 13, how without Gale she wouldn’t set a foot—or even a tiptoe—into that river, how a puddle-worth of water turned her into a cowering fool on the Block, and suddenly it’s her who feels pathetic.

She steels herself by wiping her greasy hands on the fabric of her pants and then crossing them on her chest while scowling. It doesn’t work. The gesture has always given her an edge, an air of attitude—but never protection, never peace. Today is no different.

The world around her starts shimmering and the soft hum of wind changes into crackling of the sparks on wire...

“And you?” he asks. “Why’d you leave 7?”

She’s so caught up in her inner world of hypnotising buzz and gush of water that she almost doesn’t notice he’s spoken.

“Too many ghosts,” she says at first, but then adds: “Too much time, too. Is it weird that with no Snow, no Games, I just... don’t know what to do with myself?”

He smirks, “Admit it, Jo, you never did.”

“So it’s Jo now? All right, I can take it,” she chuckles, relieved by the change of subject—and more importantly, the mood. “What else you got?”

His smirk widens into a toothy grin when he says, “You’re really pretty, you know.”

No doubt he meant it as a compliment, but somehow the comment rubs Johanna the wrong way. Of all the idle observations he could have made, Gale Hawthorne just had to choose the one most superficial of them all. She never cared for her looks—not when her hair fell out from torture, not when her face got marred by chicken pox in childhood, not when scars split the bridge of her nose, chin and cheek during the Games, not when the Capitol erased all her flaws with cosmetics. It was a stylist’s job to care about visage, not hers. Reducing Johanna to a piece of aesthetics was an insult. And insults made her blood boil.

She channels all her animosity and anger into a simple statement of abrupt definiteness: “Save it.”
Gale, on the other hand, feels puzzled. “What’d I do?” he stupidly asks, not understanding her outburst. He falls silent when a scowl and glare are his answer.

They eat the rest of the bird in silence, accompanied only by the occasional smack as they suck on the bones, a trill of birds overhead, and the mechanical clicking of the insect hidden in the greenery. Johanna tries hard to block out the sinister sound as she licks her fingers clean and wipes them on her trousers for a good measure.

“You should probably get some food.” she says then, finally breaking the silence that has lain heavily between them, her tone sardonic. “I’ll go and pick something, I’m good at that.” She sets out immediately, not waiting for his acknowledgement.

Once out of sight, she hurls her axe at the nearby tree.

“Pretty!” she scoffs. “What an idiot!”

It was all Johanna could do not to put the axe in his face instead, or her fist if nothing else. But she is working towards the set goal of controlling her emotions better, as her doctor had advised—the only piece of advice that has not gone completely over her head.

With equal verve as before, she pulls the axe out of the tree and secures it on her belt. 

_Breathe in. Breathe out._ she reminds herself and follows the simple instructions until her heart is beating steadily.

Another word for Gale’s action springs to mind—_brainless._ A soft smirk plays on her lips at the memory. However much she’d like to deny it, Johanna misses her—the taunting and the late night chats, the silent understanding of each other they had... Maybe she should consider visiting Twelve after her weekend in Two is through. It’s not like she has any tasks to occupy her time and mind.

Except for the one at hand...

Having grown up in the woods, Johanna knows all there is to know about its resources, much like Katniss and Gale do. She knows the edible mushrooms and poisonous berries, several herbal remedies and plants to dry up for spice, she knows trees and which bark makes for an unusual treat and which seeds to pick. She finds a group of young boletuses and blusher amanitas anticipating the mushroom season, picks clean a patch of cranberries and strips bare the nearby raspberry bush, even collects the fallen chestnuts hiding in the grass and plucks clusters of hazelnuts from trees to crack open by the fire. The forest is full of riches to be discovered in this late stage of summer, and there are only a few that Johanna doesn’t know.

But they’re also full of danger lurking around and overhead.

She stuffs the supplies into her backpack next to a can of dried beef, second loaf of acorn bread and a jar of honey. She is just about to head back to the camp when the first droplet falls on top of her head. Immediately, she grasps the short hair that has just recently grown back in and another dozen lands on her shoulders and temple, one sliding down her forehead to melt in her brow. She panics and crashes against the tree behind her; her breath is coming out in ragged wisps and she is unable to find a voice to scream, instead, she clutches her knees with shaky hands, the shiver briskly making its way across her body, jumping from nerve to nerve like electricity. Light pierces
the sky above her and illuminates the forest with beams of radiance through the leaves. Her pupils dilate and a muffled cry that escapes her throat is absorbed by the roar of thunder. Whiteness of a Peacekeeper uniform engulfs her sight, a voice of the wind whispering: “Happy morning, Miss Mason.” Desperately, she tries clamping her hands over her ears in attempt to stifle the memory, but another bolt of lightning combs through the clouds, followed by an outcry of opposite charges meeting.

Of course, having grown up in 7, she knows all about how one shouldn’t dawdle under a tree during a thunderstorm, but she has no strength to prop herself up. The lightning has her mesmerized and the water drops lapping against her skin paralyze the rest. The familiar tingle returns and her muscles begin to twitch with frantic automatism. Briefly, the rain turns to blood in front of her eyes—before a voice calls out her name and the flash of lightning returns her to the dank, tiled room in the Capitol.

Over the hum of the device entrapping her, she can make out a boy’s scream coming from the adjoining room. Peeta. The Peacekeeper speaks at her, but his words blend into an endless string of guttural growls and throaty laughs that send jolts of pain through her dampened skin—whether with water or sweat matters not. She is cold; she is alone but for the alternating laughs and shrieks that are soon joined by her own. With another jolt of current, they’re muffled into a whimper.

She feels pathetic.

A roar shakes her body and she cannot tell whether it is another thunder or shooting of a gun. She can feel the copper taste of blood in her mouth, though—hers, or someone else’s? Who knows... her consciousness is wavering.

Then someone is shaking her shoulders, gently, saying her name for about a dozen times.

“Johanna? Johanna, can you hear me?”

She squints, trying to bring the blur of shadows into smudges of colour, then to focus them into solid shapes.

“I know you,” she mutters. “Gale Hawthorne. From TV.”

The soldier scoops her carefully into his arms.

“Yes, you do, we’re friends.” he says.

“Friends...” That doesn’t make any sense. She doesn’t know him. Not personally. He’s Katniss’s cousin—fake cousin, to be exact. They never met.

“Hang on tight, Johanna.” he tells her and she circles his neck with her arms. Her head bobs back and forth as he runs and through the haze of memories, as the cold water soaking her brow stirs her mind into action, she realises that he isn’t wearing the dark grey uniform of District 13 and that the strips of light they’re passing aren’t fluorescent tubes of the Capitol’s underground facilities but gaps between trees surrounding them, and for the first time, she remembers that it was Gale who has rescued her from the confinement of her prison cell and carried her to safety, much like he does now when they finally reach their camp and she is lain down into the dry warmth of the tent.

He takes off her wet clothes and wraps her in his jacket, fills bottles with boiling water to warm up her sleeping bag and pulls it over her bare legs and up, almost to the tip of her nose; lastly, he presses her to his chest to give her as much heat as possible. She struggles against his efforts as if he were just another Capitol lackey, but he cradles her like a fragile doll and whispers of safety.

“It’s okay, they’re gone; the Capitol’s gone, they’re not going to take you again. I won’t let them.”
Slowly she eases into the illusion and his embrace. “We’re safe, they can’t get us now.”

She sneers to herself. Lies. So many lies. If only she could believe them.

They will always hunt her, even as ghosts—and those are much harder to destroy.

“The water...” she mutters.

“The water can’t get in here, I promise. You’re safe.” he repeats.

Tears flood her vision and her lips are quivering, “Here I am, snivelling like a little brat.” she groans weakly.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs and presses a kiss into her hair. “No cameras around here and my lips are sealed.” he jests.

Instead of smiling, she can’t help but scorn the intimacy forming between them. “I told you not to do that.”

“I can go away, if you like.” he offers, drawing away a bit.

“No,” she turns and looks into his eyes—grey as the skies outside, but unlike them non-threatening, offering to be her safe haven. “Stay.” she orders because Johanna Mason never begs, not even when desperate. There is but a single ultimatum to be had: “Just no more kisses.”

He nods and his arms envelop her as a python snake. Exhausted, she briefly contemplates whether the heat his body emanates could possibly be comfort, but isn’t sure if she is capable of discerning such feelings and their consequences, as it were, even with her head clear and bright. For now, she allows herself to lose herself in the lie—the imaginary safety of his arms. She’ll allow herself that false thought. For now.
When she wakes several hours later, Gale is skinning a big, fat squirrel for dinner.

“Hi, gorgeous.” she whispers.

“Hey,” he says and cuts up the animal into a bunch of bite-sized cubes. “Have a good sleep?”

“No.” she says bluntly and even had she lied, he wouldn’t believe her. Few people go thrashing about in a peaceful slumber. In her dreams, she was floating atop the foamy sea water until the rains came and the droplets’ icy sting dragged her underneath where the schools of neon-coloured fish tore her flesh to pieces to eat.

She shifts up and sees that the kettle over the fire has been filled with rainwater cleaned with a few drops of iodine and set boiling. She catches scent of juniper and other spices she has gathered in the woods before, notices a plate of cleaned mushrooms and a pot of cranberry mush.

She cocks her eyebrow, asking, “Making stew?”

“Yes,” he nods, throwing chunks of meat in the kettle for simmering.

Johanna finds a pouch of raspberries she picked before the storm came and pops a few in her mouth to stop her stomach from rumbling too audibly. The bird they shared in the woods was way too small in size to fill her for long and her body requires more.

“How long was I out?” she asks whilst chewing. Johanna Mason has no time for proprieties such as swallowing a bite before engaging in a conversation.

The light’s grown dimmer outside the camp, but it’s not yet time for sundown, she thinks.

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“About two and a half hours, maybe more.” he answers, adding some more ingredients in the pot.

It’s her turn to nod.

Gravely silence engulfs them both, interrupted only by the low crackling of fire and the bubbling stew. Johanna thinks back to her youth in District 7 and remembers how uncommon it was for a man to make his own dinner. She recalls the bearded face of her father coming home from work and the smell of her mother’s chestnut soup to which, if they were lucky, she sometimes added bits of seared bacon. Her father would dunk bits of coarse grain bread in it to soften the crumb as they were rarely able to afford the sweet bakery bread. Not many men in 7 could cook as the stove was ever thought of as a woman’s domain—a position which, later in her adolescence, Johanna firmly opposed as she did with nearly anything and everything.

When not cooking or doing chores, her mother would sit in a creaky old rocker and sing old ballads of magical forests and the creatures that lived within. She would swing back and forth in her chair and tell stories of spellbound woods and knights—the first time Johanna had ever heard that word—that would come hacking and sawing through the thick underbrush with their swords and save the princess trapped in a tangle of thorns where the evil witch bound her. Johanna would imagine living in one such tale, although it would be her, not a knight, saving damsels and noblemen from the captivity. All the while, her mother would be weaving ropes from tree bast or baskets from wicker twigs.
Their house would always smell like candlewax and wood and on winter nights, she and her sister would huddle in a bear skin in front of the fireplace and dream. Silly things, mostly, she recollects, and she would oft laugh at her little sister’s ideas and call her an idiot,—but what wouldn’t she give to get these moments back once her sister was gone. What wouldn’t she give for her mother’s song and her father’s burly laugh and even her brother’s teasing for which he’d earn bits of chopped up firewood hurled at his face. Johanna has ever had a particularly dangerous aim with wood and axes alike.

“I’m sorry.” Gale says out of the blue, ripping her out of her bitter nostalgia.

“What for?”

“Being an ass,” he shrugs. “Belittling your problems and focusing on mine. Doesn’t matter that you didn’t bring them up, because... compared to what you’re going through? I’ll take the nightmares any day.”

Somehow the form of his apology provokes a minor spit of venom from her. “Don’t make a fragile doll, either; I hate that, too.”

“You’re a hard woman to please,” he notes.

“Like you’d know a whole lot about pleasing women anyway, Mr Almost-Virgin.” she retorts.

“Point.” he admits.

“What? No more angst?”

“That’s hardly appropriate, I admitted being a jerk.”

“I’m Johanna Mason, it’s practically my job to make distasteful comments.” she smirks weakly, still weary from her storm episode.

“Noted,” he chuckles.

No words were shared for a while, the only sound piercing the quiet being the rustling of leaves and the bubbling of stew boiling over fire. In spite of Gale’s honest efforts at cooking, it would be Johanna to give the stew much desired flavour, all the while chewing on the soft, sweet bark she’d scraped from the young twigs before the storm overtook her.

It was hot and filled their veins with heat as they gorged themselves later, eating it with roasted chestnuts and dipping toasted bits of District 7’s acorn bread into the stew. To Johanna, it tasted of home, to Gale it tasted of new beginnings. It was an honest meal of the fruits the woods offered, spicy and full, a simple dish made of resources at hand that no longer recalled the scarcity under Capitol’s rule.

He hasn’t had a meal that good in weeks. District 2’s military canteen offers little to compare.

“You know I never got to thank you?” Johanna says. “For dragging me out of Capitol, I mean. So... thanks, I guess. Better now than never, right?”

“Don’t mention it,” he shrugs, focused on chewing up the mushrooms in the stew. “I did what any soldier would. It was my duty.”

“Yeah,” she nods and pops a cranberry into her mouth. “But it wasn’t me you came to rescue. It was Peeta. Without him there, I’d still be rotting in that cell. Electrocuted. Coin wouldn’t risk
Plutarch’s contacts for a psycho from the Lumber District, so I wanted to let you know that I’m thankful, for putting your ass on the line to get me out of there, important to the cause or not.”

He accepts her thanks silently, along with a spoonful of the food, creasing his brows as if contemplating.

“You were so cold that day. Like there was so little left in you to resist.”

“Hey, even if I died that day you pulled me out of there, I would’ve died free. That’s what matters to me, none of this sentimental bullshit.” She rolls her eyes. He doesn’t get it, no one who hasn’t endured capture ever will. “Still, I’m grateful.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m grateful, too.” he says.

“That so? What for?” she cocks her eyebrow in curiosity.

“That we got you out. That you mattered. We wouldn’t be having this wonderful conversation otherwise.” He stressed wonderful in a mocking, but not unkind way. After all, her company is what keeps him sane for the moment, prevents him from wallowing in self-pity and recounting his faults and flaws, the losses suffered this last year, all of his kills... And that’s how he realises it. It’s not a simple need for a hunting partner or a person to talk his problems through. He genuinely likes her. Her comments, the jokes, the way she calls him out on his bullshit without remorse...

Johanna Mason is, he supposes, the closest thing he has after his own family. The notion is scary and intriguing alike.

“Well doesn’t that warm the heart.” she quips, mimicking his own tone and takes care to punctuate the statement with a smile. Oddly accurate remark, considering the direction of his thoughts.

“Ever the warm one, are you, Jo?”

“As I’ve said yesterday—incredibly so.” she nods and smirks playfully. But the playfulness of the moment lasts only for a fleeting second as a thought comes to her mind.

“Have I ever told you how my family died?”

He shakes his head. Of course not—only two people besides her knew, one of which is dead and the other is in a constant alcoholic stupor, so probably as good as dead.

She takes a deep breath and begins a story so few people had the privilege to hear. It’s a secret that urges her to confine, to clear up what muddled skies had hung over her and Gale Hawthorne this entire weekend.

“You’ve heard what Capitol did to its victors, I’m guessing?” she asks. It was a trivial question, really; the entirety of Panem knew of Capitol’s machinations now, thanks to Finnick’s painful confession. They were a commodity for President Snow, meat to be offered and sold if it dared to resist death in the butchery of the Hunger Games. Johanna resisted the practice and paid the price.

“So it’s true, then? All of you were forced to do it?” he asks.

“Not all of us.” she shakes her head. “Only those thought attractive—of which Capitol’s doctors usually made sure. But yeah, they tried to force me, too.”

The words were unbearable on her tongue, bitter and sour at once, so she popped another raspberry in her mouth in hopes that its sweetness would banish the disgust. He remained quiet,
allowing her to tell the story at her own pace.

“

Tried being the keyword.” she continues. “I refused, so... I got an ultimatum. As Finnick said, each time you refuse they hurt someone you love—except hurt is a terrible understatement when it comes to Snow and his loyal crew of freaks. I refused once—an accident followed...”

She finds a piece of branch chopped up for their fire and digs her nails into the wood to ease the mental pain, replacing it with the kind that’s tangible.

“My brother was the first to go, they claimed a tree fell on him; next... my little sister drowned, my father was accidentally shot by a peacekeeper. No one believed the accidental part, of course, no one in the Districts is dumb enough to.”

Gale remembered a convenient incident involving a few of the Twelve’s vocal rebel supporters and a mine collapse. Such accidents happened from time to time—to a strangely specific set of people. Five of the men died in the cave-in, the rest were smart enough not to talk of rebellion ever again—that is until Katniss and the Mellark boy returned from the 74th Hunger Games largely unscathed.

“Finally mother couldn’t take it and committed a suicide of her own free will.” she continues, clutching the bough ever tighter. “That was when Snow stopped pushing. He had nothing more to use against me, so he let go—just like that, like nothing ever happened. I still blame myself for it... had I relented, let go of my high moral ground...”

“Then you’d be no less traumatised.” Gale weighs in.

He can’t begin to imagine what the denizens of the Capitol were capable of, what sick practices they inflicted on their sex slaves. Finnick spoke of incest and rape and other detestable things, of private tapes sold for public convenience. He was glad that Johanna went through none of that. He shudders to think that similar could’ve happened to Katniss were it not for the Star-Crossed Lovers hype.

The thought of Katniss sent a stab of pain through his chest.

He failed her and refused to let the memory go. He swore to protect Prim and in the end he was her undoing. Few things hurt more than betraying the trust of a friend you love.

His mind returns to reality only to find Johanna’s eyes swollen with tears. “They’d still be alive.” she breathes out, hoarse voice barely a whisper.

“Perhaps.” he shrugs. “But would you?”

Johanna ponders the question briefly. There is only so much a person can bear, she supposes, and she could not bear the filth of Capitol’s freaks upon the one thing she believed solely belonged to her—yet even so the Capitol found a way to defile it. With spurts of water and electrical tingling.

Her lips form an inaudible no. But her fate is a tangle of one-way streets, for had she taken her life, her family would still be punished for that insolence. There is no saving the doomed. The Hunger Games would have their due.

“Thanks for listening,” she says at last. “It’s useless rambling, maybe, but it means everything to me.”

Under the broken mask of invulnerability, he noticed she was shivering.

His own lips curl into a small smile, “Don’t mention it. It’s about time I paid you back.”
“For the hours of angst? Why, I only got a couple of minutes—how unfair.” she says, putting on her usual sardonic humour—her sole defence against the world.

“You can always angst my ear off—or, you’re welcome to try.”

“How generous of you.” she chuckles.

“Later, though; it’s getting dark.” he points out. “Soon, you’ll have nothing but that thought to warm you.”

“Nothing except for you.” she smirks and it’s the same weary smirk she’d worn the entire evening. The day’s events have taken their toll on both her body and psyche. This would be a restless night, filled with dreams askew and flooded with sea foam and current-charged water. It will not let her forget. But maybe the fatigue will blur memory just enough to become bearable.

The daylight gradually surrenders to the night. The ink fingers of dark reach through the evergreen tresses of the trees at the edge of their camp. The stars are gaping holes of silver thread above their heads.

They store the stew away from the reach of the game and retire for the night.

That night they make no move on each other, no effort at physical consolation with the world, not even a kiss; favouring, instead, each other’s warmth as they lay in the tent, side by side, as if meant to do that since forever.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Johanna will be visiting District 12 very soon, so stay tuned for Haymitch and some Everlark.
Countryside flashes before her eyes at 200 miles per hour. The flashes she remembers from three years ago. Except her willingness to travel the distance was lesser then.

Around her rise the mountains, the forests and plantations of districts passing her by. Their fences torn down, the watchtowers abandoned after the war. Humans no longer protect themselves from nature, nor are its resources protected from them. Though she’s seen it all before, the new circumstances make the land pleasantly unfamiliar.

Watching the country running along the windowpanes helps Johanna clear her head.

The first night on the train was terrible—all the memories of her Games, the Victory Tour immediately resurfacing in the luxurious suite of the Capitol speed-train. Post-traumatic stress of her torture, the renewed memories of the artificial storm on her skin, the deaths of her loved ones haunted her through the sleep and waking hours alike.

She ate a modest breakfast of sweet bread and honey and washed it down with bitter camomile tea. She had not the stomach for a coarser meal.

Now, she is sitting in the last compartment of the train, watching the green surrounding her through the transparent walls and the grey skies frowning above her, protected from light rain’s harm by the thick shield of glass. There’s something oddly comforting about seeing the droplets helplessly slide down the invisible ward enclosing her, she thinks. It conjures a smirk upon her lips that heralds the merry return of her spirits.

For dinner, she nibbles on boiled potatoes topped with melted butter and fried celery sprouts. A simple meal no District 7 native would turn their nose up at. Especially since potatoes used to be such a rare commodity in the districts just a few months ago.

Tomorrow, she would arrive in the crater left from the coal mining district that no longer produced coal—or that’s how it looked in her mind. In her imagination, District 12 was a glaring hole left after the meteorite of rebellion at most; she expected no more of its scenery.

Sundown engulfs the glasshouse compartment like a wildfire conquering the heavens and she drifts off to sleep filled with dams spewing fire, debris and tongues of churning water like fireworks against the night sky. Voices meld into the chaos of it as her vision turns green—not with forestry of her district or green waters of the sea and Finnick’s eyes... it’s the poison this time —seeping into her eyes and twisting the shapes of the barren white room, titillating screams and piercing wails not of her own... She realises then that tonight’s nightmares belong not to her, but to the boy she’s bound to soon see.
The air is still filled with ash when the early autumn wind rakes the soil with its claws.

District 12 is hardly the wasteland Johanna imagined. The streets have since been cleared of bodies and more than a mass grave the square resembles a construction site. Concrete pillars have been raised to support the factory that would house a medicine manufacturing plant.

As she exits the train station and the smell of fuel fades, pine tree aroma languidly permeates the air. It reminds her not of her home, but of another district and the last moments spent there.

“You know it’s better to spread the redeemer arc of the bad guy over several episodes,” she said to him. Always the wisecrack, even during the parting moments.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

How would she even begin to explain a joke so deeply rooted in the Capitol culture to someone like Gale Hawthorne, she wondered then. In the end, she decided that a simple “Nothing.” would have to do.

“Just take care, Hawthorne. And save up some more angst for me next time.” she added.

*If there’s even going to be a next time.*

The thought had crossed her mind only briefly, but still left her wondering. There was a certain comfort to be had in his presence, though she suspected that it could be had in presence of anyone else, really. She simply loathed being alone of late. Easy enough explanation, she assured herself.

Until his response came.

“Always, Jo.” he smirked.

The specks of ash are like soiled snowflakes in the air, as dark as soot that used to cover the town.

She finds herself standing on the porch in 12’s Victors’ Village—the only portion of the district that has gone unscathed. There, the rebellion and the bombing did not exist. Time and reason stops at the steps of Haymitch Abernathy’s house.

Same as the destroyed dam in her home district, this was likely a sadistic joke on part of Snow and his lackeys. Destroy the homes but leave the symbol of subjugation standing. The sweetest victory a villain could possibly ask for.

She doesn’t bother knocking before she steps in, she knows she’d be waiting vainly for the invitation, but for some reason she finds him seated at the table, eating a piece of bread with butter instead of lying in a pool of his own vomit and glass shards. His face betrays no surprise.

“Hey, Stinky,” she says. The nickname goes back to her own Games and his alcohol scented breath when he congratulated her on victory by awarding her a smelly, wet kiss on the mouth. The physical and psychological trauma she’s never fully recovered from.

To Johanna, Haymitch’s a like a perverted uncle that sometimes stinks, but you can’t help loving.
“Look what the bears have dragged in.” he notes, biting of a chunk of bread, offering no other domestic courtesy one might expect of anyone else. “You looking for something, Honeybee?”

“You know I hate when you call me that.” she snarls.

“That’s why I keep calling you that. To wind you up.” he remarks indifferently. “I’m fun that way.”

“Care to tell that to my axe? I’m sure she’ll be very understanding.”

He heaves a mock sigh and pulls out a flask of liquor, “When’re you going to develop a sense of humour?”

“It’s already happened. When’re you going to develop a sense of hygiene?”

“Not bloody likely.” he laughs. “You here about a boy? A girl? Come to consult my little personal love line? Not to disappoint you, but I ain’t in that business anymore.”

She plops down in a chair next to him, “Shut up, Haymitch, and pass me some bread.”

“Hey, who told you you could sit down?”

“You have no say in what I do. Shut up.”

He chuckles. It almost feels like the old times, the banquets to herd in sponsors to their teams... or the mornings after. The only thing it’s lacking is... No, she chastises herself. I won’t think of him.

“So what brings you to this little backwater hamlet of ours? I’m betting it isn’t the scenery, or is apocalypse something you’d call a lovely sight?”

Surprisingly to herself first and foremost, she does not answer with a quip. “Need some company to keep the head from jumping apart. Twelve seemed a safe bet.”

He nods, chewing. He can understand that. Anyone that’s been in the Games would. And no other person alive has as many faces to keep at bay. Forty-six scared, scrawny kids he’d helped send to their deaths in his mentor career. Those sent to fight in the arena alongside him—some of which have tasted his knife. His family, Maysilee... They were all his victims, more or less, and they all came back regularly to haunt him. Their faces pale, blood-stained, with bits blown off or gnawed away by vermin, grotesque cadavers shambling in the dark, choking him.

It’s why he learned to choose the daylight to recount the death toll in his sleep—the persistent beams tickling at his eyelids made it seem more of a dream and less a reality. After all, the word nightmare suggests they only happen at night, though the presumption’s far from truth.

He offers her a flask of liquor to wash down the obvious lump building up in her throat. His brand of silence matches hers, as do its causes.

She takes a brief swig and returns the bottle with urgency that suggests she cannot be rid of its foul taste too soon.

“So what’s new?” she asks, munching on a bite of bread with her mouth open. There’s no need for courtesy between drunks and lumberjacks—assuming Johanna Mason would bother to put up a mask of decorum for anyone.

“You tell me, you’ve been to town.” he shrugs.
“Seriously?” she scowls. Pointing to the flask enveloped by the palm of his hand, she adds: “Do you even come out for anything else than to get more of this swill?” then, she reconsiders. “Wait, I really don’t need that question answered.”

She gets up to make her own tea, not expecting for a minute to see him turn into a gracious host, nor expecting an invitation to help herself. Haymitch could not be expected to be so courteous. Three years of knowing him have rendered his behavioural patterns as see-through as tissue paper.

“I got all I need.” he says. It’s a remark filled with sarcasm and regret; she doesn’t pry. She’s learned not to.

She prepares a concoction of herbs from a box she was smart enough to bring along, not counting on Haymitch to have anything to her liking. Her foresight hasn’t failed her yet.

“Hey, aren’t you going to offer me tea?”

Johanna groans at the pointless question, “Fine. You want some?”

“Nah,” he says, smirking at her annoyance.

“Thought so, that’s why I didn’t offer.” Muttering, she adds: “I swear I’m going to rip off that stupid head of yours some day.”

“You love bickering with me too much for that, Honeybee.”

Without a comment, she places the cup on the dining table and starts talking as soon as she sits down, returning to the previous discussion, “So... Town’s looking better that expected. Well... looks far less like a bomb crater than I expected. The builders are working fast on that new factory of yours from what I’ve seen. Think the District’ll be up and running in no time. Except...”

“Except the people.” he finishes for her.

“Yeah,” she nods, blowing the steam off her cup. Opting for a change of subject for a less fatalistic one, she quips, “I hear Eff’s been around.”

“Eh, she brought me a book. Supposedly she’s into writing now. Part of her therapy, I’m guessing. So she’s sent me a few that helped cultivate her style.”

As Johanna sips her tea, he continues, “There’s been interesting findings in the old Capitol archives, sealed on Snow’s authority—old books that haven’t been seen or opened for generations. Paylor’s set people to copy and distribute them among the districts for the betterment of all. Mostly Capitol folks are working on it—probably the first time they’ve moved their little-finger to work at all. We’ll be getting a library here in Twelve—imagine that,” he chuckles to himself, it’s a strange and unfamiliar thing—progress—apt to seed hope in the most unlikely of hearts, even his. “Will be needing a library card...” he notes.

Johanna’s voice, stern and clear cuts him off, “Haymitch, don’t let her slip.”

“What? The library card? Whoever heard of library cards slipping?”

“Don’t dodge the subject, I can tell when you do that.” she rebukes. “Effie. You should make your move, old man, before the grave calls.”

“It’s been calling these past twenty-five years; I think it can wait a while longer. Should get a medal for the most dragged out suicide ever.”
“I mean it, Haymitch. The war’s over, you can tell her now.”

“I’ll consider it.” He uses his most dismissive tone; Johanna simply sighs into her cup before sipping more of her tea.

Silence and the stink of Haymitch’s unwashed armpits briefly permeate the air.

“I saw Gale.” she says then.

“Saw?”

“Well... not only that.” she mutters.

Flashes of bare skin—olive—run under her nails, the memory of his quickened breath briefly wheezes in her ears. For a moment, she can almost feel the pressure of his salty lips on her throat.

Her cheeks colour sanguine.

“So you are here about a boy.” he mocks. “Wait. Is that embarrassment? From you? Thought I’d never see the day.”

“Shut up.”

“You brought him up, Honeybee, now I want to know all about it...”

“I swear, Haymitch, you’re a worse gossip than Greasy Sae.” neither of them says.

A male voice, caressing and soft as unbaked dough; there was only one man that could carry such voice.

“Maybe I should give you the good old birds and bees talk—the boy here seems to be in need of that.”

The pale boy’s face turns into horseradish red in an instant; it’s been two weeks since he’s moved in with Katniss and he still gets flustered at any mention of this level of intimacy. Both Johanna’s and Haymitch’s lips curl into a smirk in unison while Peeta Mellark fumbles for words to free himself of their amused looks, but all he can manage is: “Didn’t expect you here, Johanna.”

“Is that how you greet an old cell-mate?” she retorts, still eagle-eyed and smirking.

“Cell-mate. Right.” he swallows. The expression sends a bout of unmentionable shivers down his spine. His fists clench involuntarily. “Well, I hope you’ve had a wonderful time so far, Johanna.”

She throws hands into the air theatrically, “Does any of this seem all that wonderful? I suppose it’s clean, at least. Uncommon, that. Your doing, I guess.”

“Yeah, I help out sometimes.”

“I’d bet Haymitch wouldn’t find his shoes without you.”

“I ain’t wearing any.” the man at question protests.

“See? That’s what I’m on about.”

Their bickering eases him into the situation, it reminds him of Katniss whenever she finds herself exposed to Haymitch’s charming company for longer than wise. He sits at the table and offers each of them a fresh blueberry-filled bun, chuckles to himself when Haymitch’s chin is stained
purple from their juice.

“So, how long are you staying, Johanna?” Peeta asks while Haymitch is stuffing his face with a second bun.

“As long as you have me and I don’t get bored,” she shrugs. She hasn’t really given it much thought, considering the abruptness of the decision itself.

“Sounds reasonable,” he smiles. “Are you planning to come over? We’ve got a few bedrooms to spare, if you like.”

“I’d better give you two lovebirds some privacy. Haymitch stinks and snores, but all I risk is running into him naked.” she says with a wink.

Peeta feels another lump at the back of his throat and forces himself to swallow. “A dinner then?” he offers, his cheeks still flaming pink. “I’ll cook and I’m sure Katniss would love to see you.”

“Well, I doubt Haymitch could serve anything bar his own liver drowned in white liquor gravy, so yeah, absolutely. Make something special.”

“You bet.” With his lips split in yet another smile, he rises from the seat, excusing himself. “I’ve still got some errands to run, but it was good to see you, Johanna.”

She grabs the last blueberry bun before Haymitch can and rams it in her mouth whole, responding only with the nod of her head.

Between the kitchen doors, Peeta turns and tells to Haymitch: “Just by the way—you really ought to tell Effie.”

“Just how long have you been eavesdropping out there, boy?” he mutters. “Papa don’t teach you it’s rude?”

“Let’s just say I’m getting better at stealth.” the boy chuckles and leaves.
Peeta is a good cook. But what’s even better is lying in the warm grass on the edge of the woods with the smell of water and sun filling your nose, stripped in your underwear and stung by mosquitoes—though it does make her think of syringes.

Katniss took her to her special place by the lake. Johanna isn’t sure if she should feel honoured or concerned that this is some weird date-like occasion.

“So, you take the Baker Prince here often?”

“No, it’s too far for him to walk with his bad leg.” Katniss says.

“You know, if this is a proposal, you should remember you’re technically already taken.” Johanna sneers.

“Don’t make me hit you again; they say it’s unhealthy for kids.”

“You implying I’m a kid?”

“Certainly act like it.”

It had happened earlier. With the presence of water at the back of her mind, she was gurgling and spitting in her dreams, mistaking the cool wind embracing her for the cold sprays that sent her shivering, the whisper of leaves for the crackling of electricity.

To the eyes of another, she’d be thrashing about, little else than a fear-struck maniac drawing in breaths two at a time. But Katniss knew this kind of fear and knew not to spare a thought to gentleness—it was no mercy when submerged in a nightmare. She slapped her awake, quenched the outpour with flaming pain to Johanna’s cheeks.

Johanna has never been so grateful for a smack.

“What about yours?” she asks, reminded of the stump that’s not been wrenched out—or so the Seven’s saying goes.

Katniss needs no elaboration, their minds in tune. “It’s better with Peeta around.”

“So love’s the cure, huh?”

“Peeta seems to believe so.”

“And what’s your opinion?”

She shrugs, “I don’t know what to believe. What about you?”
“What I think is… Love’s not a cure, love is placebo. It distracts you from immediate pain, but it lasts, deeply rooted, forever part of you. Nothing can heal loss—nothing can heal a victor.”

Nothing can heal self-loss, she adds to herself, but only in her thoughts.

Still she’s not so easily fooled. Katniss might’ve been a bit more forceful with her blows than necessary.

“Admit it; you’ve been waiting to do that.” Johanna smirks

“And if yes?”

“By all means, help yourself. You wouldn’t believe how I craved to wring your neck.” She says it with a smile so sweet it sends Katniss shuddering with unease. She is still getting used to Johanna’s psychopathic sense of humour.

“Trust me, I would.” Katniss concedes. The feeling was nothing if not mutual for a while, only subdued by the suffering that tied them together. It made for the strongest kind of bond, however.

There is a moment of silence; not like with Gale, but no less comfortable. In the silence, Johanna can hear the songbirds making their calls in the woods nearby and it fills her with sensation of home. That is, until she’s being forcefully dragged towards the lake.

“Come.”

“No!” she tries to squirm out, but Katniss is almost as strong as her now. “I protest.” she whines theatrically.

“This is Twelve.” Katniss says. “My district, my rules.”

“You’re not getting me in the water.”

“If you smell like cesspool, you’re not getting any dinner.”

That does it. Johanna races to the shore at once, blocking the remnants of her nightmare. She dips into the lake, drenching herself in its coolness, teeth chattering. And for once, the water does not feel an enemy, recalling the trauma of the tiled room. It was more than Johanna could do on her own, more than the baby steps with Gale. She should’ve known a provocation is what would work the best, but Gale wouldn’t dare that, not with her temper and tendency to beat people up. The least she would do is insult him.

But not her.

All she would do to Katniss has been done to her already. They were connected in their fear, their pain—a fire-mutt and a broken dam—Gale could never understand that, his rockslides never took his body, all their terror was in his mind.

“That’s for the arena.” Katniss says with satisfaction, and for all her teeth-chattering, Johanna is glad that the girl’s in good spirits. If a little childishness can heal a scar then it’s totally worth it, she thinks.

“You know that technically I got you out of that arena.”

“You know that—technically—I almost bled out in there.”

“Technical difficulties.” Johanna waves it off, casually, as she dismisses everything not immediate.
She makes a few strokes in the shallows and smooths the wet tangles of her uneven hair behind her ears.

“Do I get to eat now?” she asks, slapping the water surface impatiently.

When Katniss shakes her head in refusal, Johanna sends a splash of water her way. All that earns her is a snort. A few more violent splashes take care of that. *Revenge works both ways,* Johanna smirks.

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The only Capitol-bred vice Johanna cannot get rid of is olives. Sitting at the table at Katniss’s and Peeta’s kitchen, she pops them into her mouth two at a time until she’s eaten the whole can and hankers for another, but Peeta refuses to give her any more.

“Tyrant.” she cusses.

“I heard that.” he says.

“Good, you were meant to. Now be a good knight in shining apron and give a girl what she needs.”

“Shining apron?” Katniss chimes in with a raised eyebrow.

“A new turn of expression.”

“It’s stupid.” she scoffs.

“Wasn’t asking for goddamn linguistic evaluation, give me food.”

Katniss offers a reminder: “You ate half a roast duck.”

“Also, seven cupcakes.” Peeta adds.

“Hate reminding you two love birds, but gluttony is one of Johanna’s more charming features. Less bruises in that, too.” Haymitch says, stretching his hands behind his neck. “The other is her being so liberal about her nudity.”

“Shut up, Haymitch.” Katniss and Johanna say in unison.

After a bare second, Johanna adds a mutter: “Least I don’t stink like apothecary. What’s that rub you’re chugging for, anyhow, ulcers?”

“Varicose… something something. Look, who the hell cares, Honeybee, it keeps me stewed.”

“See? Criticism aimed at me bites you in the ass.” she smirks.

“Was actually a compliment in your case, but whatever keeps your fireplace burning.”

Johanna merely rolls her eyes, but from the corner of one of them she sees Katniss rubbing at the bridge of her nose, chasing a building headache away.

“Sorry, love, shutting up now,” Johanna says. But of course, as is usual with Johanna Mason, there’s a catch. “…if you keep the olives coming.”
That night, huddled on a couch at Katniss’s and Peeta’s house, the dead don’t rise to keep her company in her nightmares, in their stead a ridiculous scenario unveils, setting the olives in her belly a-dance as if on strings of a puppeteer. Johanna revels in the nonsense of it, the first time she’s found relative peace—amusement, even—in her sleep since her first Reaping Day.

The green produce sway in the rhythm of a cheesy Capitol musical, humming jaded propaganda lyrics written by one washed up musician or another, all the while terrified to be stuffed with a pickled carrot slice. Johanna can’t really blame them, she hates pickled carrots.

Her ears pound with the melody—sang ineptly by a female singer with an exaggerated accent, irritating as a buzzing fly fumbling against the window pane in search of an escape.

*Come, love, to our doorstep,*

*Experience life;*

*Buy me a diamond ring.*

*Promise me riches, fortune and fame,*

*If not you, the Panem will.*

Johanna recalls the time when the seedy song permeated every Capitol commercial break, a background against which the kids were dying.

That’s when she hears Katniss scream and startles awake. Blurry mind slowly shapes dragged out tones into form of consonants and vocals intermingling. *A male name, was it?*

Her answer lies in another scream.

“Haymitch!”

Although still inebriated from the rubbing alcohol, the man nimbly races up the stairs, followed close at hand by Johanna. The scene that unfolds before them is horrific but, unlike Johanna, Haymitch doesn’t waste time standing stupefied.

With strength and dexterity uncharacteristic of his age and inadequate sobriety, he briskly frees Katniss of the grasping fingers coiling around her scarred neck, shoving the frantic Peeta, unable to balance himself with only a stump for his other leg, to his stumble and fall. The Capitol-conditioned impostor that has seized his body is undeterred by the physical inconvenience and resolves to hurl insults at both of them, and a fleeting one at Johanna.

“It’s like the blight in the wood, isn’t it? Forever misshapen and barely alive; scarred, put out of use.” his voice trembles as he speaks, uneven as if his teeth were drooping the very poison he’s been fed in his cell; he licks his lips like the snake that used to believe the words, that twisted Peeta out of his kindliness and imprinted the poison upon him. “Except that everyone wishes you would have died!”
His muscles convulse and jerk unnaturally as he says this, moving as if hindered by some invisible electricity; his laugh, which comes out in short puffs, choked by the adrenaline of his exertion. His eyes are darkened, but shine forth a stabbing light despite of it, permeating her. Even the hair at the scruff of his neck have risen as if by static friction.

Her mind focuses around a single word the image stirs: electricity…

Her attitude armours her against insults but not the sight. At once her body is covered in shivers, twitching their way up her spine like the creeping fear of the electrical spark which invades her psyche. The green hazes of the twisted shapes in her nightmares return and rock her gaze till they blur and coat her vision with whiteness of her Capitol cell. Instantly, the bile clawing at back of her throat makes her regret all the olives as she struggles to swallow it. The trickle of sweat winding its road down her forehead to soak her eyebrow recalls the cool sensation of the water sprays. What she doesn’t see, her nerves conjure up to feel and smell. The poison fumes, the shit-soiled tiles of her maddest days, the clinical odour of detergent and sterile chemicals in the water… She feels urine trickling down her legs as her bladder lets go.

“Get out of here!” Haymitch snarls and nudges both her and Katniss out of the door.

Unsurprisingly, Katniss is the first to regain the command of her senses while Johanna is still obstructed from control by imagined jolts of electricity like a marionette. Katniss grabs her by the hand and starts leading her down the staircase towards the nearest bathroom.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” she says.

They sit on the short steps leading to the house, silent but not in silence. Grating at the night-time peace of the Victors’ Village are Peeta’s animalistic cries. The screams rescue Johanna from the physical illusion that has seized her, allowing her to hold onto her last bits of sanity. Not that there are many.

Screams are safe, though, she tells herself. They tell the pain is not mine.

The sun squinting through a collection of clouds tells her that it’s coming on morning, coating the Victors’ Village in a dim grey film against which the details of black silhouettes become barely discernible. As her eyes become accustomed to the wee hours’ lack of light, her memory colours the objects around her with the rays of yesterday, granting the deep green grass beneath the frostbitten dew more reality; immediacy to the first autumn chill.

She lets the thought dissolve in the early morning air, snuggling into the green flannel of her jacket hand-embroidered by her mother. Its smell of timber discourages the cold.

“That tree right there; you ought to chop it down.” she says to drown out the sickening whimpers of the boy still struggling to come to himself.

Not my pain. whispers a shaky shadow in her cell. Not my pain, not my pain….

“It’s the only tree to survive the bombing.” Katniss points out.

“It’s dead. Any stronger draft will tear it down.” glancing sideways at Katniss, she adds, “It has sentimental value, I get it, but that sentimentality leaves you dead if it falls on you when you walk
by.”

Without a word of acknowledgement, Katniss nods, whether of assent or simply as a gesture of a listener’s attention Johanna cannot be sure. As the conversation dies down, so do the pants and screams, and the Victors’ Village is thrown into stillness. The gravely silence passing between the girls suggests there is a question being considered that Katniss is uncertain she should ask.

She begins with a statement: “Haymitch told me about Gale.”

“Haymitch needs to lay off gossip.” Johanna retorts.

“You two close?” Her tone is blunt, but without a hint of jealousy.

She shrugs and isn’t sure how to answer. There was physical attraction, there was need. There was also silence, understanding and evading. Comfort, too; familiarity... But the jumble of emotions forms no concrete concept the kinship terms could describe.

“I don’t need him.” she decides to say. “But being near people makes it more bearable.”

She understands, even in the morning dimness Johanna can read it from her eyes, the slight sagging of shoulders. She looks at the former Mockingjay and feels she can almost grasp at the soft tendrils of memories racing about in her head.

“I was hoping that he—”

“Moved on?” Johanna suggests before she can finish. Katniss nods. “We laid the groundwork for that.” The words taste like a lie, but Johanna ignores the sourness. *One night and he still called your name.* The thought stabs and instantly she’s grateful the memory never left her mouth.

“Haymitch seemed to imply there was more.”

Johanna rolls her eyes, but answers honestly—Katniss, of all people, deserves that. “No. I’m too mistrustful for that kind of dedication.”

There is familiarity in those words. Within them Katniss can see fragments of herself as she was before the Games stripped that isolation away. In that moment she begins to analyse the last few years, from her first Reaping Day to the very present of the steps in front of her house.

It was difficult to process. First she was just a girl, pushed towards maturity by hunger. Then she was a wisp of a thing—a shell as cracked as the ceiling of the District 13 bunker after the bombing. With patience the cracks mended, but scars remained and never quite lost their itch.

But there was hope, in spite of her sullen moods; there were people fighting against worse horrors—like the boy writhing at the floor, struggling against his own mind—yet still drawing breath. Katniss considered that a miracle in its own right.

While she screamed her voice sore on her worst nights, Haymitch preferred to desensitize his mind with cheap alcohol and the indignity of soiling himself to the spectres of his memory, and many a night Peeta would wake in cold sweat, clutching at fistfuls of fabric he unknowingly tore from the bedsheets in a desperate attempt to cling onto his own identity. Katniss was not so selfish as to compare her pain to theirs. The loss was palpable, but the sense of self indomitable when finally regained.

*Peeta.* The Boy with the Bread would forever be a moot point of her life. He’s saved her life more times than her pride would allow; he’s preserved her identity during crisis and given her light when he had none to shine upon his own shadows. The fate, it seemed, had a way of thrusting...
him onto her in her time of need until she finally admitted that it was him she needed. It was not love as described in stories—theirs was born of struggles more binding than the shallow characteristics of prose.

Quickly, her memory elaborates on the subject, recalling the variety of emotions that have become linked to him throughout their acquaintance: first there was defiance, disgust even, over the layer of underlying gentleness; also necessity, artifice; eventually, frightening outbreaks of need…

Then there was an omnipresence of loss choking out everything else.

The least she could do is to hold him—clutch him as desperately as he sometimes clutches those sheets—whispering, and sometimes begging (Not real, not real, she would say.), for him to remember that the poison images were lies engineered to betray himself. Sometimes she kisses him until her warmth brings him back to life. Sometimes, like tonight, he’s so far gone slogging through fear that she screams for Haymitch to come interfere.

All this passes through her head in barely a minute before she can realise why, and in an instant she knows her answer: there is so much of Johanna that matches herself and still so much holding their personalities apart—like a distorted mirror, but she says none of that aloud.

In the meanwhile Johanna is treated to what she came to think of as trustful quiet—a trait Katniss and Gale irreversibly share and she’s grown fond of.

“He misses you.” she says when her brain retrieves no witty remarks suitable for the situation—for even Johanna Mason has standards.

“I miss him, too,” Katniss admits. “But there’s war in his eyes and I can’t bear to see it.”

Then, without a further word, she stands up and goes back into the house and Johanna bears her no grudge. She’s seen to her needs already when she gave her clean clothes and helped her wash up. Right now, there are others that need her care more than one broken dam.

The clocks have barely beaten four, but Johanna doesn’t go back to sleep, fearing the inevitable intervention of nightmare. Instead she grabs an axe and sets out to cut the gnarled tree usurping the horizon in a horror-like fashion. The wood would be dead for a craftsman’s hands, but the lumber would be good enough for fires.

Her hands are steady on the haft as the first swings land, hacking out a cleft to control the direction of the tree’s fall. She finds the manual work therapeutic, easy to let out the accumulated rage. The rush of adrenaline lets the imagination loose and even though she’s only hacking away at dead wood, as the blows connect she sees beneath their edge the Capitol dummies without real lives, at other time the Peacekeeper grunts that made her a whimpering fool or the snake-eyed menace who’s too dead to mess up her life but somehow continues to, and finally, through the flashes of the assholes that had hurt her, she imagines the bark of the tree stands for the clinical white tiles and she strips them down like bast.

Sweat nests in her hair and sometimes trickles down her forehead—she only stops to wipe it off with the sleeve of her already drenched shirt.

She works on the tree till it lies down, defeated.
Finally an update! I'm sorry for how late it comes, but with my thesis and the final exams, I couldn't find a moment to write anything longer than an occasional one-shot and afterwards I was catching up on life (understand gaming and reading) and couldn't whip up an inspiration for Johanna. I'm not too satisfied with how this chapter turned out, but I didn't want to keep you waiting any longer, so I hope you've enjoyed it even so. Thank you for reading and your support and hopefully I'll have another (and to me better) chapter ready soon. :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Long time no see, dear readers!
I have a hectic year behind me - I've finished my B.A. studies, acquired a writer's block, got a my first ever job, hooked up and broke up... All in all, not much time left for writing. But I vowed to finish this story and that's what I'm going to do. So there it is - finally an update! This chapter feels slightly shorter than usual, but I decided to split it in favour of an earlier update (which means I'm already working on the next one!).
Thank you for your patience and enjoy the read, everyone. :)

She takes breakfast in Haymitch’s house that morning, half-heartedly chewing on some stale nut-and-raisin bread she neatly soaked in honey to achieve edibility. She warms her hands over a steaming pot of herbal tea too hot to drink and watches Haymitch fumble about the kitchen, spying that he’s already half-drunk; her suspicion is confirmed at once, when one of the dirty coffee cups he’s been trying to clean smashes to the ground, provoking a bout of cursing from the inept house keeper.

She groans, shooting a glance out of the window, her brown eyes inevitably landing at Katniss’s and Peeta’s porch. She’s seen none of them exit the house yet, even though the sun has already filled the horizon with soft, rosy light against which she usually saw the silhouette of Katniss returning from the hunt. Not today, though, which was just as well to Johanna; she wished for an uneventful day that would turn out to be, if not idealistic, then at least boring.

“So the midnight adventure... fun, eh?” Haymitch says sarcastically, and these are the first words anyone has spoken to Johanna in hours.

Once again she is caught off guard by his incredible sense of tact—or lack thereof. Not that he was famed for anything else, and come to think of it, neither was she. One of the many things they had in common.

It’s this simple fact that lets her admit that it’s all she’s thought about for the better part of the morning but did not bring herself to ask.

“These—what do you call it—seizures...?”

“Episodes,” he corrects.

“Right.” she scowls, disregarding his lesson in terminology. “They happen often?”

“Once in a while.” he grunts over the dishes. “Usually there’s a trigger—a whiff of memory, bad dream, pain—stings are particularly bad—” Johanna cannot help but nod—she, too, loathes needles and the rocking waves within. “Or just enough stress does the trick. Other times it’s like Snow reached out of the grave to remind us he existed. The girl can usually handle it herself, though, in case he can’t shake it himself. The free-of-charge horror show you saw, that’s rare. Had to knock him full of morphling to get it to stop.”
His face, handsome, though worn and tugged at by the wrinkles on his forehead, the corners of his eyes and lips, roughened by the unshaved stubble, grey eyes sunken by his daily addiction, contorts in a rare grimace, submerged in thought.

Johanna quickly chases away the less metaphorical interpretation of the word before the image sets in, while Haymitch keeps pondering.

“It seems worse now that...” he almost lets the words fly out of his control, but hesitates, for once balancing on the edge of diplomacy.

Johanna doesn’t need three guesses to get at his meaning.

“Now that I’m here.” she finishes for him.

“Yeah.” he says. The acknowledgement comes out as a groan.

Go figure, Johanna tells herself and briefly the heavy plating of selfishness she surrounds her feelings with is penetrated. It’s her fault, she thinks, *I kept teasing even when I’ve seen him flinch. I pushed him underwater.*

Water enters her mind again—a personal metaphor, synonymous with losing control to Johanna, renewed by yesterday’s trauma. Flashing against the soft sunlight of the morning is the white room again and she shivers in spite of herself. Haymitch’s voice tears her from the brutal memory into a much more mellow reality. She marks a mental thank you.

“Well, since you’re gonna be avoiding the love shack today...” The tone of his voice is enough to elicit a groan from her, her eyes make a full circle in their sockets. “Mind dropping off some rags at Hazelle’s for washing?”

“I’m not your errant girl.” she retorts, but mentally considers it.

“Just thought you might want to scope out the future relations...”

“Shut up,” she says, but nonetheless lets out a small chuckle.

At around noon Johanna cannot bear the silence of the house any longer. Except for the occasional sound of snoring coming out of somewhere in the living room—Haymitch, having drunk himself into stupor again, fell asleep soon after breakfast—there was no sound to disturb the voices of her thoughts. For a while, she browses the library—surprisingly extensive even by the post-Capitol standards. She is by no means a reader—the pages cluttered with words and letters did nothing to her intellect but remind her of the lumber textbooks she was forced to read at school, and those at least offered the distraction of pictures. The Games stripped even that away—no one required her to attend classes after they gave her a cage of her own and grain aplenty to keep her hands from working. It didn’t stop the chirping complaints of hers as well as they would’ve liked, though.

Haymitch seems to have found solace in literature, however—or he’s merely hoarding junk, for he’s rarely had use for any philosophy that has not come from a bottle. She suspects a certain woman might have a hand in that.

In her boredom, she explores the house aimlessly, observing the worn-out décor of no one’s
choosing that once spoke of luxury. All the victors’ houses looked the same, she concluded—the walls gaping with the same flowery wallpapers, the furniture so matching it almost appeared clinical. Haymitch added no adornments of his own—indeed, he barely used most of the rooms with the exception of kitchen and living room, perhaps his own bedroom on an odd occasion or two. Even the bathroom was sparsely used—or so Johanna imagined, judging from the smell and the greasy mat of hair of her host.

There is but a single personal touch in the entirety of the house—not counting the knocked out glass panes of some of the armoires. A painting of a girl, wrought in Peeta’s hand no doubt, too fair to be Katniss, too young to be Effie. The golden Mockingjay pin on her breast betrays her identity. There is a reason the painting’s covered up with a sheet—hers is the name that shouldn’t be spoken in front of Haymitch, not if you wish to keep up the false hope that he’ll stay sober for at least a half hour.

It was fond memento, perhaps, but not a moment remembered fondly.

On her way back to the kitchen, Johanna almost stumbles over a pile of dirty clothes scattered on the floor—the very ones he’s tried to make her his courier over, she guesses. But regardless of her how much it wounds her pride, she concludes that the mess—and the smell—is insufferable and wraps Haymitch’s soiled rags in a relatively clean, but sodden sheet.

*Out of the principle to not touch Haymitch’s clothes, of course, not out of squeamishness, she assures herself.*

Her thoughts stop at that—it’s best to not think about what the sheet’s dripping with.

She makes her way through the Victors’ Village towards the last house in a row of many, some still abandoned, the window panes knocked out by the drowning tides of pressure left after the bombings. The brisk wind wheezing about raises the dust of the path against her eyes; makes the empty, lightless homes creak in the dim sunlight barely illuminating the day through the dense grey clouds. It’s coming on rain, she realises and speeds up her steps, struggling against the force of nature pushing her backwards. She would not get wet this time.

She knocks on the door and awaits the answer, anxiously eyeing the sky.

“You Hazelle Hawthorne?” she says gruffly when it opens. “Haymitch’s sending his junk for washing.”

The woman looks at Johanna curiously—she remembers the lean, stringy slip of a thing that arrived a few years ago on her victory tour. The ragged creature her son helped drag out of the Capitol. She looked nothing like her now—the black circles around her eyes suggest sleeplessness, but the body itself radiates health. Of course Hazelle knows the girl’s mental state not necessarily reflects that and catches herself imagining Johanna’s psyche as shaggy as the matted mop of brown hair crowning the top of her head.

“You’re Johanna.” Hazelle says, mostly to confirm that the thin tendrils of memories she has of the girl in 13 have not become entangled beyond recognition. As her lips move, the wrinkles around her mouth reveal her age—worn, but not wizened, the crow’s feet tugging at the corners of her eyes mirroring all the hardships she’s been through. “Come on in.” she adds, stepping aside.
The first thing Johanna notices is that Hazelle’s house is the polar opposite of Haymitch’s, neat and tidy to the point of appearing nearly clinical. She flinches. Luckily there are no tiles to stress that quality.

Hazelle beckons her to leave the bundle by the laundry door and shows her into the kitchen.

“Coffee?” she asks.

Johanna nods, “Sure. Thanks.”

There is a moment of silence, the awkward, uncomfortable kind; not like the sort she shares with Gale and Katniss, not even the grim and annoying kind of when Haymitch passes out mid-conversation. This is pure unfamiliarity at work.

Hazelle senses this and finds a topic they have in common—survival; and one exclusively her own—gratitude.

“It’s strange,” she tells Johanna while heating up the kettle on the stove. “It used to be we couldn’t afford coffee. Every morning, I used to cook ground grain to my husband when he went to work. Sometimes we saved up just enough money to buy the real thing. That never happened after the children came. Then, when Gale was thirteen, he never came back from the mine. There was never enough food before. But after he died, we were starving for weeks. Then Gale took up hunting. I was scared he’d get caught, but the hunger… there were five of us to feed, the tesserae were too little for all of us.”

“Now,” ,” The word comes out as a sigh as sets a cup of dark liquid and a bottle of molasses in front of Johanna, “I can offer it to anyone.”

Johanna’s eyes narrow; she nods a silent thank you at Hazelle, but doesn’t understand what the woman’s getting at. “Why are you telling me this?” she asks, her tone a bit too harsh.

“What I mean to say is—thank you. For fighting back.” Hazelle says. “For giving us this.”

Waving her hand, the housewife draws Johanna’s attention to their surroundings—the tasteful wooden furniture, the comfortable cushioned chairs, a pot of verdant herbs on the kitchen counter and a box of cookies on a shelf overhead. All that a visitor would take for granted, as she has.

“It wasn’t my effort.” Johanna responds matter-of-factly. She doesn’t feel responsible for the victory over the Capitol; indeed she took no part of it, even if through no fault of her own. The Block had drowned her taste for fighting then.

“You were at the start of it,” she insists. “There were others, yes, but you were also a part of it.”

Johanna doesn’t answer, sipping her coffee in quiet. She won’t remind Hazelle of the worthless morphling-dependent wreck that she was in District 13, later a grunt defeated by a mere sight of water flooding the battlefield; it’s enough that she herself is constantly reminded of the pathos of it.

Hazelle is not deterred, “This government is paying me a widow’s allowance—it’s not enough to cover all expenses, but this government provides. My children don’t go hungry anymore. There is no lottery for their lives. I am grateful.”

She doesn’t say it out loud, but so is Johanna.

“It was a little better in Seven.” she says instead. “Seven is the forest, there were always mushrooms or nuts—or at least twigs with sweet bark to nibble at the worst of times. The winters were tough, though. Every day, my father used to smuggle a small block of wood in his jacket. It
made hardly any difference, we often went cold for days. But that small act of resistance, he was so proud of that.” A lopsided smile appears on her face, brief, gone in a flit of a second. She finishes the thought, “After the Games that was no longer a problem.”

“They killed your family.” Hazelle notes. Johanna searches for a hint of awe in the woman’s eyes, but all she finds is weariness of the world that was.

“They did.” she nods. “I refused to do their bidding. It was stupid.”

Hazelle merely listens. She knows any words of comfort she could offer would be misguided and insufficient. Instead, she allows the girl share at her own pace.

The bitter brew serves to untie Johanna’s tongue in a way that her head doctor could never manage. For the first time in a while she feels talking is a therapy—and this one she doesn’t pay for. Somehow Hazelle makes confining easy.

“I don’t really feel I belong in Seven anymore.” she admits. “It was always in change—the trees growing and getting cut down. The seasons passing. There was always something new, fresh. But now, it’s reforming, and I feel obsolete in there.”

Hazelle understands that feeling. She’s heard it described before, similarly worded. “Gale says he couldn’t bear living in this place anymore.”

“I know that. He thinks he failed the people here.”

“He also says you went hunting together.” Hazelle remarks.

Johanna almost doesn’t realise how deeply ensnared she is in Hazelle’s trap before she falls right into it. As soon as she does, though, she tries squirming her way out. No way is she talking about this to Gale’s mum.

“I don’t think he meant hunting the way you imagine.” she retorts.

“Johanna.”

The very sound of her name chastises her like it only can from the lips of a mother. Regardless of Hazelle being no mother of hers. All her protests come to cease immediately, rendered speechless by necessity.

“Don’t know what actually happened between you two, but one thing I know for certain—the sound of his voice when he called—he sounded so relieved, elevated. I haven’t heard that side of him in a long while. So, whatever it is that you two are up to, you have my blessing.”

Johanna rolls her eyes, “You done yet?” she asks, clearly annoyed.

Hazelle doesn’t even flinch at her tone—after all, this is not the first time dealing with the girl. Nor is it her first time dealing with the temper of this sort.

“You know what’s the worst about my husband dying, Johanna?” she says instead. “Now, years later, some ex-Capitol official sent me a letter of what really happened in that mine. The Capitol needed to cut their expenses. So they’ve arranged an accident—killed the miners, made the survivors work extended shifts for the same wage. He died because the rich thought warmth was too expensive.”

Johanna raises an eyebrow—it’s a story almost familiar to her own; she never imagined that a commoner’s life could feel so much as victor’s, that maybe they had as much to lose as she
had. She’s never given it much thought either, to be honest, too caught up in her own problems as she was.

“You know what I think, Johanna?” Johanna responds only with silence, anticipating Hazelle’s words. “I think that it was Gale who had that letter sent to me. I never agreed with what he did back in Thirteen. The war made him ruthless and calculating. The battles he fought only accounted for enemy losses—not the victims of our rage. I believe that letter was his way of explaining himself to me. To show me that his actions were merely a response to those of the Capitol. You understand now, I hope, that I’m glad for every moment I get to see a softer, more caring side of my son.”

Johanna nods—as after all, there isn’t much left to say.

“You should set up a practice.” she points out then, smirking.

Hazelle answers with a hearty laugh, “I’m sure there’s more qualified people out there, Johanna.” shaking her head, she offers another suggestion. “Now, if you’re done with your coffee, I’d like you to help me with the laundry you brought.” Hazelle suggests.

Johanna finishes the rest of the cup in an instant, following Hazelle into the laundry. She welcomes the change of activity and the silence of the manual work—for the first time a comfortable silence between the two of them, even if that’s just what Johanna tells herself to be spared from any further attempts at matchmaking.

Though she and Hazelle both work at clothing with equal vigour, there are still types of Haymitch’s clothes that Johanna prefers not to touch. Hazelle, having raised four children, is far less squeamish about any human-produced liquids. Johanna doubts she’ll ever reaches that level of tolerance.

From her perspective, any kind of liquid’s only prone to make a mess of things—water most of all.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Slightly edited this chapter.
The skin of her fingerprints is creased from the prolonged contact with water, her hands moist and squishy. They smell of washing soap and work. She eyes her hands curiously, only now noticing the blisters forming on her palms. Funny, how fast she could forget about the effects of water in the presence of another—when her mind is occupied by dares and provocations, deafening the deep-seated terror. Immediately her lips are crowned with a smirk that appears nigh all-conquering, prideful... The smallest look at the grey skies frowning above defeats it.

The smallest look ahead tramples it into the ground.

Golden-haired even in the threat of incoming rain, Peeta is minding the garden, of all things, and immediately, Johanna's hopes of avoiding the boy for the entire day is flushed down the toilet.

For all her fear of liquids, Johanna'd appreciate had all the wetness not left her mouth just this instant.

Meekly, she forces her mouth into an arrogant smirk—one practiced for the eyes of the Capitol—and briskly searches her mental phrase-book for a quip. Funny, how even when the veneer has fallen, she still finds reasons to pretend.

"So... painting, baking cakes and gardening? You're making me reconsider my bad boy always wins stance." she says; her tone is almost convincing.

"Here I thought that broody hunter guy was more up your alley." he points out, returning the smirk.

Her eyes travel full circle in their sockets, as they've become only too accustomed to.

"Keep it up and I'll shove a boot up yours." she retorts, trademark snark finally returning to her voice. "Cause this is getting old pretty quick."

Peeta simply shrugs, minding the flowerbeds.

"Got evicted did you?" she asks then, kneeling next to him.

The scent of fragrant flowers tickles her nose as she sits in the grass, almost provoking a sneeze out of her.

What vanity, she thinks, but soon understands the symbolism. The petite yellow blooms are what her sister was named for. They guard her identity.

He shakes his head, "Katniss is in town, sorting out supplies for the winter. It's going to rain, so I thought I'd better do it now. Besides..."

He stretches his arms in front of him as he utters the word—his hands are shaking, she hasn't noticed before; but even when he tries taking deep breaths and focuses all his strength on steadying the tremor, his wrists and fingers still swirl in that nervous dance.

Johanna recognises it as a symptom of morphling withdrawal.
"I'd rather not make ruckus around the house, you understand." he finishes then, digging his fingers back into the soil.

She has no words to offer him—no insult, no quip, certainly no comfort. For the longest while she simply stares at the lawn in front of her, biting the remnants of a nail she has not yet completely gnawed through, wondering. For once, she doesn't analyse the silence enveloping them—personal comfort appears so secondary in the light of this revelation.

Of Haymitch, herself and Katniss, Johanna thought the boy next to her was the strongest of all.

*Love isn't the cure.* she realises. *He is an addict. It's bullcrap, all of it. And Katniss doesn't know.*

And yet Johanna finds herself desperately wanting to believe that *bullcrap.*

"I'm sorry for yesterday." he says.

His words wrench her back into reality.

Harshly, she cuts him off, "Let's not, okay? Just… just don't."

She shakes her head in hopes of shaking the thoughts with it; Peeta gets the message and directs the conversation elsewhere.

"That spot over there?" he points out the far corner of the garden, right by the fence. "I'd like to plant a pear tree there."

"Why a pear tree?" She can think of much nicer trees, familiar trees to plant there. A weeping willow for a comfortable shadow in the heat of summer, a pine for the smell of its needles in the sunlight, a beech for quality lumber, linden for the fragrant blooms, or a maple…

"There's a particular set of memories I have associated with pears." he flashes a smile her way.

"You're sickening." she groans.

The images come back to her in a flood—the cave in the arena, his wounded leg and Katniss taking care of it. Even from the screens in the Training Center and over the taste of champagne and peanuts in her mouth the sweetness of the display made her want to hurl.

*Shut up and eat your pears,* she told him.

He grins, "You keep saying that."

"Revolting!"

"Reading thesaurus in your spare time, Johanna?"

Her eyebrows arch and furrow in a briefest thought, "Thesa-what…? Shut up!"

He laughs, "I'll consider that a win."

"Yeah, yeah." she rolls her eyes. "Ass."
At the first drop of water, they both retreated into the sanctuary of the house. The warm, swirling fire lighting up the room with hues of oranges and yellows, the smell of burning bark filling Johanna with the sensation of content—enough of it that she can cosily curl up by the window and observe the rain harmlessly assaulting the glass. The first raindrop was like a jolt to her spine, she squeezed Peeta’s shoulder to steady her reaction—painfully so, until he let out a quiet yelp which considerably hastened their retreat.

Now, she’s sipping camomile tea with a dash of dandelion honey, letting her thoughts concentrate around the smell of wood and the soft light it creates. Buttercup is insistently purring on her lap.

It is fortunate that Katniss is not at home; Johanna doubts she would suffer open fire in the house, as marked as she was by the element. A fire-mutt.

In her stay, she’s never seen any of the fireplaces alight. Never seen Katniss near the stove.

It was just as well, the girl’s cooking skills were most likely horrible.

She almost doesn’t notice Peeta leaving the room and re-entering, not until he calls out to her: "Johana, come here. Take a look at this."

The cat claws a mark of disagreement into her leg when she rises that’s sure to stay there for a while.

She leans over the table. It is a book, of all things; a sturdy leather-bound tome of at least five-hundred pages—not that she’s ever read anything of comparable length, the page count is merely a guess.

Peeta beckons her to sit as he opens it, swiftly turning the pages filled with drawings and photos, newspaper cut-outs and neat little writing that she just knows can't belong to Katniss—nor Peeta considering the state of his motorics. She raises an eyebrow in a question, being too preoccupied with her tea to voice it out loud.

"We call it The Book of Loss." he explains. "It's part of Katniss's therapy. We record as many memories of the Districts under the Capitol rule, the losses we suffered in the Hunger Games, the rebellion… It began as a personal project, but there's so much that shouldn't be forgotten. So I thought that maybe—"

She swallows her tea and interrupts him before he can finish, "That I should add to it?"

"Yeah."

Setting the cup on the table, she takes the liberty to skim through the pages on her own. She sees the history of oppression unfold on the fine paper—the photos of District 12 before the bombing and after it; a picture of Katniss's father, and underneath a young Haymitch with people she doesn’t recognise but assumes are his family. There is a page on which the poisonous snake personalised is snarling next to a single dried rose. A drawing of the Mockingjay pin and a picture of Katniss with a fair-haired girl; a few pages further on, a photo of Maysilee Donner and she looks the same as on the painting in Haymitch's house. Then every single District 12 tribute listed, but hardly any pictures accompany their obituary.

Her breath catches when she turns the next page—a familiar pair of emeralds greet her on the paper, and at once she slams the book shut. Finnick. She's fought hard to forget that face forever, only to be haunted by it.

Peeta covers her hand—still resting atop of the book's leather cover—with his, squeezing it gently, encouraging her to talk her way out of the pain.
"You and Katniss lucked out." she says when breath returns to her. "Nobody in the Capitol wanted to tear up the Star-crossed lovers razzle dazzle. You had that angle going for you. Something to keep their twisted little heads occupied. The rest of us? The Capitol made us do things. You can imagine how well that went on my front."

"You resisted." he guesses.

"Yeah. It got my family killed." she's said the words so often lately that they almost sound casual, emotionless. "Snow had them killed because I wouldn't spread my legs on order. I didn't have the virtue of your popularity."

Taking a deep breath, she continues: "The sponsors don't pour money into you out of kindness of their hearts. It's a trade. The rules are simple—they place bets, they invest and expect that investment to return with interest. In the end, every last parachute is paid for by the Victors. And repayment schedule is not an option."—the words take on a sinister tone as she says them; the kind that rings with truth—"Refuse—your family dies, but if you agree—you die; everything you stand for—your beliefs, your defiance, pride—they take that away, leave void. And they use things you love to do that."

She pauses, takes a sip of the tea, uncomfortable with the length of her speech more than the topic. Somehow it needs to get out, someone needs to let them know. Whomever them includes.

"Look at Cashmere and Gloss." she decides to demonstrate her point. " Pretentious little morons, you'd say—and you'd be right, but there's more to it… there were other reasons they were so close. The lengths they had to go to… Eventually a tape would get out. There was a market for that sort of thing in the Capitol. They're that rotten."

His eyes narrow, her meaning lost on him. "What did they have to do?"

"Remember that propo of Finnick's?"—she flinches at the sound of the name—"How he talked about prostitution, incest?"

Peeta nods.

"There's your clue."

"By the—"

"I know, right? Hard to find words. There were videos of the whole thing in the Capitol, sold by millions. Happy as I was to kill the glittering jerk and his pompous bitch of a sister, I don't envy them—nobody deserves to have their identity stripped away like that. Vile stuff."

Peeta looks disgusted, but not shocked. For Johanna, that this the true display of Capitol depravity—when no one, not even as pure as Peeta, is surprised anymore.

The true currency of the Capitol is shock value.

"Do these people have no boundaries." he says. Johanna notices that it's not a question.

She shrugs, "Some do. But they're all as bad as those that done it—if you wave a hand over murder, you're as bad as the murderer. And yeah, I know that makes me a hypocrite."

The silence that befalls the room allows her to finish her tea. It is the heavy kind—grave, filled with anticipation. Johanna's throat is obstructed by a lump she hadn't noticed growing. What wouldn't she give for a bunch of cupcakes with a sugared creamy topping. The mere thought of
the treat makes her stomach grumble with frustration.

Peeta's voice shatters the air of anticipation into a thousand blunted shards. He collects the pieces and forms them into a question.

"Can I ask you something, Johanna?"

She snarls, "Would my saying no stop you?"

He pays the comment no attention. "Back in the Capitol, when Coin tried to organize another Hunger Games, you voted yes. Why? I know what Katniss was trying to do now, but I still don't see your reasoning."

"Short answer? I voted yes because I'm a sadistic bitch." In her voice the answer is an accusation; she draws in a deep breath, letting it warm inside her lungs, then lets the puff of air out in a sigh. "The long answer is—I wanted retribution,—I wanted to see their faces when their own kids would cut each other down like we did. I wanted them to cut each other down like they cut down my family. In the hindsight… maybe I have more of Capitol in me than I'd like to admit, but I stand by my choice."

He nods—it's all he can do, really, not sharing the opinion or Johanna's passion for arguments.

Staring into the empty cup, toying with its handle, she continues: "Sometimes I think we should've just bombed them like Twelve and left them all to die. They watched kids murder for sport, endorsed rape… incest… They're like cancer—there's little positive except eventually you're gonna die."

Peeta keeps his silence and her twitchy fingers move to toy with the book—she prods the leather cover with the stumps of her nails, fingers the many pages till a simple hiss draws a drop of blood—the last in the line of many sacrifices endured at the hand of the Capitol.

"You should see the picture of his son," Peeta suggests, not needing to say the name. "It's on his page, below the wedding photo."

Johanna struggles to open the book on the exact page; beneath her hands, many other fates unveil, illustrated or described. She recognizes Katniss'ss father only for his resemblance to his daughter; beyond that 74th Hunger Games posters and tributes, Boggs of 13 and the Star Squad, the sketches of Mockingjay armour and longbow…

And further yet, a rounded smile of child no older than a few months, eyes shining like the emerald sea waters of District 4. Her eyes roam fixed in place, reluctant to look beyond the area Johanna's outlined for them. Her lips twist in a smile out of their own volition.

"You're right," she says. "He looks just like him."

_Cyprian, Sapper, Sawyer_ were the boys. _Grove, Willa_ the girls, and one she only remembers as _Squirrel_ for the shaggy red ponytail she wore. Those were the names she gave Peeta to record on her own page of losses—the tributes that died on her watch. Their features all blur into a mockery of life—she's seen them more dead than alive, so much so that she can scarcely recall their faces untainted by sport.
A Capitol word, not hers.

"Promise me something."

"Sure."

"Go off it as soon as you can. I'm not kidding."

"I am."

That's how they said goodbye to each other.

He sounded so convinced, so in control—was that what the tremor meant? Was he lowering his dosage? If hope had ever picked a human vessel it had to be Peeta Mellark.

"For Katniss." he adds.

_For love_, she hears unsaid in his voice.

"Somebody help me, I hope it's not infectious."

She marks a mental observation: _A whole lotta people do stuff for Katniss._

Johanna finds it refreshing to be the one person always out for herself only.

She finds Haymitch in much the same position as she had left him—slumped in the rocking chair by the window, neck bending under the heavy weight of the inebriated head resting on his shoulder. Indeed, it would be nearly indiscernible if he had moved at all—were it not for the fresh bottle of liquor in his hand. The fact it is not empty or spilled over Haymitch's pants is all the hint Johanna needs to be seized by rage. Her moves are neither quiet nor gentle when she pries the bottle from Haymitch's stiff hands.

Impossible as he is to wake, the theft of his _memory medicine_ startles him awake at once.

"Whatcha doing, Honeybee?" he mumbles, his limbs fumbling and failing at propping his weight up. Spying the prize in Johanna's hands when he blinks the world into focus, however, his reflexes quicken, muscles tighten. He follows her brisk strides into the kitchen with his own languid ones.

"You give that back, sweetheart!" he shouts, then begs, but his pleas fall on uncaring ears, deafened by the girl's boiling temper.

He leaps, but the alcohol-impaired strength is not enough to subdue Johanna, who nimbly squirms out of his grasp, leaning forward just enough to throw the bottle of booze into the sink.

It shatters into thousand pieces of sorrow and desperation and Haymitch sinks helplessly to the ground.

"Did somebody piss on your pancake, what the hell are you doing?" he yells, regaining enough command of his body to stand up and grab her by her shoulders.

"I'm saving your life, you prick!" she responds with a scream, the volume of her voice by far
overpowering his.

_They'll hear us all the way to Hazelle's house._ For barely a second, the thought flashes in her mind before she dismisses it. Johanna Mason doesn't care, it's not in her nature, her temper doesn't match it, nor her tempered reputation.

Except she does care.

"Stop with this shit already; it's killing you. I'm not losing more people, you understand me?"

_The Book of Loss._ The pages, the stories, faces… it all reminded her of what was lost—who was lost. Like water it all floated beyond her control, but now she is determined to steer its course—to build a dam to obstruct that leakage, let the tide rise till it reaches shore and washes up its captives.

_I won't let more of my loved ones die._

Meanwhile, Haymitch is crushing her shoulders with a roaring disagreement. "I paid for this stuff. This is my house, I got every right—"

"You have a right to fuck all!"

Haymitch sneers, his voice dripping with cold anger. "Then maybe you should go get stuffed and take your charity with you. The door's right there."

But she doesn't leave. She graces the suggestion with a gesture that roughly translates as _kiss my ass._

They don’t talk for hours, barely exchanging a glance across the kitchen table even as they dine; the silence woven between them is filled with insult and spite. The vein on his forehead pulsates with urgency to unsay the said, say the unsaid.

He says nothing. Johanna feeds the gruesome quiet with a glare.

It's late evening when she finally speaks to him, embarrassment audible in her voice; he knows better than to acknowledge it. "I need your help." she says.

"What's up, Honeybee? A spider needs killing?"

She pays the joke no heed and leads him to the bathroom. Puzzled at first, he searches her grimace for clues—her eyes are begging. Bereft of passion, sensuality, he discerns the only one option left—desperation.

He turns around as she undresses, giving her vulnerability its privacy. She heaves a sigh at that, though if it is of relief or frustration only Johanna herself can tell.

Instead, his eyes fix on the tap water spewing into the tub while his hands work at a small flask of perfumed oil—it stinks of putrefaction, having turned rancid long ago. He shakes his shoulders casually, "Was meant to smell of roses."

She smiles, appreciating the effort at making the mess of anxiety and fears that she is a bit more comfortable, for trying to take her thoughts away from the water.
"I hate roses anyway." she forces out a chuckle, but it rings hollow despite the effort.

Rotten oil smells nothing like the clinically white cell in the Capitol—and for that she is grateful.

Haymitch stirs the water to the perfect temperature before he eases her into the bath.

Johanna trusts not the steaming water seeping into her pores, but she trusts his hands soaping her hair; he washes her as a father would. His sour smell—the sweat-stained shirt and the grease matting his hair, the omnipresence of the alcohol stench permeating him, the hint of their supper on his breath—reminds her of no peacekeepers, no disinfectant. She is grateful for that, too. It puts her mind at ease.

Under the touch of soaped scrubbing brush, she's a little girl in District 7. Afraid of nothing, capable of anything.

It's not a bad thought to have.

Chapter End Notes

Another month, another update! I hope you enjoyed it. I appreciate all your kudos, follows and comments. I hope to see you all soon. :)
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A/N: Finally the last chapter arrives. I hope you will all forgive me for how late it comes; my life took on a rather hectic tempo since the last update, leaving me with no time to write at all.

Hope you enjoy the long overdue conclusion of this story. As always: comments, reviews etc. are very welcome. Thank you all for your patience and for reading my story.

Her morning is filled with the familiar creaking of trees, an unfamiliar screech of the alarm clock, promptly silenced by her fist only for her to discover that the sound has no ending—the mockingjays outside her window have taken up the call.

“I hate these stupid birds.”

For days now she’s been waking in her own house, surrounded by familiarity.

Yet the calm stereotype of 7 does nothing to lessen her alertness—if anything, the peace feels more unnatural than ever. This is the district that has seen the deaths of her family, of the kids she’s been trusted with as a trainer. Yet the landscape appeared as if it had never witnessed those deaths.

The once lush forests were marred with mortars, some trees uprooted; elsewhere, the land was still drenched with the rushing flush of the broken dam, leaving pools in its wake.

But the lives claimed by that war were someone else’s ghosts, their paleness did not bother Johanna. Hers had tangible features—there was no ignoring those.

Still, the barest touch of water proved more intimidating than any face haunting her.

Ever so carefully she turns the tap on, letting the clear liquid flow steadily for the few moments it takes Johanna to draw a deep breath and close her eyes. She wets the toothbrush only slightly before squeezing a dab of mint toothpaste on it. She detests the taste of mint—but she finds that hatred takes her thoughts away from the greater threat.

Washing her face is harder, it involves contact with the enemy. She can no longer carelessly splash herself with a handful of water as she used to. When it ripples between her fingers she can almost feel the electrical sparks running along the current, making her flinch and draw another deep breath.

“You’re pathetic, Johanna.”

With no one to put on a façade in front of, Johanna is at a loss. She cannot hide from herself the weakness she tries to keep away from others.

She stares at the reflection in the mirror for the longest while, examining her grimy face, the mess of greasy hair on her head. Simply by looking at herself, she can hear Effie Trinket’s voice all
“By the jewels! Your hair looks positively dreadful, Johanna.”

She bit back the remark that she was lucky to still have any hair at all after her merry vacation in the Capitol torture cell, then. Honestly, she had to give herself props for that exercise in self-control; liberation of the Districts notwithstanding, Capitol characters like Effie still made her hands twitch for an axe.

“It does, right? I’m told my hairdresser lost her head over it.” This one she couldn’t help but let slip out, negating her previous efforts at civility. Try as she might, some things would never change.

Effie visibly flinched—without all the layers of her make-up mask, it was hard for her not to betray emotion. Johanna smirked, marking down a mental victory. Capitol 0, Johanna Mason 1.

“You just can’t play nice, Honeybee, can you?” Haymitch said.

She could’ve sworn she had never seen him so cleaned up before—a fresh shirt, washed hair, and—unless her nose was playing tricks—she smelled a dab of cologne.

“You know me, Haymitch, courtesy is not one of my virtues.” she pointed out with a smirk.

“Virtue in the context of your personality is a vulgarism.” he remarked.

She climbed the steps to the platform, replacing the Capitol woman by the train. Her last moments in 12 for a while. Involuntarily, her stomach clenched. An anxiety began settling in that would last even a few days after her arrival in 7. She had no idea what to do with herself on her own, still doesn’t weeks after.

“Be seeing you, old man; don’t get dead.” she said, by way of goodbye.

He waved his hand carelessly, “Yeah, yeah. Cut the sentiment and get on the damn train.”

She smirked, “So eager for one-on-one time with Effs?”

“None of your business.” he retorted all too quickly.

It spoke volumes of Effie’s restraint that she had not interrupted their bickering. Although when she looked at her that day, her eyes stared right beyond her, her mind as if wandering miles and years away. Briefly, it crossed Johanna’s mind that maybe the Capitol had its ghosts, too.

“I’m taking that as a yes.” she grinned, marking down a mental victory.

“Take the train instead.”

He was right, of course. The conductor had been delaying the departure for her sake only. She nodded and climbed into the vehicle, turning around in the doorway she decided to take in her surroundings for the last time.

“And hey, Johanna?” Haymitch called out. “Smooch the hunter guy for me.” he grinned.

“Sc—” The automatic door swooshed shut in front of her before she managed to finish, locking her in with her response. “—rew you.”
Her breath catches as she finally wets a sponge and lets it lick away the bits of morning grime on her forehead. Only then does she breathe out, grateful for not drowning in her fear. Point two of her morning survival list ticked off.

In comparison, flushing the toilet is easy—watching the water roll into the abyss, seeing its waves dissipate, gives her an odd sense of victory. After all, in the emptiness of her house, even the softly popping soap suds sound like the crackling of electricity.

*One challenge conquered, a whole forest of them yet to go.*

“You have to be patient, Johanna.” the doctor says. It’s enough to send Johanna in a frenzy.

“I don’t have to be jack-shit! I want it gone.”

For all this fancy titles, the diplomas littering the walls of his surgery, he still knew nothing about how she felt, Johanna concluded. And how could he? He was from the Capitol—all the psychological trauma he had to deal with there was showing up in an out-of-season wig to the Grand Soiree. The petty self-esteem problems bred by that lair of decadence. He knew nothing about the District folk, about the victors. He was talking *bark and splinters*, as her father used to say. It made her want to wring his powdered neck.

The timer clicks and just like that it’s time to pay up for the empty words.

“Encourage yourself to be in contact with water, Johanna. Pick a sport.” is his last bit of advice he offers her before seeing her out of his office and into the lobby.

“This is Billie, my new administrator.” he says, pointing out a thin girl seated behind the heavy oak wood desk. Mousy brown hair and a pointy chin betrays her as the resident of 7. “She’s also from Seven, as you can tell. Her parents were in the paper industry.”

Johanna sneers, “Lucky her parents weren’t in the moist towelette business.”

The head doctor ignores her jape completely. “Don’t forget to book your next appointment with Billie. Until next time, Johanna.” he says before disappearing back in the surgery.

Johanna nods a greeting in the general direction of the secretary, but never actually approaches her to book the next meeting.

At first Johanna took the head doctor’s words to mean that she should start swimming. But there was no way in hell she’d go near a body of water without somebody’s dare to guide her through it. To shut out the trauma. Bravado was always her primary means of defence. The doctor had to know that.

Then it dawned upon her that he wanted her to be in contact with water not out of leisure, but
necessity. She added jogging to her daily routine simply to have a reason to wash. To bathe. It seemed simple enough—in theory.

The reality is that she enjoys jogging—a steady run through the forest in the morning keeps her fit and her thoughts fresh. She watches as the fall descends on the District with greater urgency each day. Sees the leaves take up colour and gnarl, observes as the birds prepare to take flight to the places of more comfortable weather. The skies grow heavier with each day, the grey clouds fill the air with humidity of the season. She’s learnt to watch out for the warning of oncoming rain and how to elude it. She’s never caught unprepared.

She’s learned to listen to District weather forecasts—another Capitol habit that caught on—and never goes out on days that predict rain.

The day rain catches up to her, she hides in the no longer used peacekeeper patrol tower, out of touch of the wet soil. She curls up under the low metal roof, the palms of her hands pressed to her knees—a sort of a chill cradling her body back and forth—and hums to herself just loud enough to drown out the dripping of water. She was never an apt singer, but now her voice is shaky and strained, her breaths come out ragged and shallow—her throat feels caving in, as if crushed by a phantom hand. The words of the song are a creaky whisper barely slipping through the chattering teeth. If not for the lyrics, hardly anyone would recognise the traditional District 7 tune, that her mother used sing while weaving bast fibre ropes by the fireplace, from the trembling melody of Johanna’s lacklustre performance.

\[\textbf{You’ll find my ghost by the willow tree—}\]

\[\text{Just across the stream where you bent the knee.}\]

\[\text{There you asked to marry me.}\]

\[\text{There the leaves like waves are embracing me.}\]

She stays atop the tower for two days straight—time flowing past her like an enraged river—feeding on stale crackers she discovered in her backpack. She catches raindrops into a bottle, but finds them hard to swallow. The rain twitches in her nose, recalling the putrid smell of her Capitol cell.

“You’re pathetic, Johanna.”

She cannot discern whether the voice rings through her head only, or comes in through her eardrums, but it’s the impulse she’s been missing—in the absence of anyone to feign strength for, she finally realises that the one person she needs to muster strength for is herself. Her knees feel wobbly as she rises and steadily climbs down the ladder, each raindrop biting her skin like discharge.

She struggles against the wind wheezing past her, focusing herself on the sound of it wailing in the leaves. It distracts her from the chiming storm wracking her body, sending muscles a-twitch.

The trees are garbed in monotone, remaining stagnant even as the wind tears through the boughs, she focuses on the constancy of the colour of their soaked bark, the even distances between the trunks of this artificially planted fort of greenery. Sometimes the pins and leaves have the courtesy to catch the rain for her, shield her from its jolt; at other times, she receives a full shower as she carelessly brushes against a low-hanging branch and the tremor shakes the water off the treetop’s
verdant crown. At that moment, her sight flashes piercing white of the cage she’d known, her ability to press onward hinging only on the awareness of the muddy colours of the forest persevering in the corner of her eye. She touches the water-glazed bark of the tree closest to her, feeling its texture on her palm, rough and crumbling where her fingernails dig deeper as she steadies herself; she finds no similarity between the cold, wet wood and the polished tiles of her captive room.

*Touch wood* takes on a whole new meaning then. Not insurance fuelled by superstition, but a reality check, punctuated by ragged breaths.

What is merely an hour of a hike under Johanna’s preferred weather conditions, takes her three hours to surmount. When she finally does reach her home, the remnants of her strength allow only for stirring the cold fireplace into a steady flame before she gives in to exhaustion and collapses on the carpet in front of the emanating warmth.

She wakes to shivers leaping across her skin under her soaked clothes. Johanna has no recollection of how much time had passed—hours, a day or several? The passage of time left the fireplace yawning dying embers among the dark ash—the only indication of its tides washing over.

Several minutes flush out while Johanna gets her bearings, noticing the mud and dirt her unfortunate episode has left in its wake. The realisation brings her face to face with her second greatest horror...

Her steps are resolute as she makes her way to the bathroom, scattering dirty clothes behind her, upon turning the tap, however, she hesitates, her mind hundreds of miles away as she stares beyond the water’s flow.

The bathroom smells of pine and mountain air—artificial, of course, the thick scent of chemicals makes her nose twitch, nigh provoking a sneeze out of her. Even so, it’s soothing—mountains and pine, even artificial, smell nothing like the Capitol with its luxurious flowery fragrances that cost as much as her monthly Victor’s allowance. It takes her away from the harsh memories of that life, of the dank cell they’ve kept her in.

Even so, it takes her whole twenty minutes to gather courage to enter the bath; by that time, the water’s already growing cold.

“You’re pathetic, Johanna.” she reminds herself.

No, you’ve just been through a lot. replies the head doctor’s voice in her head.

For once she does not disagree.

District 7’s Victor’s Village is an arboretum. An assortment of neatly trimmed exotic trees and hedges. Frilly mazes of low-cut boxwood. Among them wood-laden houses, painted white. Johanna despised how pretentious it was compared to her childhood cabin, but it was the only
place in the district with tap water—hot tap water, and central heating.

The stuffed deer’s head over the fireplace stares at her in judgement, having witnessed all of her recent breakdowns. Nought stayed hidden from its beady eyes. Johanna hated the bloody thing, the entirety of this Capitol pre-decorated house.

Sometimes the folks from the Capitol used to come to Seven on hunting trips before the Rebellion. Not to do any hunting of their own, of course, merely watch the Peacekeepers slaughter animals at will and claim trophies from their killmongering endeavours. The deer over her fireplace most likely suffered the same fate. It still infuriated her to think of it—headless corpses piled on a pyre, burning to a crisp just so that the citizens of Seven couldn’t use them for food. The Capitol folks were never interested in the *filthy* meat, but that didn’t mean anyone else could have it. It was just like Capitol to kill for violence’s sake. Over the years as a victor, she’s grown accustomed to the death of human prey. Rationalised it. Dehumanised herself.

But the animals were too pure to murder at will.

The deer over her fireplace kept staring with its empty, judgemental eyes.

The only thing keeping her from chopping it all to tinder was her own ineptitude as an interior designer.

She looks out of the window. The forest is cosier, more familiar; her kind of aesthetic.

A knock on the door diverts her attention.

One gale went by to leave another at the door—Johanna did not know what foul wind blew Gale Hawthorne to her door-step, but his uncharacteristic smile made her grit her teeth.

He couldn’t have picked a worse day.

Her house was a mess—only providence has seen to it that her face wasn’t as well.

She opens the door with an annoyed snarl, “Are you stalking me?”

Frankly, finding her house is no great feat, she knew; it was enough to look for the house everyone else avoided—the one set the furthest away from the rest of the Victor’s Village.

Gale Hawthorne whips out his best smile as he says: “I hear some girls are into that.”

By some saintly intervention she manages to suppress the urge to punch him in the teeth, but just barely.

They stand between the doors, wordlessly exchanging inquisitive looks. The silence passes in what feels like hours, but the seconds gone by would barely fill two minutes.

“How are you here?” she asks.

“I like being around you, Jo.”

“What, is that my nickname now?”

“If you like,”

She shrugs. “People’ve called me worse. It’s not too shabby.”

Another few hundreds of seconds chase past them, measured by the regular intervals of lashes
brushing against each other in a blink of an eye.

“I missed you,” he says, then hesitatingly offers: “I’ll go away if you want.”

Seconds pass, whirling about like the water flowing down the drain. The clock inside the house beats and even hour.

Her chocolate eyes narrow. Her lips tighten, soundlessly questioning his motives.

“I thought maybe we should start over on a more… serious note.”

She notes that down as one of the things she never expected the notorious District 12 flirt to say. She allows the strange feeling it stirs within her wash over.

“No, come on in.” she says at last. I missed you, too—she keeps that part of the invitation to herself.

He steps over the threshold and into the house. Immediately, his eyes are drawn to the muddy floor, a pile of clothes by the cold fireplace.

“Ignore that.” she mutters.

He nods, promptly diverting the conversation elsewhere.

“So I found out what you meant. That comment when we parted. I’m the villain, huh?”

She chuckles, “To some. Luckily for you, I always had a thing for the bad guys.”

Amused, he shakes his head, and careful to step over the mud on the floor he makes his way to the kitchen, mindful to not spread the dirt further.

Johanna appreciates that, yet immediately finds something else to criticise.

“So what, you’re not gonna kiss me?”

“All in due time, Johanna.” he laughs, finding the taking in of his surroundings more of a priority.

“You might’ve figured this out by yourself already, but I don’t take kindly to teasing.”

“I’m counting on it.”

In a blink of an eye, she surmounts the distance between them with four wide steps, to pull him in hungry kiss which he returns fiercely, drawing the every last breath of air from her lips.

“Happy now?”

“For a minute or two.” she would almost giggle had she not strictly forbid herself such frivolities nearly a decade ago.

His eyes continue scanning the room, arriving at a crumpled wall calendar. Several dates are circled—A stands for appointment, but the last three notes are crossed out. He notices a lopsided B scribbled in the last week.

“I missed your birthday.” he notes.

Johanna shrugs, but her voice sounds tired at the reminder. “By a few days. Not that there’s anything to celebrate. Fucked in the head and old... One of those things is too much to handle.”
“Come on, Johanna, you’re not old.”

“Says you. You’re younger than me.” Younger, but no less broken, she knows.

“I make up for it in maturity.” he points out.

She burst out laughing, only stopping to catch her breath briefly before continuing for another three minutes. She then looks at Gale whose eyebrows’ crease follows the curve of the wrinkles on his forehead in a regular pattern.

“Thanks, I needed that laugh.” she says with a smile.

Only after this exchange she beckons him to sit and fetches a plate of blueberry muffins that arrived on a train from Twelve a few days ago—her birthday treat. She offers him tea or coffee or both. He asks her for a beer. He does not bother with a glass she offers him and drinks the cold beverage from the bottle, wiping his lips on a sleeve of his shirt. Johanna pours herself a glass of District 11 made cider, but her manners prove not the least bit more sophisticated as the liquid trickles down the corner of her mouth.

Gale helps himself to a muffin, stuffing it into his mouth whole. His teeth and tongue turn purple from the blueberry juice—she secretly finds it adorable.

“Taste like home.” he says.

“Even though Peeta made them?” she points out.

“All the more for it.” he says, but the truth is the taste is unfamiliar—his family never had the money to buy pastry at the bakery. Each day he had managed to put bread on the table was a feast then. He likes to think that’s what the signature taste of his home district would be like now that flour came in abundance and his war veteran’s rent allowed for a much bigger spending budget.

He could almost picture Katniss handpicking the blueberries in the forest beyond the fence, the way they used to do together. He flinches at the memory, anger creasing his eyebrows. Suddenly he finds himself looking out of the window, not realising when or how he had stood up. The woods he sees lurking over the trimmed hedgerow are proud and tall, spaced out for the woodcutters. The vision of Katniss fades in its industrialness. He makes towards the door.

“What, you trying to chicken out already?” Johanna’s voice cuts through the room like the chainsaw muffled by the window, her disappointment palpable.

“I need some air.”

She follows him on the porch in front of the house, slipping a raincoat on, just in case.

Breathing in, breathing out, his nostrils inflate and deflate. The wheezing of his breath the only immediate sound. The woods beyond the hedge are silent, anticipating more rain.

“The air smells different here.” he observes.

She points to a group of trees nearby, at the very edge of the woods. Their trunks are long and elegant, the branches dry and crumbling on the lower levels, but brimming with long, dark green needles at the top.

“You know pine trees are my favourite? Always liked the smell of them for some reason.”

He thinks of the different smells he’s grown to cherish. The light rain of summer wetting the slag
heap. Strawberries and that strange perfume Madge’s mother used to wear and Madge always borrowed whenever he and Katniss came around. The leaves of grass by the lake beyond the fence. The hot blood of a fresh kill. Campfire. Clean leather. The mountain air of District Two.

Lately, he found himself adding an unexpected one to the list, found himself yearning for it.

The sharp, musky scent of the woman beside him.

He swallows the admission he has no intention to utter as of yet and finds Johanna’s lips pressed into his, wet and warm and so welcome. His fingers snake up and tangle in her short hair.

Still, he has to make sure.

“Does it count when I’m in pain?” he asks.

Johanna grins, “Mother always told me that that all the hurts and bruises need to be kissed away.”

Maybe that’s the exact cure he’s been searching for.

“Mind if we walk?” he asks as they stand only barely apart, shoulders brushing against each other.

They measure the distance between the trees with their steps in silence while the forest around them is grave with anticipation. Their knuckles breach the narrow space between them, touching lightly, as they walk side by side. Johanna lifts the cape of her raincoat over her head, as if trying to protect the peacefulness of her mind from the rain. His fingers seek out her hand, settling in her palm, entwining between hers. The wind rustles the unspoken in the yellowing treetops.

But the quietude does not accompany them all the way. Curiosity interrupts his peace of mind, finding a way to his lips.

“What were you doing in Twelve anyway?”

“How’d you know?”

“I’ve had Posy on the phone, gushing over you for ten minutes.”

“My, Hazelle really gossips like a washerwoman.”

Gale laughs, “Isn’t she?”

The connection didn’t occur to her when she spoke, but now it has her chuckling as well. An actual washerwoman.

“Guess there’s some truth to the proverb after all.” She cuts herself off briefly, considering how to respond to his query. “I guess I was feeling mentally undernourished. So I went to Twelve to get food for thought—not only for thought.”

“Undernourished—that’s a big word for you, Johanna.” he points out.

“I know, right?” she laughs.

“It feels better when I’m around people.” she finally admits. “I’ve forbidden myself from letting my breakdowns show in front of people. It sort of works.”

Johanna looks at him with wary eyes, seeking judgement, affirmation, perhaps? But his face betrays none such.
“What about you?”

Gale appears surprised by the question, allowing emotion to break through the usual stoicism.

“Mountain air,” he says. “Nothing clears the head quite like rock climbing. Up there, where the air is thin, you don’t really think, just breathe and hold on.”

He inhales deeply as if trying to discern whether the experience can be duplicated here on the ground, but the air is rich and thick with oxygen, spurning his mind onward, not slowing it down.

“Just breathe, huh?” Johanna says with a wink, “Never take anyone up there?”

He raises an eyebrow, “Something on your mind?”

“I’ve heard rumours.”

He frowns, clearly not appreciating being the hot topic of District 12’s gossip. “They weren’t outdoor types,” he says at last.

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Their walk takes them past the forest to the river. They pass the pools of water formed in the wake of the destruction of the 7’s dam, saturated with the rains of the past few days. Their boots splash in the muddy puddles, floundering in the wet soil, soles caked with the stuff.

They walk straight towards the old power plant that used to supply Seven’s electricity, power manufactured with the force of the flowing river water. The sight is almost surreal to Johanna—scaffolding set all around the broken concrete walls of the dam, hundreds of workers from District 5 at work on what she came to consider a symbol of her breakdown. Rebuilding. She feels relief as acutely as she felt the bitter irony swallowing her up when she first discovered the destruction left after the Rebellion.

“There is no cure for PTSD, Johanna.” the head doctor had said. “The key to living with it is acceptance. You need to make peace with the fact that it’s never going to be the same.”

She snapped at him then, obviously: “So you’re saying this whole therapy shit is useless. We might as well be drinking tea here. What am I paying you for?!”

The cracks in the walls of the dam would be smoothed over, filled with a fresh layer of concrete. Could she do the same?

Hesitant, she takes four steps forward, overhearing the faint melody of a District 5 song from a distance. Energetic, hopeful. More than she could muster whilst stuck in that watchtower.

The afternoon air is tense and permeated with the smell of water, her eyes look up, over the edge of the heavily manned scaffolding. The concentrated puffs of grey alert her to the presence she still deems threatening

“It’s going to rain,” she says.
Gale nods, taking her hand and pulling her to the direction they emerged from. His stern grey eyes mirror the sky in their determination.

Johanna takes a firm step, allowing herself to be enveloped by the forest once more, smearing her boots with watery brown mud of the puddle crossing her path.

She’s got a whole lifetime left for rebuilding.

She is seated at the table when the thunder and whips of lightning split the sky. The last thunderstorm of that early fall. Johanna watches the crackling of electricity touch a tree and set its life on fire, smothering the branches reaching across the sky. She does not flinch even as the trickles of water draw their own lightning bolts on the window pane. Cradled against the hunter seated on the chair behind her, she dares not let out a breath of dissent. They drink bitter tea together from the same mug.

She is perfectly safe.

“Did mother tell you about Beryl from Three and Coil from Five?” he asks.

Johanna shakes her head, shifting on his lap to turn her face as much as she can towards his.

“Funny story. A blonde, a redhead. I couldn’t decide which one I liked.”

She arches an eyebrow, intrigued by the possibility, “So you’ve had both?”

“I wish.” he laughs. “Somehow they found out about each other, decided I was stringing them along. So they ditched me and started dating each other.”

Johanna laughs, “They had the right idea.”

“Oh, really?” His fingers move to lift her chin, forcing her dark eyes to lock with his.

“Yeah; I’d sooner gauge their eyes out than share.”

The storm outside was a war of raging water, sparks shooting across the sky. But fears would not engulf her tonight; the dam rebuilding inside of her would help hold back the flood—awake or in dreams.

Gently holding the edges of her jaw, Gale pulls her face closer, locking any further thoughts of water behind the reinforced gates of her mind—locking it as he locked his lips with hers. The only flood that follows is the bitter, herbal taste of him.

No, she thought. There wouldn’t be any dreams of drowning tonight.

That is... if they decide to sleep tonight at all.

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