Promise Keeper

by hoosierbitch

Summary

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He puts a tarnished silver ring on her scarred hand and she does the same for him.

Annie lays a wreath of white lilies on Finnick's grave.

Their son has Finnick's smile.

Notes

Thank you to shadowen for the beta!

See the end of the work for more notes

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“Will you marry me?” Finnick asks, in the time between the endings of the world. He is gaunt and pale, and everyone but Annie seems to pity him. He doesn't fit in the dull grey of District 13 any more than he had in the roughness of 4. Even Katniss, even Johanna, can see that the brightness inside of Finnick has been broken. His smile seems weak without it. Annie understands that souls move like tides, and Finnick has always said that Annie hung the moon. “Will you make me the happiest man alive?”

They are two different questions and he has asked them both before.

“Of course,” she had said, when Finnick Odair was twelve and handing her lilies. Who else would have loved him? Capitol cull, pretty and perfect, orphaned and kind.

“I won’t make you happy,” says Annie Cresta, when Finnick Odair is twenty-four and on his knees. Who else will love him? Capitol Darling, Snow’s favorite snowflake, trident true, orphaned again. “But I will marry you.”

* 

They are both thirteen, but of the two of them only Finnick is truly afraid. Finnick, Finnick the summer son, Finnick the sun-kissed, turns fourteen the day before the Games. He is old enough to be reaped.

Their Capitol chaperone, Tremulous, pulls a piece of paper out of a large glass bowl. “The male tribute from District 4 is...Finnick Odair!”

There is silence.

Finnick walks to the podium quickly. Head held high. Finnick stands tall, tan and blond and perfect. He already looks pretty enough to be in the Games.

Growing up, they called him the Capitol Cull; a changling child who looked like he belonged on a Vid reel instead of waist-deep in fish. No one could truly stay mad at Finnick for long, since part of his perfection was bone-deep kindness, but the sense that Finnick never quite belonged was always there. Annie felt it too.

When Tremulous raises the Tributes’ arms with a victorious smile, Annie claps along with the crowd. Slowly and in unison so that no one can mistake their applause for approval. Finnick is the only one other than Tremulous who is smiling.

Before the train departs, the female tribute’s family gathers around her, crying and hugging and talking over each other. Mags waits by the train, Finnick at her side. Mags raised Finnick, and since she'll be accompanying them as a Mentor, she has days until she has to say goodbye for the last time. Annie wonders what tears and promises and words they would share if Mags still talked.

* 

“What will you call the baby?” Haymitch asks.

She rests both hands flat on the curve of her belly and waits for the baby to kick. The waves are up to her ankles. Haymitch, glaring and complaining the whole time, rolls up his pants to the knee and joins her to watch the sunset.
“If it’s a girl, you should call her Prim.” Effie, now trinketless, has taken to accompanying Haymitch on his journeys through the Districts. Annie knows they’re gathering information for the fledgling government they’re making, getting the lay of the land, but there is an irresistible charm about the both of them that makes it hard to resent. Effie, unlike Haymitch, stays farther up the beach and keeps herself dry.

“That’s obscene,” Haymitch replies.

“It’s all the rage,” Effie protests. “It’s sweet! It’s an honor!”

“It’s going to be a boy,” Annie interrupts. She’s carrying high, and her morning sickness is terrible. Old wives wisdom gives her more confidence than an ultrasound would.

“A boy!” Effie sounds practically transported with ecstasy. “How lovely! Then Prim certainly won’t do. You could always name him after his father, of course, although I do recommend ‘Nick’ or ‘Finn,’ just to be original.”

“Johanna says I should call him Fags,” Annie tells them. “After Finnick and Mags.” Effie looks horrified. “It’s kind of a joke.”

“I think it’s hilarious,” Haymitch says. He has been too nice to her, ever since the world ended.

“I think I might just call it ‘The Baby,’” she says. She is half-serious. “‘The Baby O’Cresta.’”

“O’Cresta?” Haymitch’s smile is real this time. Even Effie stops fluttering for a moment.

The sun sets, and Haymitch and Effie argue, and the waves recede.

* Tremulous pulls a piece of paper out of a large glass bowl. “The female tribute from District 4 is...Annie Cresta!” She is eighteen, almost too old for the reaping. She is taller and stronger than Finnick had been when his name was called and he went to the Games. That is a useless thought. She doesn’t bother to fake a smile when Tremulous reaches for her hand.

* Tremulous pulls a piece of paper out of a large glass bowl. “The male tribute from District 4 is...Finnick Odair!”

No.

Finnick is not thirteen. He is twenty-four and a Victor. The crowd is angry with echoes and Finnick’s smile seems real and wrong and familiar.

This cannot be--Tremulous pulls a piece of paper out of a large glass bowl. “The female tribute from District 4 is...Annie Cresta.” She is older than eighteen but she does not know how old. She is tall but not strong. The only sounds are her sobs.

Tremulous reaches for Annie’s hand and Mags steps forward, gnarled fingers forming a defiant fist, pounding against her own heart.

Mags takes Annie’s place at Finnick’s side.

Annie realizes that the best she can hope for is that only one of them will die.

“We already did this scene,” Annie tells them, trying to get them back. She puts her hands over
her ears to block out the angry echoes, Tremulous’s proclamations, Finnick’s lies. “We won,” she says. “We won. We won. We won. We won. We won.”

*

“I’m beautiful,” Finnick says. He has come back from his first time as a mentor, newly fifteen, sharp and shiny like an unwrapped present. “Everyone in the Capitol wants me.” He spreads his arms out wide and spins in a circle. The sand under his feet sprays out around them and peppers her ankles.

“Everyone in the Capitol wants to fuck you,” she corrects. She is angry with Finnick, who left District 4 as a boy who wanted to marry her, and came back a man who didn’t care. “There’s a difference.”

“There is,” he says, almost sad. “And they do.”

*

Annie chokes on sand. It coats her tongue and gets between her teeth and cheeks, grinds into her skin. Her teeth snap and bite into her tongue as an earthquake shakes the arena and sends a wave of water over her. She manages to swim through it. In the space of a few coughing breaths she watches both of the Tributes from District 12 drown.

“Breathe.”

She whirls around, gagging on sand and blood, trying to figure out who had managed to sneak up on her. She knows she can kill him. She knows that now about herself: she rode the wave and wants to live and will kill to make that happen.

“Annie, it’s okay. You have to calm down.”

When she blinks the sand from her eyes she sees the boy from 12, the one who had been crushed against the rocks and gone under, hovering over her. She screams and tries to hit him. Her arms are tied down.

“It’s Peeta,” says the dead boy. “We’re in the Capitol. You have to calm down or they’re going to drug you again. Annie—”

“Give it up.” A woman’s voice, coming from somewhere beyond the ghost. The arena is too bright. Her eyes hurt. “Crazy is as crazy does.”

She sounds mean. Annie likes her. “Did I kill you?” she asks.

The mean ghost laughs and comes forward. Pale, with dark stubble on a shaved head and onyx eyes. “You couldn’t even if you tried.”


“You didn’t kill me. You’re not in the Arena anymore. My name is Peeta. Remember me?”

“The Games are over,” Annie whispers, remembering that she had won.


*
President Coin raises a statue and holds a ceremony. They commissioned the statue, a hunk of marble in the shape of a trident, and carved Finnick’s name on the shaft. It looks wrong: an immovable weapon, nothing but the empty sky to attack, all of its enemies behind it.

It is very ugly, but Annie doesn’t mention that. She just keeps her hands clasped in front of her, hiding the swell of her belly, trying to look sad. She is wearing black. She needs to stop hanging around Haymitch, who says he’s doing her drinking for her, and that, given her condition, that means he’s drinking for three. It's logic of a kind.

The speeches she nods through are trite and impersonal. The only people who knew Finnick well are dead, crazy, or too pissed off to be allowed in public. Then Peeta Malark, the winner of the 74th and 75th Hunger Games—the two crowning titles with the least meaning—takes the stage. He looks at her, and she nods her permission. Peeta’s a sweet boy. He too knows what it’s like to be broken and beloved.

“Finnick was a hero,” Peeta says. He says other things, but Annie doesn’t hear them.

Finnick was a hero.

There are no heroes left. Need and greed turned them all into politicians.

Finnick had chosen a good time to die.

* 

After they crown her Victor, her fingers still raw from having sand and blood scrubbed from beneath her nails, Finnick takes her back to the District 4 quarters in the training center. She is too tired to ask when the train will take them home. She is bone-tired, too tired to cry, too tired to sleep. Finnick puts a glass of something hot by her elbow, and she notices the bruises on his wrists and forearms.

“You needed food,” he says, when she asks what happened. “I don’t have much currency in the Capitol yet. I traded with what I have.”

Five days into the Games she had been starving, tucked in an alcove too small for her to lie down in, hiding and praying. A chime had sounded and a silver gift had floated down to her. Protein cubes, enough to keep her going. Enough to keep her alive.

“Thank you.” She puts her hands over the bruises. He stays by her side until she falls asleep.

* 

She meets Primrose Everdeen when the Victors’ loved ones are summoned to the Capitol after the reaping for the Quarter Quell has finished. Annie has already had to let go of Mags and Finnick, and she wonders if they have met Katniss yet; wonders if Katniss in person looks more like her sister: deceptively delicate and dangerously quiet.

Plutarch had summoned them all, asking for a favor.

She has not stopped shaking for days. Armed soldiers lead them into a stark, empty room. Annie sits next to Prim, but doesn’t say anything. Both of them have been reaped before; both of them had been saved by volunteers. It’s not a conversation starter, but it is a shared connection.

Plutarch, who Annie has seen on TV, and who is even more startlingly ugly in person, comes before them. “I assume you all know what a mockingjay is,” he says. “Remember that little whistle? Rue’s whistle?” At Annie’s side, Prim stiffens. “Jabberjays can memorize much more
than a silly little tune,” he says. “They can mimic voices. Memorize whole sentences.”

He brings in a jabberjay. There is a rubber band around its beak. One of his assistants removes it, and the room is filled with the sound of a woman screaming. Plutarch is going to turn them into weapons, he is going to use Annie to hurt people again; she was not reaped but she is not free.

One by one, he calls people forward from the crowd. They read a list of phrases. They yell on command. They scream. Plutarch assures them that the voice tracks will be digitally modified before being taught to the jabberjays.

Annie tries to match up the people in the room to the Victors, loved ones to the lost, but Prim is the only person she recognizes. After a while, she realizes that there aren’t enough people. She is the only person from District 4, so she must be here for both Mags and Finnick. Maybe there are other people in this room who are doubly-beloved, but she thinks it more likely that there are some Victors without any loved ones left.

When it is Annie’s turn, she tries to read the words on the paper. They drip and melt and wash away. She doesn’t need them. She opens her mouth and lets out the screams that are always inside of her. Finnick’s name, Mags’s name. Help help help. Please help me, I’m dying. I can’t breathe. Finnick. Finnick, help me.

Plutarch doesn’t say anything to her when she’s done. She rips up his little piece of paper with its lies that aren’t lies, and throws it above his head like confetti, like they are at a party, like any part of this isn’t obscene.

It makes Prim smile.

* 

After the 67th Hunger Games, Finnick and Mags return to District 4 alone. He doesn’t talk as much as he used to. Annie tries not to worry about them, but it’s hard. They’re both so isolated in the half-occupied Victor’s Village. They’re both too needy and too easy to love. When she has free time, she goes to the beach closest to the Village because odds are that Mags or Finnick will be there. The other Victors spend most of their time drinking.

The morning after the train comes back to 4 (lighter by two passengers than it left) she finds Finnick sitting in the sand, shivering with the chill of dawn.

“Snow kissed me,” he says, when she sits down and leans against his side, water soaking her dress and teasing the ends of her hair.

“Snow? President Snow?”

“Yeah.” His eyes are fixed on the blurred horizon.

“What—what was it like?”

“He tasted like blood,” he whispers. “Why would someone taste like that?”

After the 68th Hunger Games, Annie finds Finnick alone on their beach. She kisses him and it tastes like the sea.

* 

Finnick goes to the Games a boy and comes back a man. No—
Finnick goes to the Games a man and comes back a whore. No—
Annie goes to the Games a girl and comes back broken. No—
Annie doesn’t go to the Games.
Finnick goes to the Games a whore and comes back and marries her. No—
Finnick goes to war and comes back—
He comes back—
*

*

Johanna has wedged herself onto Annie and Finnick’s bunk (their wedding bunk, for whatever that’s worth). Her jaw is clenched tight. Starvation has made the skin paper thin, and all that Annie can see is the bone and muscle underneath, painfully tense. “Finnick didn’t make it.” Annie wonders if this is as close as Johanna comes to crying.

“I thought we won,” Annie says. She hasn’t left her bed—morning sickness makes everything a challenge—but the cheering had been very loud. “Didn’t we win?”

“Sort of,” Johanna said. “But I think war is a Game. No one ever really wins.”

The cheering in the hallways outside grows and recedes, the joy edged with pain. “How did it happen?”

“Katniss said he was murdered by a group of mutts on the way to Snow’s palace.”

“I don’t think he was murdered,” Annie says, after a long pause.

“He’s dead,” Johanna snaps. “There’s no body, but Katniss saw it happen.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Annie says. “If he was murdered by mutts, then—couldn’t he have been muttered?”

Johanna stares at her for a long, long time, before she starts laughing. The wedding bunk shakes with the force of it. Annie joins in, very aware that she is in shock, unable to do anything else. Johanna starts crying, still laughing, and Annie wipes away her tears. “Why are all the good ones either dead or married?” She looks at Annie and adds, “Or dead and married.”

*

She names her son Magpie Mason O’Cresta, a mouthful of a name that no one dares disapprove of. Katniss, her own belly starting to show, says that it sounds beautiful.

As soon as Annie can walk, she takes her son to the water. She holds him while the waves caress her ankles. Haymitch and Johanna are on the shore behind her, both of them pretending that they arrived there by accident.

She tells her son that his name is not a memorial or an expectation. It is a gift. She promises that his name will never be written down on a piece of paper and handed over to fate.
She tells him that the world is impossible. She tells him that he is loved by Victors who never truly won, she tells him that all games can be replayed, she tells him that his father was beautiful. She tells him that Finnick and Mags are gone, but that Annie was their best beloved, and she will share that love with him. They will never be alone. Their ghosts are kind and they are constant.

“The sea says good morning,” she whispers. The waves are tipped with orange and pink. She will have to go inside soon. She holds her son and closes her eyes.

*

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End Notes

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