Embers Set Aglow

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Summary

SYNOPSIS: THIS STORY PORTRAYS THE EVENTS OF THE HUNGER GAMES, CATCHING FIRE, AND MOCKINGJAY, AS TOLD BY HAYMITH ABERNATHY. MAINLY CANON THROUGHOUT THE FIRST TWO BOOKS, WITH A CHANGE OF PLOT FOR MOCKINGJAY.

DISCLAIMER: I DO NOT OWN ANY OF THESE CHARACTERS OR LOCATIONS. ALL CREDIT TO THE WORLD THESE CHARACTERS LIVE IN AND THE CANON EVENTS GOES TO SUZANNE COLLINS. THANK YOU.
“Primrose Everdeen!” rings out the amplified voice of Effie Trinket.

While she’s doing her best to remain enthusiastic before a crowd of unsupportive citizens and unwilling participants, I am doing all I can to remain standing. I feel dazed, but not confused enough to forget where I am. I could never forget the Games, no matter how hard I tried.

Even with the assistance of the white liquor as a sedative to maintain a chronic indifference to the world, I cannot shake the deep-seated hatred I feel for the Capitol and I cannot forget the memories from the Games I was a participant in. It’s like this each time the Reaping rolls around. I think it might even be getting worse with each new Games.

Within a roped off area before the podium stands children ages nine to eighteen, waiting for their name to be called. It reminds me of herds of cows being prepared for a slaughterhouse. I decided that this would be a better comparison if the cows were aware of their situation.

Heads whip about, seeking out the girl who the obscure name belongs to. I don’t search for her: she will come forward and trip when approaching the stage, as all Tributes do, as if her feet were turned to lead. She will feel like she’s being choked as she stands beside Effie on the podium. She won’t hear the male tribute’s name be called, and she won’t feel his tight, terrified grip on her hand when he shakes hers for sportsmanship.

It’s the same each time - same faces, same stories, same inevitable end.

A small blonde girl stumbles out of line, and I suspect someone behind her has forced her forward. She stands in the center of the crowd with her arms swinging at her sides. Her mouth drops open, and I suspect those are tears welling up.

Some people avert their gazes out of politeness, while some murmur amongst themselves. I see, from within the ropes, several girls drop their stiff postures: their shoulders relax, their breath returns to a normal pace, and their hands unclasp. I can see the hidden happiness bubbling within them: the Everdeen girl is a terrible loss, true, but to have made it through another Reaping is too great of a triumph to not acknowledge.

Effie Trinket is immune to Primrose Everdeen’s sadness, and beckons her forward. As three Peacekeepers leave their assigned posts to escort the blonde child onto the stage, another figure - this one taller, and dark-haired - breaks free of the crowd, her chest heaving.

For a moment, I expect it to be the girl’s mother, in a fit of grief. But then, the trembling woman cries out in a hoarse voice: “I volunteer!” There is an awful silence in which Effie Trinket’s amplified breathing is projected across the town. “I volunteer as tribute!”

And then, Effie’s gushing about having the District’s first volunteer beside her once the Peacekeepers have forced the girl onto the podium. I see Primrose being escorted back into the crowd on the shoulders of a handsome man watching the stage with his lips pressed into a thin line as the trembling volunteer stands on the stage, wondering what she has done. When Effie asks for the girl’s name, she responds in a voice lower and huskier than I had expected, “Katniss Everdeen.”

She seemed to have a knack for defiance from the beginning, even if then, it was just to expectations.
It’s the first morning, and I am far from being sober.

The male Tribute - a blonde kid with large arms and a reasonable amount of pudge settled around his neck, with pink cheeks and a dimple on his chin that I figure will last a grand total of a minute and a half in the Games - is complaining about how I’m his mentor, and how I’m supposed to be helping him, blah, blah, blah.

When he throws the flask I was drinking from to the ground, I am forced to remind him that while I might be a useless old man, I became a Victor for a reason. I am certain he remembers when I throw a fist at his jaw, and it collides against his skin with a sickening sound. He stumbles back, clutching his chin and looking at me like a wounded dog that I had just kicked.

The girl who volunteered regards me with an expression of strong disliking that twists her plain features into a scowl. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen her wearing something besides a grimace. Then again, she’s being shipped off to the Capitol to die: I suppose I can understand her foul mood.

I reach forward for the liquor bottle, and a knife finds home in the space between us. I see the glaring girl’s hands wrapped around the handle, her chest heaving again. I could see now that she had potential: sure, I knew she had spirit when she gave her life for her sister’s, but this stint…

“Looks like I have a pair of fighters this time around,” I comment, meeting her gaze and offering up a smug smile. I ask the girl - Katniss, her name is Katniss - what else she can do with a knife, half-expecting her to lunge at me again. Instead, she pulls it out of the table and throws it into the wall in one fluid, almost graceful motion.

I watch the male tribute pale as he realizes the odds might not be in his favor, even within his own District. What’s his name again? I learned long ago that with names comes attachment, and that is the last thing I wanted. But could either of them have a fighting chance? Should I even bother?

I decide to make them a deal. The pair watches me: the blonde looks hopeful, a smile on his face, while the girl regards me with neutral expressions on her features. I suppose it’s better than a scowl. I promise to help them, so long as neither interfered with me drinking.

For a moment, I wonder if she thinks I’m disgusting. I decide not to care.

From the barracks emerged the two Tributes into the Main Plaza.

I confessed, at a later date, to being shocked to see their drastic transformations. Gone were the pair of children from District Twelve, and in their place stood Tributes: for the first time, I saw them as two members of the Games who stood a chance - one more than her counterpart, but still...

Katniss Everdeen - her name had stuck - was no longer the girl who had trembled before her District at the Reaping: she resembled a woman, with defiance in her brows and a pout on her lips that was becoming less irritating and more appealing. Alongside her, the blonde kid from the Merchant’s Quarters of town - Peeta Mellark, as Portia would later remind me - fidgeted in his costume. He, too, had noticed Katniss’s transformation.

“Hold hands.” I told them, and left the chariot before their protests could reach me.
I would never understand women.

No, correction: I will never understand this woman.

She handles being selected for a contest she did not choose to enter in which she is forced to leave her home, her loved ones, and all she knew to fight to the death in an Arena while being filmed for entertainment with calmness and ease, but when someone confesses their love for her, she breaks his hand with a vase and bashes him up in an elevator?

“He made me look weak!” She screams at me, pointing an accusing finger at Peeta, who seemed to have entered a state of complete shock. Now that I was fine with: he was having an appropriate reaction, which I was becoming more and more appreciative of as the moments went on. Perhaps I should’ve learned his name first…

“He made you look desirable!” I counter angrily, taking Katniss roughly by the elbow and leaving her out of the elevator. My voice sounds harsher than I intended when I tell her loudly, “Something you couldn’t do on your own!”

Effie is cooing over Peeta and gushing over the broken, expensive vase. Her heels click down the hall in an irritating fashion as she and Portia take Peeta out of the room, herding him like a sheep. Peeta continues to cast several impish glances at Katniss until he is out of view, while she remains indifferent, staring at the wall and fuming in silence.

I take a few deep breaths, pressing my fingers to the bridge of my nose. In a calmer, quieter voice, I tell her as gently as I possibly can: “It’s an angle, a strategy.” She doesn’t seem reassured by this, so I add: “And it may just save your life.”

Her posture straightens, and I can tell that she’s weighing the odds in her mind. After a few seconds of hesitation, Katniss nods, her mouth set in a tight line. She doesn’t like the idea, not one bit, but I remember the little blonde girl - her sister - who she volunteered for, and I know that she’s thinking of her - what was her name again? - too.

“Alright.” She decides, nodding once more. The girl looks at me, as if she’s waiting for me to weigh in on the matter, but I have no more input to give. Katniss looks to the ground, shuffling her feet. She’s still wearing Cinna’s dress, and bits of it are still aglow. When she repeats her confirmation again, her tone is one of resignation: “Alright.”

I clap her on the shoulder and turn to go, but something stops me. I pause on the final stair that leads to the Main Floor, and turn to her. “You did well tonight.” I compliment, and I think I see the trace of a smile on her lips. The pause becomes long, so I add with a certain gruffness, “get some sleep” before heading towards the open bar.

“Any last advice, Haymitch?”

I really did not like finality of that statement.

I really did not like the odds, because they were not in her favor.

I really did not like the lump in my throat.

I really did not like having to say good-bye.
“Stay alive.”
“The girl - she’s got spirit.” A woman behind me remarked, her voice bright and excited. I could feel their gazes watching Katniss on the screen, observing each movement she made as she forged a path through the thick forest terrain. Each time she stumbled, a sharp intake of breath could be heard around the room, all in unison.

Each time that happened, I took another drink.

“Oh, that Katniss Everdeen? Yes, I must agree,” replied another voice, this one masculine. I recognized the speaker as one of President Snow’s nephews, of the name Tiberius. He’d benefitted from his uncle’s power, enough to make him a small fortune in the bond business, and for him to retire before he turned nineteen. He regarded her as if she was a piece of meat on his plate as he remarked, “She’s got a certain charm about her, too.”

I wanted to tell stand up and meet the proud gaze of Tiberius Pratt, and tell him that if he thought Katniss Everdeen was charming, it was obvious he had never met her. Now that would wipe the infuriating smug smirk right off. But I said nothing. What good would it do to upset the nephew of the President? It would be no good for me in the long-run, and no good for Katniss.

“You know, I quite like that Katniss. I have high hopes for her,” chimed in Aurelia Alder, a Victor from the Games following mine. At the time, she had used her appearance and charm to gain support from the citizens of Panem, despite how incapable she seemed. In the end, Aurelia proved to be just as ruthless as the Careers, cornering and trapping the remaining Tributes inside the Cornucopia, and concocting a poisonous gas she released upon them. After three agonizing hours, District 2 gained another Victor.

It pleased me to see just how unkind time had been to Aurelia: she now resembled a pale hippopotamus, with jaundice skin and a pink wig she wore which seemed to forever favor the left side of her head, leaving the right part of her bald scalp exposed. She sat between two escorts, and rested her large legs on the lap of a member of the press named Phineas Albias.

“How was mentoring her?” asked a reporter named Glaze who focused on gossip and rumors than actual stories. His columns in The Capitol Report was a combination of alleged cheating scandals, whispers of illicit business trade, and using information people had told him in confidence against them. From our brief time together for the Games, I know Effie quites likes his work, which was reason enough for me to dislike it.

A male model named Weaver Harris gasped and put an arm around me, which was about as well received as expected: I shoved him off with a scowl, grumbling to Chaff as he gushed: “Oh, it
must have been devastating to send the star-crossed-lovers into the Games! You poor thing. You must have witnessed their love first-hand, though - oh, consider me jealous!"

At that moment, the Gamemakers chose to set the forest aglow with fire. The ironic idea of Katniss Everdeen, the Girl on Fire, being burned to death, was both humiliating and sickening: I figured it would be just like Seneca Crane to do that. I set the bottle of Scotch down on the table and scowl, muttering, “C’mon, Katniss - c’mon!”

Basil Vigo, a esteemed doctor in the Capitol whose line of expertise was reconstructing bone structures, fell off the couch in shock. Katniss stumbled, her leg steaming. “Those burns -

Cinna materialized beside me. “Effie sends her regards, and apologizes for not being here to witness the Games.” He tells me with a certain silkiness in his voice that clues me in to just how he feels about the treatment of tributes in the Games, and his disdain for those brainwashed like Effie. “How’s our girl doing?”

Katniss was now crouching behind a boulder, clutching her leg. The camera panned across the scene that once was a forest with lush foliage: now, it was a barren, burning wasteland. I watch her scream out in anguish, tearing at the burnt, bubbling skin above her knee, clawing until bone was exposed, then sobbing in pain.

“She needs our help.” I announce, standing up and assuming a brisk walk. The crowd of Capitol citizens, of mentors, of damaged people surrounding themselves with expensive things, before me parts as I exit the Viewing Center with Cinna steps behind me. Together, we rush towards the Control Room, where I can send her ointment to heal the damaged skin, or a slave to soothe her pain - something that will heal her, help her, save her.

I don’t want to watch the Girl on Fire die.

“What is she doing?” gasps Effie Trinket in an octave foreign to human ears.

Beside me sits Cinna, and he’s smiling. “Good girl,” he murmurs to me. “She’s utilizing her surroundings. See that nest there?” He points towards the screen, and Effie nods, her expression one of intense focus.

Effie shakes her head with such violence I wonder if her wig will fall off. “She’ll be stung!”

And stung she is. We watch Katniss saw through the branch, harming herself in the process of setting a fatal trap for the Careers. When the nest lands in the clearing, four of the Tributes are able to flee: the beautiful girl from District 1, Glimmer, and another insignificant child with a face like a rat, are stung to death. The camera pans as the two begin to writhe on the ground, screaming through venom-induced hallucinations. At last, both fall still, their corpses mutilated.

The focus returns to Katniss now, running through the woods in a haze. She falls twice to the forest floor, moaning and talking to nothing, but manages to rise to her feet both times. On the third crash to the ground, her limbs begin to twitch and spasm, and continuing on becomes impossible for the girl.

“Oh, Katniss.” Effie whines, and Portia places her arms around the inconsolable woman. “I need a drink. Care to join me?” She rises to her feet and lets out a loud, impatient breath when no one stands with her. Effie’s gaze falls upon members of Katniss’s preparation team.“Octavia? Yes? Come now. Portia?”

Cinna prods Portia, and she agrees to join Effie. At this, Octavia and Flavius both rise to get
refreshments. On one of the couches adjacent to us lies Venia, sprawled out, her limbs stretched out in different directions. She passed out four deaths ago, after ingesting several white pills from District 5’s escort, Athena Chopp.

The screen now shows the remaining Careers tending to their wounds, but this is not what I want to see. “Where is she?” I demand through clenched teeth. I refill the flask I keep with me at all times with imported gin and drink. Cinna seems to be sharing the aggravation I feel, and begins to pace with tension. I wish I could stand, but the room seems to be spinning, and the Girl on Fire is no where to be found.

I ask it again, this time, desperate: “Where is she?”

A silence falls across the Viewing Center.

Katniss Everdeen crouches over the smallest tribute, a petite cocoa-skinned girl who has been injured and remained in critical condition, with her hands grasping the child’s. Rue whispers something into Katniss’s ear, and she blanches: I wonder what the girl has requested.

For a moment, there is nothing but silence, both in the Arena and in the Capitol.

At last, this is broken when Katniss coughs. I watch her swallow hard, wince, and then, she does the most peculiar thing: she opens her mouth, and begins to sing. The tune is familiar, and it reminds me of home. The room has fallen under a trance: we all stand, some moved to tears. All of the attention in Panem is on the Girl on Fire.

“Deep in the meadow, under the willow.” Katniss begins, her voice soft and soothing. Rue relaxes into the blood-stained moss she lies on and shudders. “A bed of grass, a soft green pillow…” I watch tears drip down Katniss’s nose, onto Rue’s face. The Girl on Fire brushes them off and offers Rue her hand. The child’s grip leaves her wound, exposing it to the world: I know then she has little time.

Katniss continued singing: “Here it’s safe, here’s it’s warm.” The child’s eyes have fluttered shut, with long eyelashes exposed to the Heavens. Her chest moves, but only slightly. Katniss’s body heaves with sobs, but she is determined to finish. “Here it’s s-s-safe, here’s it w-warm…”

A canon fires in the distance, and then, the clearing is quiet again. It seems, for a moment, that the entire world is still and quiet. And then, the birds take up the song, echoing it throughout the forest, repeating the eerie melodies in a funeral barge for the child.

I want to be proud, but I feel numb. Will it be her canon I hear next?

I watch the silver parachute enter the cave.

Peeta Mellark is in no condition to open the tin, much less sit up, so Katniss does so. The blood caked underneath her fingernails leaves red marks on the container. I swallow hard when I see her relief to discover she has been sent soup.

Our method of communication is basic enough: she understands that she receives goods when she acts her part of the head-over-heels girl from the poorest district who wants nothing more but for kind, good Peeta to survive.

She looks up, as if searching for me. I wonder if I’m imagining it, but she seems to smile up at the
night skies. I know she won’t eat the soup: I know she’ll coax the broth into Peeta. I want to tell her to take it, to gain some weight, to keep fighting. I want to tell her I want her to survive.

“C’mon, Girl on Fire. Let’s show them,” I murmur to no one in particular, and I set the bottle down for the first time in hours. The camera focuses on Cato and Clove, the remaining two Careers, and I lie down on the couch. The room stops spinning, but all I can think about, even in this state, is Katniss Everdeen. The Games are unfurling now. “She’s a survivor.” I insist, and I’m not sure if I’m speaking out loud or in a dream.

In the distance, someone hums Rue’s song.

I am alone as I watch Katniss and Peeta approach the Cornucopia.

I am alone as I witness the battle between the star-crossed-lovers and the Career brat.

I am alone as I witness Katniss ending Cato’s life.

I am alone when the announcement is made: there will be one Victor.

I am alone, expecting Katniss to turn on Peeta, to win.

I am alone as I witness Katniss brandishing the berries.

And I am alone in mourning, for as much as both tributes surviving seems like a silver lining, like an act of kindness from the Game Makers, like a gift from the President himself, I know better than to accept this. Because it is not a gift, and it is not kindness that motivates the Capitol: not for a moment. The moment Katniss Everdeen pulled out those berries was the moment she was marked as a threat for her act of defiance.

I am alone.

I am alone, and this is not new. I can accept being alone. Hell, I have accepted being alone. It's easier.

What is different is that I don’t want to be alone. And the one person I want to be with? She just was marked as a traitor to Panem.
She was alive.

Katniss Everdeen, the Girl on Fire, had survived the Games.

And she had brought Peeta Mellark home with her.

But in what condition would she come home?

She looked so peaceful in her sleep.

No scowl? Now that was a first. Well, perhaps not a first, but a second or a third, at most. She hadn’t smiled much in the brief time I knew her, and I feared she would do so even less after the Games.

The Arena changed people - I was aware of that better than most. I still remembered it, to the last miniscule, most gruesome detail. I relived it each night, after falling into unconsciousness in a slur of alcohol, then waking in a cold sweat hours later.

I didn’t want that for her.

On second thought, I wouldn’t want that for Peeta, either. He might have survived the Arena, but he was no Victor: he was too innocent, too good and pure, to have won the Games. Us Victors, we all were damaged from the start, a little more ruthless than the rest - not ruthless, but more in touch with our primitive instincts than others.

Come to think of it, the more I tried to define what made a Victor, the less it seemed like Peeta could be one. He was being kept elsewhere, in some secret chamber of the Training Center, and was in the middle of a series of long, extensive surgeries to salvage his leg.

Katniss shifted her position, releasing a huge breath of air. She was in bad condition: several of her ribs were broken, her left eardrum had been shattered, she was emaciated from hunger, her leg had become infected, and her lungs had suffered from smoke.

The Capitol would heal her up, leaving visible no traces of old scars, or prior damage. Her face would be fuller than before, her skin would be flawless, her figure would be desired, her hair would gleam, her irises would sparkle, and her smile would shine.

But she wouldn’t be the same.

“Little bird,” I mumbled. Unsure where this tenderness came from, I resumed a scowl and left the Hospital Suite, searching for a bottle of something strong that would make me forget.

I heard someone calling out for me.

I turned, expecting to see Effie Trinket hobbling across the platform in those ridiculous spiked heels with an update to the schedule regarding the return trip to District 12. Instead, I see a girl that is almost unrecognizable from the last time I saw her: Katniss Everdeen boards the train and walks to me, her expression unreadable.
When she gets closer, I notice that her lower lip is trembling, and her glance is somewhat frantic, like a cornered wild animal: something is wrong. I don’t have to guess what the root of her problems is. I know well enough that President Snow never valued acts of defiance. The Games were annual reminders of his disdain of rebels.

“Let’s go get a drink, shall we?” I ask her, wrapping an arm around her slim shoulders and steering her inside, down several winding halls, and into a storage closet containing assortments of silverware, all before she can respond.

And then, once the door’s been shut and I’ve made a point of shuffling around platters, she dissolves into chest-wracking sobs, though Katniss sheds no tears: her words tumble out, jumbled and somewhat incoherent. Her forehead rests against me, and I’m unsure what to do, so I pat her shoulders.

She tells me what’s happened, though I’m unsurprised.

So, I tell her it’s going to be alright, though I’m unsure. I’ve never been an optimist.

The compartment door slides open.

We are somewhere between District 11 and District 12. It was almost like a metaphor, as I am driving through somewhere between sober and inebriated, heading towards complete and utter oblivion that could last for hours.

Katniss Everdeen stands across the room in a powder blue nightgown. She looked like she had been suffering from several sleepless nights on end, and it wouldn’t surprise me if she had. Her hair was a disheveled mess that fell down her back, not tied back in her usual braid, and one of her hands was laced through the curls.

I don’t know how to react to her calmness, so I crack a smile and take a swing of something strong and so potent it makes me wince. “Come for a shoulder to sob on, sweetheart?”

“No, I came for a drink.”

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