Koi No Yokan

by orphan_account

Summary

Fortune never favoured any of us.

Annie Cresta was nothing but ordinary. Finnick Odair was everything that's extraordinary.

-Alternating POV Odesta.-

~I don't own The Hunger Games, nor do I own any characters within it.~

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter One

Annie

Something terrible is going to happen today.

Of course it isn't, stop being ridiculous.

My sheets are sticky against my legs and small beads of sweat linger against my hairline. A small hand drags over my collarbone and Aspen rolls on top of me, pressing her chin into the nape of my neck. She must've crawled in with me in the middle of the night. "Annie?" she whispers, opening her eyes heavily
"Mm?"
"It's reaping day"

My stomach drops then flies up to my throat. Aspen's only 5, she has years until the Capitol can try to kill her. My eyes close and I take a deep, shaky breath. I run my hands along her head, fingers ghosting over her hair.
"I know," I murmur. "Let's get up now, maybe we can go to the beach before we have to go."
She smiles into my neck and jumps up, bouncing across my bed and on to the wooden floor, her bedraggled hair shining golden in the sunrise seeping through the window. My stomach won't seem to un-tense itself when I stretch.

Aspen has disappeared into her bedroom so I take the time to get dressed in my ordinary clothes, refusing to acknowledge my reaping dress hanging on the wardrobe; the sickly pink fabric resting on layers of mesh netting contrasts garishly with the green and blue of the room. I'd much rather wear fabric shorts and a t-shirt than a dress to the reaping. Dresses are tight and stuffy and make you feel like your stomach's being constricted. I can't run a brush through my hair because of the hundreds of ties my mother put it in last night, so I cover it with a sun hat. Apparently the ties make me have pretty bird nest hair, not rampaged bird nest hair. She only does it on reaping day. "Penny?" I ask, lingering at her closed door opposite mine.
"Wait!" She cries. I stop abruptly and hold my breath slightly until my presence fades. Before long I hear a small clattering of objects and the closing of a drawer and Aspen is back at the door, beaming proudly at me. She takes my hand tightly and presses something bumpy into it, making sure I can't see it until she instructs to do so. "Now look!" She commands. I inadvertently roll my eyes at the domineering tone in her voice and open my palm. Inside is a necklace made of a cluster of different beads, worn glass, messy knots and small shells strung on a rope that was no doubt made with a five year old's hands. "I made it myself for your good luck!" She beams. I can feel my nose block and damp threatens to touch my eyes- but I can't cry, never in front of Aspen. She knows today is my second to last reaping.

"Penny?" I ask, lingering at her closed door opposite mine.
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We spend a few hours at the beach in the cove near the Victors Village's private one; you can't get any closer to it without accessing directly. Any strip of beach would've been empty, but this is our 'secret beach'. Aspen swims, collects more shells to stick to her mirror and begs repeatedly for me to let her braid my hair. It's not until the sun reaches high enough to beam directly at my eyes we leave.

Our mother unties my hair and lets me comb through it while she bathes Aspen, much to her disapproval. I don't look like my mother- I don't have her blonde straight hair or pristine skin, qualities she shares with my sister. I'm pale and covered in freckles, and my hair is dark and curled. I look like my father. He drowned when I was 13, not long after Aspen was born, when the boat he was on capsized. It killed my mother from the inside out, which is probably why her eyes are always narrowed and her lips are always pursed, as if she's dying to say something terrible and brash but she won't say it. Sometimes I miss when she used to smile all the time.

"Annie, you need to get your dress on now, or your hair will spoil," she instructs. I always watch the walls as I ascend the stairs to find the small spots of colour that couldn't be concealed by the white paint that covered the house after my father died. He would always joke about Reaping Day, calling it the circus animal's lottery, the circus sortitio. Maybe he was right, calling us circus animals. Four is a privileged District, and we are lucky, but we will never be more than the fishermen and glassworkers cooped inside their pen; the tributes that will make for a disappointment or a stunning win.

I ponder over my thoughts as we walk to the square for the Reaping, using my hair to shield my face. My brother Trent meets us on his way. He's 21 now, and has been slowly working his way up through ranks at the docks. I don't see much of him any more. He's reserved and quiet, but has always been calming to be around, possessing an aura that could ease the ocean during a storm. Once at the square, Aspen hugs me tightly and checks I'm wearing my necklace several times before I can put her down. My mother squeezes my hand too tightly for it to be reassuring, but I appreciate the gesture nonetheless. Trent smiles encouragingly-- it helps my shoulders drop slightly and my teeth un-grit, but is useless against the hurricane inside my stomach.

The sun is relentless in an area with closely packed bodies and no shade and I suddenly feel nauseous. The sight of our Escort trotting on to the stage causes me to flinch; Seraphina Findlay has ditched last years metallic golden skin and has now adorned herself in obnoxiously large interlocking hexagons across her entire body that are in blues, yellows and reds so bright it could give a headache to someone miles away. Her dress is merely rhinestones glued strategically on to a transparent latex wrap that ends at the tops of her thighs. Her teeth glint in the light as she sings her welcomes and rebellion history to us all. Maybe someone will volunteer this year, but after the disastrous follow ons of volunteers inspired by Finnick Odair's win 5 years ago, it seems idealistic. No; not idealistic, or hopeful. This shouldn't be happening at all. I shouldn't hope for death.

"And now ladies and gentlemen of District 4, we will discover the lucky two chosen to represent us all!" Seraphina chimes. Her voice drips with grotesque excitement. I divert my eyes to my feet and stare intently at the brick, willing something to be there.

"The female tribute for District 4 is..." She drawls, taking far too long to announce the name of the person who will be dead too soon. I now pray for a trapdoor to carve itself into the floor so I can slip silently away, like I always have. I fiddle with my necklace and try to ignore a drum that is beating faintly in my ears. My lungs are resisting my instructions to work properly.

"Annie Cresta!"

How many Annie Crestas have lived? Maybe there's one right here, one who is unheard of, like me. Poor thing, she probably doesn't deserve it, does she?
The drum beat now resonates so loud it hurts and my lungs have won. Everyone's eyes are stabbing me and I can't even feel my feet leave the floor but now I've tripped on to a stage that's spinning like a whirlwind and the dampness behind my eyes wants to rip me apart. Aspen is 5 years old and always told me that she wants to get old like Meredith at the bakery, and I have to look after her when she's old like that. Logically, I couldn't anyway, but I can't even entertain it now, because I'll be dead within 3 weeks. Trent has a girlfriend but refuses to tell me who, and now I won't meet her, because I'll be dead before I can. I don't dare look up. People don't want to see a dead girl without the protection of a TV screen.

"Parker Hagan!"

He's dead too. He's 12. His father owns a stall that sells pretty clocks and wall furnishings. He could've done that one day. Someone says something I can't hear, but Seraphina cheers in delight. "Oh, we have a volunteer! Marvellous!"

Someone different for the grave.
I don't look at anything but the floor. The dampness is beginning to cloud my eyes, but I'll be damned if I cry. The boy who volunteered is called Isaac Thadal. I haven't let go of my necklace. When we have to shake hands I find comfort in his hand being as clammy as mine, but nothing but unrest at him being only marginally older than Parker, 15 at the most. He managed to beat the selected Career's reactions to volunteer. Volunteers are always 18 year old Career superstars, ready to take a younger child's place if needs be. He is brave, I'm not.

Either way, none but one can win these Games. We are not that one. We are four.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, feedback is always appreciated x
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Strong girls only cry behind closed doors

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This room isn't right. The purple on the right wall is darker than the left. And the paintings of fish on the walls are too bright a sight for someone who's going to die. I've stopped crying now, I've lost the energy to do it. Instead I just draw my knees to my chest and sink into the plush ottoman in the room's centre and stare blankly at the wall. In an hour's time I would've said goodbye to my family, for possibly, probably, the last time.

The door suddenly crashes and Aspen runs through and throws herself into me. I nearly loose my balance and the stool topples, threatening to throw us off. She moves into my lap and clings on to the back of my dress with one hand, and uses the other to play with the mesh on my dress. I stroke her hair and rest my chin on her head, trying desperately to carve her tiny body into my own. She sniffs slightly but isn't properly crying. She's stronger than I'll ever be.

"My little lucky penny, meum denarium" I coo, my voice merely a whisper. The Latin that is my parents' mother-tongue falls between my lips like water.

"Neenee?" She says, reverting back to what she called me when she couldn't pronounce A's properly. She turns her head up at me and her eyes glimmer with such a childlike innocence it burns. "Promise you'll win the Game, and get lots of presents?"

My heart sinks. I can't make a promise to her that I'll break, yet the words escape me before I realise.

"Promise."

Aspen buries her face in my chest again and we remain still for what feels like forever, until the door clicks quietly and my mother and Trent are lingering tentatively in the frame. I look up at them and see my mother's hollow eyes and realise she's accepted my death already. Trent looks dark, almost dangerous, and leans in to my ear.

"Win, Annie," he urges. "If you can't do it for me, Penny or Ma do it for Dad. You can win, I know you can. Just come home alive. Please."

His words sink into my skin like ghosts, and I feel sick again. They can't loose two people. It isn't fair on any of them. I nod slightly, tears springing to my eyes. I blink them away as smoothly as I can. Aspen still won't let go so my mother wraps her arms tightly around my shoulders.

"Sweet little Annie, my firmus puer" is all she says. It sounds defeated and tired. She doesn't need to say more. Despite her lack of ability with words of love, or with displaying affection of most variety, I know how much she cares about us all. Peacekeepers soon open the door and order that my family leave. It couldn't have been an hour-- my friends from school haven't said goodbye yet. My Mother begins to cry and Aspen still refuses to let go of me, so Trent has to carry her over his shoulder, kicking and screaming, just to get her out. The screeching echoes with a delay in the hollows of my ears. Just before the door closes I see him mouth something at me that I can't work out; then they're gone. Really, truly gone.

Now I'm crying again, but not normally. I stare blankly at the floor and my eyes seem to erupt with a tidal wave that my body ignores. I don't sniff, sob or gasp. I just cry. The same happens on
the car journey to the train station. Despite Seraphina being sandwiched between us, I don't attempt to look at Isaac once, and I feel terrible, but my eyes won't stray their longing gaze away from the coast that flashes by. I may never go to the beach again.

Once on the train Seraphina directs me to my compartment and babbles something about dinner and mentors as she pushes me through the corridor, eventually leaving me with the information that dinner is in an hour. I catch a look of my reflection in the elaborate mirror reaching from the floor to the ceiling that sits opposite my bed. My eyes are pink and swollen and red blossoms over my cheeks. It's obvious I've been crying, and I hate myself for it.

The door on my right has a looks like a bathroom inside, from what can be seen through the crack in the door. I head quickly into it and run cold water out of the jewel-dotted faucet, observing my surroundings while I wait for the cold to freeze my fingers. The shower is big enough to fit several people comfortably inside, and the entire room is tiled from half way upwards to the ceiling with glass rectangles that are tinted blue, purple and green and flash with rainbow spectrums as you move around them. I'd would appreciate the architecture much more if this were at home, not on a train leading me at light speed to the Capitol. The water becomes cold before long, and I run the corner of a sand coloured towel under it before pressing it over my eyes and cheeks. It sends a shiver down my arms but it helps me breathe properly. I keep it over my face until the fabric becomes damp, not daring to pull it away. Once the towel couldn’t possibly be cooling my face anymore I return it to the rack screwed to the wall, the red blotchiness is gone. Anyone who hadn't seen me cry wouldn't have guessed I did. I look stronger than I am.

Right now, that isn’t a bad thing.

I leave the bathroom and sit on the end of my bed. It's bigger than any one I've seen and is laden with cushions, blankets and pillows that all sparkle too brightly. I remain there, resting my face on my knees until a sharp rap at my door makes me jump.

"Annie, darling, dinner is ready!" Seraphina chimes. I can hear her high heels tapping against the plush carpet outside, even through a closed door. Nobody notices me when I slip through the open compartment door until I fall into eyeshot. It’s never been any different- unless I announce my presence, nobody notices I’m there. It can be helpful at times.

Mags smiles warmly at me when she sees me and I instantly know I trust her. She has a reputation for bringing home more Victors than any other Mentor, and has even mentored the poorest Districts until she got a Victor to take her place. The most credible of all was Finnick Odair 5 years ago. No 14 year old had won in the entire 65 years the Games had been running, and it’s unlikely to ever happen again.

"Annie, darling! Do sit down!" Seraphina says brightly. I try to smile the best I can at her, but It probably looks more like a grimace. I pull out the chair opposite Mags and lower into it, but a sudden force makes me jump and jolts me forwards, and I have to grab the edges of the table to keep balance.

"Can't let a pretty lady tuck her own chair in," a voice murmurs seductively in my ear. I recognise it as Finnick Odair's instantly. He's always confused me, and I'm not sure if I like him. All of my girlfriends at school would fawn over him constantly. He's beautiful, tremendously at that, and seems friendly enough, but he never stays anywhere long enough. Capitol lovers are disregarded within a week and he flits between home and the Capitol like a child jumping rocks.

"Finnick!" Mags tuts. "You'll give the poor girl a heart attack, inepta rem."

His jumping out on me caused me to instinctively turn, and he's looking down at me through hooded eyes, a smile playing on his lips as he leans against the back of my chair. I frown involuntarily at him as I try to work him out, even if it's only slight, and he smirks, taking the seat next to me. His smiles seem perfectly genuine, but they look like they're blanketing something else.

"Such a gentleman," Seraphina sighs admiringly. Finnick winks at her, sending her into a fit of bashful giggling. The woman of the Capitol are even more enraptured by him than the girls at home.

The sheer masses of food render me speechless. There are some things I've never seen before in piles on huge platters. I struggle to see anything properly familiar at all and tentatively scan
piles on huge platters. I struggle to see anything properly familiar at all and tentatively scan everything there. The basket holding bread catches my eye because between the gaps of different golden loaves I spot a flash of green. My hopes are confirmed as the bread I pull turns out to be a seaweed loaf from back home. I'm unsure as to why I'm clutching it so gratefully-- I don't even like it much, the salt can be overwhelming. However right now it's the closest to home I'll get. Mags is smiling softly at me and it reminds me that I'm not the only one from 4 here, and I have to stay away from it for far less time than them.

"Would you like any?" I ask, holding the bread towards her. My voice sounds a lot more quiet than I hoped it would.

"No thank you, dulce meum," she says, still smiling with the soft shake of her head. Mags' accent is heavy from before the Capitol pushed Latin out of District 4 shortly after the Games started. It's comforting. I place the bread carefully on the shiny metallic platter in front me, now feeling more nauseous than I do hungry.

When Finnick ends a one sided conversation with Seraphina about a fashion line to cross the room to a stand of huge bottles I notice he is bare footed and sporting the usual absence of a shirt. After weighing up several bottles he unscrews one, saying something about starting the party. I turn my attention back to the table and tear a tiny piece of bread with my fingers and chew it for what feels like hours, my mouth refusing to let me swallow it. Eventually I relent and just sip at the water from a jug that's filled with lemon slices. It takes nearly no time for me to drain the entire thing, leaving me with nothing to occupy myself with. Something slips by me and I see a small hand take the handle of the empty container and lift it, quickly replacing it with another in silence.

"Oh, thank you," I say gratefully. The girl who did it looks taken aback and ducks her head, returning to a shadowed corner of the room.

"Darling..." Seraphina says, sounding mildly horrified. "Nobody speaks to the Avoxes." She makes the word sound like it’s venomous on her lips.

"Aren't Avoxes the...?" I begin to ask, loosing my train of thought mid-sentence. Nobody responds. I remember being told about Avoxes before, but the information is yet to renew itself for me. I catch Finnick rolling his eyes in my peripheral vision, the crystal chandeliers above making them glint green.

"The people that have committed treason against the Capitol," Finnick reminds me lightly, angling his head towards me but keeping his eyes fixed on the passing scenery through the window across the room. When he continues I can hear bitter amusement lace his words. "They cut their tongues out."

Any chance of me wanting to eat is long gone. That girl replacing the water was young, maybe even my age, with striking blonde hair and brown eyes that looked nothing but innocent. I struggle to think of something she could’ve done that was so treasonous. I try to drink more water, but the glass shakes in my grip. The bones in my hands feel brittle and my fingers seem to slip against the collecting condensation on the smooth edges.

"Is Isaac coming?" Mags asks nobody in particular. Seraphina pauses her whimsical chatter.

"I did tell him, he said he wasn't hungry," she sighs. I haven't seen him since the car ride. Mags clucks sadly and begins to watch me carefully.

"Eat something amor," she urges.

"I can't,"

Embarrassment surges through me at how weak my voice sounds, and I duck my head. Mags ignores it however, and places a soft hand on top of my own and rubs her thumb over it.

"Try. It will do you good, scis nimum tenuis, child,"

I've never been anything but thin and small since I was born. There are 14 year olds at the Career Academy the same height as me. No amount of Capitol food could change it. This is all just a big death wish.

My body's desire to cry makes my throat ache and a tingle run down the bridge of my nose.

I'm still in my Reaping Dress.
"Excuse me," I mumble, standing up and turning around quick enough so that no one will see my eyes fill with tears as I make my way back to my room. I can feel Mags and Finnick’s eyes on me as I exit. I’ve decided; if I'm going to die soon, I'd like to spend my last days with the company of my own fear.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, feedback is always appreciated x
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Who ever knew Prince Charming would be best at charming himself?

I spend hours in my room, watching the world fly by through the window. The window ledge is just big enough to sit on so I stay balanced on it, knees drawn to my chest, with the edge of the blanket from the bed wrapped tightly over me. I don't know where we are, all I do know is that we have to pass through District 2 to reach the Capitol. District 2 is stone, and this is untamed woods made up of trees I'm unfamiliar with which sport huge leaves that leave as quick as they appear. The only light is what's coming from my window. The top pane only opens an inch, probably to stop anyone from trying to kill themselves before another Tribute does it for them. The air that seeps through is enough though, and I revel in the icy feeling it sends around my lungs as I inhale. Inhale, exhale. Mechanical.

It takes nearly two days to get to the Capitol. Train speeds are adjusted to ensure everyone arrives at a certain time, for the right appearances.

I think about my family, and what they would be doing right now. Did they eat? Did Trent take Aspen to get a cake from the bakery like we always did? Did my mother lock herself in the old study like she used to after dad died? God, I hope she didn't.

I roll the small conch on the end of my necklace between my thumb and index finger, feeling the grooves of the shell ghost through my fingertips. It feels as if the one tiny pendant holds an entire world inside of it that acts as my ultimate comfort.

The optimistic side of me hopes that maybe the Capitol will be so magnificent I'll forget all my troubles, and the Games will be a breeze; but the realistic (pessimistic) side of me knows that there's no chance that will happen.

My stomach begins to feel the bearings of no food all day after a short while, but it's my fault I walked out of dinner. Nobody else's.

An unexpected sharp knock on my door startles me so much that I jump. I'm tempted to turn the caller away, but curiosity overrides me.

"It's open," I call flatly, waiting for the person to reveal themselves.

From behind the door comes no other than Finnick Odair, still clad in the same lack of clothes he sported earlier, along with the arrogant smirk plastered on his lips. I raise an eyebrow in question—he has no reason to be here.

"Mind if I come in?" He asks silkily, leaning against the doorframe.

"I doubt I have much of a choice." His responsive laugh is breathy and soft. "It's more a case of you wouldn't turn me away," he smiles, entering and reclining back on to the foot of my bed.

"Why are you here?" I ask tentatively, before quickly covering my mouth with my hand. "That was rude... I'm sorry"

Finnick waves his hand dismissively, his grin not shifting. "I ordered some food to be delivered here, that way if you leave it you'll feel really bad because it was made specially for you, so you're actually morally obliged to eat it all." He leans back on his elbows, looking extremely satisfied with himself. The gesture confuses me, but I appreciate it all the same.

"Thank you," I mumble sincerely, beginning to fiddle with my necklace again. "The pleasure is all mine," he says charmingly. "Coming down from that window any time soon?"

"I might do," I shrug. "The seating is quite sub-par,"
Finnick smirks and lowers his eyes, flicking them back up to me shortly after. I've no reason to stay on the window ledge, so I slide off of it and pad across the carpet toward my bed with my blanket in tow.

"That dress is pretty but you've got to take it off at some point, honey," he asserts, eyeing me up and down. The pink ruffles are still cascading down to my knees. I can feel my cheeks redden as I try to stammer out excuses, all to Finnick's amusement. "I'll go next door so you can change," he laughs.

His expression changes slightly afterwards and he bites his bottom lip. "Unless you want me to stay...?"

I know he doesn't mean it, and he's like this with everybody, but I can still feel my face reddening further when he winks at me. I swallow and assure myself that I can sound brash if I try hard enough.

"Bathroom's on the right," I retort. I can't ignore the hint of surprise I hear lacing my words because of how smooth my voice sounded. Finnick's smile causes his lip to be released from in between his teeth and he ducks his head again, chuckling on his way to the bathroom. Once I hear the door click closed I open the wardrobe door to be greeted with the largest amount of clothes I've ever seen in such an enclosed space. I pull all kinds of things off of the rails to find them too big, too small or suitable for anything but sleeping. I find myself getting frustrated after a while of yanking floating blouses on and off and my grip becomes tighter and rougher.

"Are you trying to keep me captive in here or are you lacking the ability to get dressed?" I hear Finnick smirk through the bathroom door after a few minutes.

"Nothing here fits, and if it does I most definitely can't wear it to bed." I huff exasperatedly. "Try the drawers underneath, the bigger stuff is in the top ones; but I doubt you'll need it." The end of his advice is dripping with the kind of snide amusement that makes me want to roll my eyes back into their sockets. I ignore him however, and purposely take the largest white cotton shirt provided in the top drawer and hold it between my knees as I rip the Reaping Dress from my body. After locating a suitable pair of matching shorts that I'm confident will near enough fit me, I slide the shirt over my head to find it reaches right down to my knees.

"You're clear," I holler, turning my gaze back to the passing scenery. When Finnick re-enters I raise an eyebrow at him as haughtily as I can manage and he laughs. It sounds foreign, as it isn't the arrogant smirk he so commonly exhibits or the breathy laughter that is more like a sharp exhale accompanied with an upturn of the lips- this is genuine, and sounds a lot nicer than the previous two.

"Nice," he drawls, smiling widely. "Although it is a little figure hugging, you might want something looser."

I can't help but join in smiling at his remark. It's probably the first time I've smiled carefree since my name was called this morning.

(I've never hated my name so much.)

Shortly after, the red haired Avox arrives with the food Finnick mentioned piled in trays on her forearms and hands. I have to cover my mouth when I nearly thank her, but Finnick gives her the usual remark ("Thanks, darling") before she leaves. The trays are filled with dominantly sweet things; pastries, cakes and deserts all cut into tiny squares and assembled into pretty patterns on silver platters. I take one of the small slices of white frosted cake and bite into it gratefully. After I've ate several pieces I look up to find Finnick watching me carefully through narrowed eyes, having left the bed and taken place leaning against the window ledge I was sitting on earlier.

"What?" I ask nervously, feeling slightly uncomfortable under his gaze.

"Nothing," he says lightly. He seems to be revelling in how uneasy I am and it's beginning to agitate me.

"What are you actually doing here? You're not even my mentor," I ask quietly. He smiles again and rolls his shoulders slightly.

"We're hoping that will change tomorrow," he announces.

"I'm the last person you want to mentor, I'm not even a Career," I mumble, feeling a wave of self
doubt and dread roll through me, resting around my fingertips and making my chest ache. "That's the last of my worries," he laughs bitterly. "I don't like mentoring boys." His voice takes and edge as he says boys, as if it's something laughable. Maybe he forgets that he's only 19.

"Why?"

"Because mentoring boys means they want to be you, or be better than you." He states as if he's lecturing me on one of the most complicated subjects in the world. "However, if I get a pretty girl like yourself, I don't have to deal with unnecessary competition; just the hassle of someone wanting me to be their Prince Charming. It's easier to put up with."

His comments leave me wordless. His kind gesture earlier made me forget that since the age of 14 Finnick has gotten nothing but what he wants, when he wants it- regardless of how it affects others. Nonetheless, my heart feels like it's pumping boiling water through my veins rather than blood.

"Then maybe you'll be relieved to know that I couldn't care less who you are, or who mentors me. I want to go home, not idolise Finnick Odair." I scoff, turning away from him and back towards the bed, pinching some crumbs between my fingers. If winning the Games means I become as self serving as that, I'm unsure if I want to win.

But I'd never let myself be like that. (Would I?)

And I didn't volunteer, I don't want to be here. (Would I have if I was still training as a Career?)

I'm doing this for my family. (Or am I doing this for myself?)

"I like you," Finnick says from behind me, the grin audible in his voice.

"I'm glad," I reply shortly.

"No, really," I can hear him crossing the room towards me. "I can tell you want to go home, genuinely. Not just be a Victor,"

I glance up as his weight hits the bed. He's watching me with a childlike curiosity in his expression. I nod in agreement and he makes a humming noise in response, pulling a chocolate decoration from a tart and eating it.

"We'll get you home then?" He proposes. "Alive, of course."

"I'd like that," I reply, my voice loosing most of its velocity. "But it's near impossible."

"You haven't seen any of your competition yet!" He exclaims. "Except one, who didn't even have the decency to come to dinner."

"I walked out," I retort. I don't know why I feel compelled to jump to Issac's defence so fast.

"But you still turned up," he states matter-of-factly. "Besides, nobody is useless in that Arena. There must've been a reason nobody volunteered for you."

"There isn't," I argue defeatedly. "I haven't Trained in 4 years."

Finnick tilts his head curiously, his eyelids becoming heavy. "4 years?" He asks.

"I used to be in the Academy until I was 13," "Kicked out?"

"No," I respond quickly, my pride outweighing my control. "I left,"

"You left the Academy?" Finnick asks bewilderedly. "Why?"

The Academy is paid for privately in 4, and extremely exclusive due to the fluctuating funding from the Capitol. Every child in the District applies at 9 years old, and only the best will even be invited. Everyone considers being invited to the Academy an honour, but I found it more of a burden. I know I could never kill somebody, and training tirelessly in ways to do it, disguised as district trade exhausted me, along with being fully aware that my parents were paying their every spare penny to allow me to do it.

"My father died not long before. It made me realise I valued learning knowledge over learning how to kill," I explain softly. "I'm probably going to regret it now."

The smile he gives me is neither pitiful or amused, just understanding and kind. It's comforting.

"You won't," he assures. "It's impossible to unlearn weapon training,"
"It's still no use though," I sigh, feeling disgusted at how pessimistic I must sound. "I'd probably let someone else kill me before I killed them."

Finnick stays quiet for a short while, running a hand slowly through his hair, the waves falling from between his fingers.

"You never know what you'll be willing to do if you want to survive enough until it happens," he muses. "But you seem smart, you might not even need to kill anyone if you play your cards right."

(How do you know where to place cards when every time you look at your deck its contents switch around?)

We both sit in silence for a short while as I try to envision scenarios where I won't need to kill anybody. I come up with very little.

"It's late, you need rest," Finnick states suddenly, rising from the end of my bed. "Eat all that cake then get some sleep," I nod and watch as he walks backwards towards my door.

"Oh, also, make sure you're up before Seraphina knocks on the door, those nails are brutal first thing in the morning," he grins, pulling the door open. "And have a speech ready to persuade Mags that I get to mentor you. It's my turn this year anyway." The last part of his sentence seems to be more a reminder for himself, but I smile anyway.

"I'm already thinking one up," I say. "Thank you for the food."

"The pleasure is all mine," he says again, the old arrogant grin from earlier returning as he lingers in the door frame. "Sleep well, honey."

I groan slightly at his use of nicknames and he winks, although the smile twinning with it is the kind one I witnessed momentarily earlier on.

The door closes firmly and I find myself alone, crossed legged in the centre of a huge bed on the way to the Capitol and surrounded by half empty trays of deserts. I eat as many as I can until I feel nauseous, an indicator that my best interests would be to brush my teeth and try my hardest to rest.

I end up not sleeping, as hard as I try, and instead resort to formulating a mental list of things I know:

• I don't know if I trust Finnick Odair, and I don't know if I like Finnick Odair. That's perfectly okay, I've barely known him for a few hours.
• I do know that Finnick Odair has good intentions, regardless of whether they're for the benefit of him or someone else.
• I know that I want to go home alive more than anything else.
• I don't know if that's a possibility. It probably isn't.
• I know that I'm going to try my hardest to win.
• I know that I won't be able to kill anyone, and that is going to hinder my chances.
• I also know that if I do end up killing someone, the consequences are on me.
• I know most of all that I want to be able to go home to my family and know that they will never be short of money, and we won't have to worry about paying for power during fish yield drops in the winter, and Aspen can actually buy the pretty trinkets in the market instead of just admiring them. That we will all be happy and safe, and they won't loose another member of our family too soon.

Eventually I fall unconscious, my fantasies of what could be still whirling in my mind.

(But you have to win for that to happen, Annie.)
Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

If only the elements had a happy medium

The clock on the oak table beside my bed reads 5:30 AM.

My thoughts aren't lucid enough for me to fully douse myself in dread just yet, as a thin mist seems to cloud behind my eyes. The constant fretful turning and awakening during the night has wreaked havoc on my hair- which, admittedly, looked pretty yesterday. I can feel stray tangles sticking out of outlandish parts of my head like the branches of a palm tree. I have a half hour until Seraphina will knock on my door, and not a minute out I bet. It's a nice time- it's enough to get something done, but not enough to leave you with your own subconscious. But being a walking paradox means I go against my own thesis and occupy myself with showering- the one activity that gives you no choice but to hear your subconscious. The head of the shower seems to release hundreds of sewing pins at the turn of the metal handle that prick at the skin on my back. The water is perfumed with the kind of heavy scent that lingers in the top of your nose like a cold, despite the water being anything but. It probably has something to do with the buttons I fumbled with in order to make the water run. The perfume must be what's making my eyes water so much.

(Don't kid yourself.)

Once my hair has been washed enough to weigh the unruliness down I surround myself with the security of a towel that's been pre-warmed by the rack it was hanging on, and try to navigate through the countless bottles of products in the under sink cupboard for a brush or comb. Hopefully smoothing out my hair will smooth out my mind too. I'm struggling to adjust a shirt so to not have a neckline dipping below my breastbone when Seraphina raps on my door. She sounds as if she's constantly in song, or so ecstatic she can barely contain herself in a composed manner. It's ironic, considering politeness is one of the things she likes to press most on others. I catch her rounding a corner as I exit, the ends of her pearlescent silver hair flicking with a momentary delay. My own hair sits damp against my back, the ringlets beginning to form as the weight of water gradually subsides.

On entering the dining cart, I notice only Seraphina and Isaac are present. I can see the back of his head and it dawns on me this is the first time I’ve seen him properly, through arid eyes. His hair is sandy and the skin on the back of his neck is dark, both characteristics of the Aquilonem vicinity up north of 4. It's where most of the industrial work takes place, and consequently the poorest area of the District; most of the tesserae comes from there.

Isaac looks up as I approach and a pang of anguish sears my chest as his round cheeks and chin remind me of his age. However his eyes are dark, both physically and metaphorically, and hold both an indifference that instantly causes you to feel displaced and bitter vengeance that stirs a pit of skepticism in the hollows of the stomach. He is far too young to possess the eyes he does. He neither smiles nor frowns, just observes me. I offer a faint smile, to which he responds with a polite nod.

Seraphina diverts her attention away from the compact mirror she is inspecting her makeup in when I sit down. "Good morning darling!" She trills, diamond encrusted teeth glinting as she smiles. "Good morning," I return lightly, skimming my eyes over the table's contents.
"They really eat this stuff?" Isaac scoffs under his breath, just resonant enough for me to hear. His voice matches his eyes.

(Too young.)

(Aren't we all?)

I hum an affirmative reply, taking a small handful of vibrantly coloured berries from a large glass bowl. Neither Finnick or Mags are here, I don't care to wonder why. Seraphina has redirected her attention to her own reflection again and seems completely immersed in herself. I seize the opportunity to try to speak to Isaac.

"How are you?" I ask under my breath, watching the table where his hands lie.

"Bored." He replies bluntly. "Tired, vitriolic. The usual."

I smile slightly, the abrupt shamelessness of his reply was only to be expected.

"I don't know where Mags and Finnick are," I offer, curious as to wether he might.

"Me neither," he says, a slash of bitterness intertwining with his words. "I'd be lying if I said I care."

Im usually the last person who would ever be found conversing with someone with the same demeanour as Isaac, but the impertinence he carries in himself is somewhat captivating. I can't think of a substantial reply. I'd like them here, just as a confirmation that they take even a slight interest in us. However my judgement seems to be wavering toward negative after the friendly gesture from Finnick last night ended up simply being a device to aid him in getting his own way. I still hold an unreasoned sense of trust with Mags.

After a short while of insatiable silence, interrupted only by the occasional clanging of cutlery against silver, Seraphina rises swiftly and looks at us both cheerily, the light above her reflecting garishly off of her cosmetically enhanced cheekbones.

"Do excuse me, I'm going to lay you both outfits out for when we arrive in the Capitol," she announces. "We must look presentable! Do carry on eating, all of this must be so new for you both!"

Isaac's disgusted scoff flies right over the crotchet flower fixed to her head as she trots out toward our rooms.

"She's ridiculous." he hisses, fiddling with a strawberry that looks as if it's being crushed between his fingers. I shrug-- giving silent and neutral responses can never get you in trouble. However, in this instance my throat burns with the desire to agree.

"Well strawberries are hard to get hold of out season," I say quietly. It earns a smirk that's amused, opposed to bitter.

When Seraphina returns and dismisses us both to get changed into something "pretty" the unwavering anxiety that has been pooling in my stomach makes itself prominent once again. It feels as if it could turn me inside out. The blouse she gave me is a mission to get on. I spend minutes wrestling with the orange silky fabric that falls flimsily between the fingers like sand, trying desperately to find which holes are for arms and what to do with all the swoops and ruffles. Once it looks as if it may be on properly I try to manage my now damp hair. It takes hours to dry normally because of how thick it is, but there's something about what I used on it here that's making it dry suspiciously fast.

On my return to the dining cart and front lounge I can hear several voices all speaking at once, the conflicting tones and pitches bounce off each other.

"Are you a maniac?" The laugh of disbelief belong to nobody but Finnick. I slide through the ajar door to see Isaac and Mags sat opposite each other and Finnick leaning against the wall, wearing nothing but a robe tied around his waist with his arms crossed.

"Don't be rude," Mags scolds him, sliding the smug smile from his face. On turning her head to him she notices me lingering in the doorway. "Hello amor," she smiles. "Come sit, we're just discussing some things."
She gestures to the empty space next to Isaac on the plush chair lining the edge of the room. "What kinds of things?" I ask, sitting myself a small distance from Isaac. The shirt Seraphina laid for him is the same tangerine colour as mine and it looks out of place against the glower he's wearing on his face.

"We're getting the gist of your plans to not die," Finnick says candidly, removing his back from the wall and sitting on the arm of the chair next to Mags. He turns his gaze evenly to Isaac and bores his eyes into him. "Looks like we have some work to do."

(You're meant to be good at planning, remember your father's funeral?)

(That was a funeral, not a death match)

(Who will plan your funeral when you're gone?)

"Annie?" Mags' voice causes me to jump as it drags me out of my thoughts. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear." I say sheepishly. She laughs slightly, it sounds like a tut, and rests her hands on her lap.
"We were wondering if you had any ideas?"

'We' is a lie. Finnick looks extremely bored. I don't want to be here either.

"No. I haven't thought about it."

"That's fine,"

She's being far too nice. Why isn't she scolding me, pressing ideas on to me or threatening to decide what to do for me? Isn't that what career mentors do?

(You're not a Career, Annie.)

"I had an idea," Isaac says snippily. "But only certain ones are allowed."

"Only realistic ones," Finnick quips, scoffing through his nose.

"I didn't realise my ideas for a child killing game had to be realistic." Isaac sneers, throwing himself back into the chair.

"My sincerest apologies that we're trying to get you out alive."

The two are bickering like children, the agitation creeping into their retorts the more they argue.

"Can I know the idea?" I ask, looking up from my hands to Mags, who's frowning between Isaac and Finnick.

"Isaac said he wanted to try kill as many from 1 and 2, and any tag alongs, at the Cornucopia."

Mags says, watching me for a reaction.

I know it isn't a practical or realistic idea, at all. They're trained for longer than us and harder than us, plus there's far more of them. Isaac is only 15 and I've no idea how good he is with weaponry. I can't bring myself to say it, but a standoff with 1 & 2 is the last thing I want to be partaking in. He's determined, granted, but idealistic at the least. (Or you're a pessimist?)

"I can't decide what Isaac does," my voice becoming quieter the more I speak. "But that isn't the best approach for me."

Mags hums, Isaac huffs and shifts slightly. I flicker my eyes around and notice Finnick watching me carefully, the intensity of his gaze making me uncomfortable. I frown in question at him and he simply raises an eyebrow a fraction.

(Don't think he's not trying to read you, your main plot line is open for everyone to see.)

"What can you both do with weapons and such?" Mags asks.

"Or anything that might help you," Finnick adds, resuming his position against the wall again and removing his eyes from me.

"Swords." Isaac says bluntly. "And spears."
"How good are you?" Finnick's question sounds challenging opposed to curious.
"Define good."
"Could you kill someone with it?"
They leave no space between their responses and the heat noticeably rises between them.
"Depends on how I'm killing them."
Finnick purses his lips and sighs exasperatedly, lowering his jaw from it's usual upward position and louring at Isaac.
"If somebody is charging at you with a knife in their hand with the intention to slit your throat, would you be able to kill them first?"
My throat clenches at the imagery. Nearly every Games has a huge fight scene that starts in a way similar. That could be me, or Isaac. (Or both of you.) Isaac's lip curls slightly and he raises his eyebrows defiantly.
"Depends on how fast they're running."
Finnick's jaw visibly clenches with its rise back above so as to look down on us both. I could swear the green in his eyes darkens before he momentarily closes them to take a deep, collective breath.
"How about you, sweetheart? Takes more than a pretty face to get into that Academy."
Despite his question being aimed at me, it seems as if he's reminding himself of the strict pecking order of the Academy.
"Knives, mainly," I return. "I used katanas for a while."
"How good are you?" he asks expectantly, probably waiting on a substantial response that surpasses Isaac's tormenting. It takes a short while for me to reply- I want to be honest, but not big-headed. Plus, I haven't used them in years, it's mere guesswork.
"I don't know about now," I start. "But they didn't want me to leave, if that means anything?"
"It may," Mags chimes in. "Unless your age group was underpopulated. That would've meant they wanted you for funds."
I know subconsciously it wasn't the latter, but the more I try to sensationalise my abilities to myself, the guiltier I feel. The need for some kind of reason to simultaneously trust and doubt myself is conflicting like fire and ice, and until the Games begin I will remain oblivious to whether it's better for me to remain cold and reserved or fiery and open.

"It wasn't, isn't."

Isaac says. I look up to him and see he retains the unfazed expression he has had for most of the morning. "Your age group was full up, there was about 15 of you."
Mags makes a noise that I can't pinpoint the meaning of, and Finnick is watching me with a mischievous smirk. The ice method seems to be evaporating by the second.
"Honey, you're either doubting yourself or have your own little plan formed already."

Finnick grins.
"If I had a plan I would've told you it." I retort somewhat bluntly. Mags nods contentedly and I take it as an affirmation that she believes me. I think Finnick might, but it's impossible to tell behind the arrogant smiles and relentless teasing.

The remainder of the morning, lunch and the ongoing afternoon is a mix of light, slightly forced conversation between the 5 of us. I try to divert away from any questions about the Games and surround myself in a self-inflicted blanket of pretend ignorance to settle my mind. At one point, Mags whispers something to Finnick and he rebukes her instantaneously, to which she tells him that she knows best in Latin, and his protests subside. The bond between the two holds an uncanny resemblance to a mother and son, opposed to a Mentor and Victor, and it confuses me how I've never seen the two together on TV or in the Capitol and only seldom in the Market, yet they're so close. I know the Capitol is big on censorship of things they don't like, but what could be harmless as the two?

I'm gazing distantly out the window at the passing mountains when the scenery turns abruptly
black. Seraphina is forced to stop faffing with my hair when I turn around to glance at the other windows to only find they're encompassed by the same darkness.

"Ah, we're finally here!" Seraphina sings, abandoning my hair and whipping out her mirror again to inspect her make up. This can't be the Capitol- it's just darkness tinged with the occasional flicker of a passing light. We must be in the tunnel that runs through the mountains in 2. I stare expectantly out any windows that fall into my gaze and catch Isaac, Mags and Finnick all looking completely disinterested.

(Poor idealistic you.)

A sudden brightness floods the carriage again, and the sight of the Capitol renders me both speechless and breathless. I'd assumed they only showed the most magnificent parts on TV and the very centre was the only part of the city that housed buildings that touched the sky and architecture that looked like fantasy, but even the outside edge of the Capitol is more glorious than I could've imagined. I hop from my seat and move to the other side of the carriage, pressing my palms to the window and trying desperately to see more.

"Come look at this!" I exclaim to Isaac, who looks up indifferently from his nails he'd been fiddling with. He stands reluctantly and moves to where I am, raising his eyebrows at the sight before us.

"I thought they computerised most of this," he says, his voice sounding more impressed than I've heard all day.

"Make sure you smile and wave." Mags tells us, standing to follow Finnick out of the room. I go to question her, but my enquiries are answered as the train slows and a blur of neon bright colours begin to zoom past us. I make out faces and realise they're all Capitol citizens lined up on the station platform. The more we slow, the more I can acknowledge what they're doing. Some are waving and some are clapping, even cheering. I follow Mags' advice and wave back, my face sporting an astounded smile. Through the reflection in the glass I can see Isaac just staring blankly at the people in the exaggerated clothing with the strange faces. I hear the sound of Seraphina's heels trotting over to us from behind and a slender, bony hand places itself on my shoulder.

"Welcome to the Capitol!"
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Chess pieces are either powerful or insignificant.  
I don’t want to be the latter,  
I’d never find myself as the first.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

These streets are surreal and my thoughts are foreign. On exiting the train we’re joined by Finnick and Mags again, Finnick now in clothes that both fit nonsensically tightly and hang from his shoulders. The bulbs of cameras flash like stars caught in the eyes of telescopes around us, causing me to instinctively flinch slightly. The white light glints off of the grey in Mags hair and forms an artificial glimmer in Isaac’s eyes. Yet Finnick somehow seems to grey-scale in the illumination that encompasses us as he is led to a different car by an attendant; smiling, waving and winking at the screaming crowd. Mags tells us he has meetings to attend as we, too, wave and smile at the enthralled Capitol citizens calling our names.

Everything here seems to be emanating some kind of light, whether it be the neon advertisements scaling the faces of the towering buildings we pass, or the golden streetlights that beam brighter than the sun itself. I become engrossed in my surroundings in a dangerously small amount of time and my mentality switches from viewing this as a souvenir preceding death to a holiday that foreshadows something I’d rather not think about. Everything about the Capitol seems to reconstitute the normalities of home I had spent years basking in with something far more grand and dignified, and my psyche screams ignored warnings at me when my perception of what is truly magnificent threatens to shift from streets lined with cobbled stone to neatly laid brick.

The Tribute Centre lends us an apartment to use that rests on the 4th floor. Seraphina ushers us around the vast living space and the bedrooms that could house a small family alone, chirping about photos, training and chariots to herself as she presses her ring-clad hands into our backs. District 4 is the fourth to arrive, and Districts 7 to 12 will arrive early tomorrow morning for the parade tomorrow night. It gives us a debatable upper hand- a few extra hours of time which can only be spent in certain ways. Isaac asks about watching Reaping tapes and my mind fogs with a overcast cloud that weighs me down like a child made of cast iron sitting on my shoulders. I nod cheerlessly, a small fraction of me feeling vaguely satisfied at my identification of what the darkness dabling at the inner corners of my skull is- a cloud. The Capitol’s brilliance had lifted it, if for a short while, and I decide to investigate further into ways of pushing the cloud aside in time for the Games.

We both sink into teal armchairs, and Isaac starts up the hologram that is replaying the taping of the Reapings that the entirety of Panem is seeing. I dread to think what I look like, and shudder at the thought of my family having to watch the tape over and over again. I force myself to pay the most attention possible to the translucent screen that is showing several presumably 18 year olds from District 1 scrambling to volunteer quickly enough. The ‘lucky’ two couldn’t be much more different if they tried- a short, burly girl with a pointed chin and pale blue eyes that look abnormal on her face by the name of Platinum, and a tall and slender boy who lacks the muscle that most other Careers do with a feline face framed by blonde hair. I can’t help but smirk slightly when his
name is announced as Taaffeite– the bizarre names of children from 1 will never cease to entertain me. Isaac snorts at them both and begins shaking his head bemusedly.

“Their names are nearly as bad as the ones here, suus stupidi.”

Mags’ laughs catches me by surprise until I remember everything except the bedrooms in this place are open-planned, unlike the train we just exited. Mags sits on the oversized loveseat adjacent to our chairs and rests her hands on the edge of the cushion she is perched on, the darkness of her skin clashing against the cyan fabric. District 1’s Reaping ends with Platinum and Taaffeite staring pompously into the camera that records them, both of them displaying smug smiles before they leave to enter their Justice Building. As the Reaping for District 2 starts, a feeling of uneasiness clenches my stomach at the atmosphere that is identifiable without any effort– even through a screen. The ambience of 2’s crowd doesn’t hold excitement in the same way 1’s does. The Reapings for 1 buzz with the potential to go to the Capitol and be a Victor, to live the life of luxury they advertise from the second we’re born. 2, however, holds something that feels so much more menacing– a feel of lust and craving for the Games themselves, not the glory. They are historically the most enthusiastic when it comes to partaking in the Games. 2’s reputation of killing for entertainment and 1’s reputation of killing for the prize is what has always set them apart for me. Seeing Enobaria’s pointed teeth peering from between her lips as she stands at the back of the stage acts as a bitter confirmation of my previous contemplation. I straighten in my seat and watch carefully as their Escort, a man with green hair whose name I’ve never been able to pronounce is interrupted while unfolding a slip of paper by the camera switching too soon to the group of 18 year olds in 2’s square. The volunteers have the reaction times of birds hearing gunshots and Mags tuts when they announce themselves as twins by the names of Lucious and Lilith.

“How could a brother and sister volunteer?!” I ask, not trying to cover how aghast I sound. “The lot of them are maniacs.” Says Isaac, watching the twins raise their linked hands and laugh threateningly at the camera.

They’re both identical in the face- tan skin with dark, deep-set and angular eyes. Their jaws are sharp and squared out and their jet-black hair falls behind them as they stare down at the crowd.

(What have they {you} gotten into?)

I pay little attention to the young-ish boy and girl from 3, or Caesar and Claudius’ interruption to speak excitedly about 2’s twin Tributes and wait tensely to see us. I see Isaac straighten when our Reaping begins to play. An unreasonable amount of time is spent with the camera on Finnick while Claudiaius and Caesar discuss things to do with him that have no relation to the Games at all. When my name is finally called the camera hesitates only a fraction before moving to the group of 17 instead of 18 year olds. I watch it critically, wincing at how startled I look when my name’s called, and loathing my the way eyes flit around me as I walk. I don’t look as terrible as I had initially feared, but the girl frowning at the ground that’s in front of the stage looks like a fish in a sea of sharks compared to the Tributes from 1 and 2. When Parker Hagan’s name is called, the camera rests on the 18 year olds hanging their heads sheepishly and I catch a comment from Caesar about it being unusual that ‘no older people volunteered’. When Isaac does volunteer his voice resonates strongly and he stands confidently, looking slightly left of the camera as if none of this fazes him. Caesar makes an enthusiastic remark that compares Isaac to Finnick and I hear him scoff disgustedly from next to me. He looks far more threatening than I do.

The only other Tributes that catch my eye are the strong-looking boy from 7, the girl from 10 who glares at the camera and the little boy with hollow cheeks from 12 who looks not a day over 11. His petrified eyes glint silver with tears and I scold myself for being as self-pitying as I have.

(You could always have it worse.)
Finnick arrives midway through dinner. He looks completely Capitolised yet slightly dishevelled, but smiles on entry nonetheless.

“I hope I didn’t miss anything…?”

The glance he shares with Mags looks wholly private, and witnessing it makes me feel intrusive. He shrugs off the shirt that was buttoned when we left the train earlier and falls into one of the armchairs behind us. As he passes, the unmistakable scent of various potent colognes and perfumes follow him.

“Venit et comedite,” Mags tells him, frowning concernedly. She doesn’t leave out any firmness in her instruction and Finnick rolls his eyes, standing reluctantly to walk to the table of food. Seraphina quietly mutters something about speaking properly, but her comment is ignored.

“If you’re going to make me eat, give me a good line up.” He teases, leaning on the back of Mags’ chair and surveying the food laid out. I had never seen most of it before and found myself picking at small bits of everything, separating what I like from what I don’t. All the food here seems too sweet or salty. Nothing tastes real.

Mags hits Finnick’s arm and orders he sits down when he tries to lean over her to grab something, and it’s met with a childlike groan. I chuckle slightly over the glass of water I was sipping at and Finnick winks at me when he catches my eye. I don’t react and return to eating, hearing him laugh that breathy laugh through his nose. When he takes the only available seat next to Seraphina her eyes light up as if he’s chosen her out of 100’s of women, and she starts babbling enthusiastically about her encounter with the designer who custom made Finnick’s now abandoned shirt. He pours some sort of liquor into a small glass and sits restlessly through dinner, eating little and either shifting or fidgeting every minute or so. I find a food I like that consists of mostly vegetables in a sort of soup with pieces of red meat inside, and actually find myself with a full stomach by the end.

“What did the other kids look like?” Finnick asks suddenly, breaking the silence as he glances sideways at Mags.

“2’s got twins.” She replies simply. Finnick smirks sarcastically and swirls his glass.

“Fantastic.”

When dinner is over I wander to the huge window that makes up nearly the entire street-facing wall and perch next to it, leaning my forehead against the cool glass. The Capitol never looks the same for more than 2 minutes- the advertisements scaling skyscraper walls constantly change, cars are always in passing and the streetlights’ glow will change its hue every so often. This city clearly never rests. Finnick retired to his room immediately after dinner but leaves the apartment again at some point for a pre-Games party somewhere, and Isaac retreats to his room as soon as he can, leaving just Seraphina, Mags and I loitering in the lounge. I’m still mesmerised by the moving world outside– after working hours are over District 4 practically shuts down entirely. Just as the sky turns into an inky blue, a foreign commercial I haven’t seen yet appears on the board of lights opposite. It’s advertising the Games and the Tributes, using silhouettes of boys and girls in place of our portraits that don’t exist yet, along with our names and ages. I watch it morosely, the reflectiveness of the glass creating a harsh glare just out of eye-line. Twenty Four names are shown and only 1 will stay in peoples memories, the others will depart as fast as they appeared. Twenty Three of us are going to die.

(Don’t let it be you.)

When Seraphina turns off the reality show she had been commentating along with to go to bed, Mags joins me at the window.

“How are you, amor?” she asks, huffing as she lowers herself down to the floor. The way she rolls her r’s is comforting, it reminds me of my own mother. I exhale heavily, not turning my gaze from the window.

“That’s normal.” Mags replies, placing a weathered hand on my drawn knees.

“I don’t want to be scared, I want to be ready and determined and brave like I’m supposed to be, but I’m not. I don’t even know what I’m going to do in Training, let alone the Games.” I sound whiny and helpless, and it agitates me further. I constantly envisage and long for all these things I wish to be, yet do it in such a way that disproves any potential I have of achieving it. A walking contradiction with a lack of balance and far too much self pity.

“It happens to the best of us,” Mags reassures. “But we must persevere, hm? *Timor potest non vos occiderem.*”

“Fear can’t kill me,” I agree. “The Games can.”

“The Games are hardest when you fear them,” She insists, waiting for me to look at her before she continues. Her brown eyes still hold a resilient youth far younger than her actual age, but also show the brunt of years of battering. “If you fear it, anything that happens seems worse than it is. You can only run from the problems until you’re at the edge of the Arena. You must face it, eventually”

I nod, beginning to frown.

“Once you accept that the Games will take you, and you will have to do this, you see everything clearer. Don’t try and cover up what will inevitably happen, yes? *Accipere.*”

“It’s just an obstacle on the way home?” I suggest.

“Exactly.” Mags smiles. A few of her teeth are missing near the back, another reminder of her ever increasing age. “Ron and Librae will be here early tomorrow. They’ve been staying here recently. We’ll speak properly about plans with them, hm?”

In the complete mess that has been the past few days, I forgot not only Mags and Finnick would be mentoring us. If the District has enough Victors, President Snow invites 4 of them every year. For us, 1, 2, and the few other Districts with more than 4 Victors, they invite the ones the Capitol loves most, and those who can mentor the best. Finnick and Librae come under the first bracket, Mags and Ron the second.

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea.” I agree, my hands wandering to twist the ends of my hair around.

“I think you will be best with Librae and I. Isaac will do well with Ron and Finnick.”

I remember what Finnick told me on the train last night about wanting to mentor me, or more so a lack of desire to mentor Isaac, leaving me as the other option. I doubt he’ll be happy, but Mags ultimately knows far more about the Games than he does. She’s been mentoring near enough every year since she won her Games what must be nearing 60 years ago. Honestly, I trust her judgement far more. Mags decides things logically, Finnick judges things selfishly.

“Ohay, that’s fine,” I say as lightly as I can. “What’s Librae like?”

“You’ll like her, I’m sure.” Mags says confidently, offering me a soft smile. I nod and return it weakly, my body flooding with gratitude for her. Mags has done nothing but help me since that Reaping, I doubt I’ll ever be able to repay her for it.

“You must sleep, amor,” she says, her voice filling the quiet.

“How about you?” I ask.

“My body knows no sleeping pattern.” She chuckles, leaning on the rail running across the window above us to stand up. “Try sleep, don’t over-think, we can think tomorrow.” I take it as an instruction to leave, so I do; thanking her as I go. Getting the orange blouse off is as much of a challenge as getting it on was getting it on this morning, but I remove it eventually and fold it on the dresser for the Avox girl to collect when she needs to, along with the navy skirt Seraphina made me wear. This bedroom is similar in size to the train’s one, the window is marginally larger and the room is significantly cooler. Once in bedclothes with my teeth brushed and face still damp from the water splashed on it, I nestle into the bed amongst all the blue and green cushions and let myself warm up.
I think about my family again and force myself to resist crying; I’ve made it this far without doing it, I can keep going. I fiddle with my necklace that I still haven’t removed yet. I had picked up on myself doing it a few times throughout the day, but I was mostly unaware of the fact I was rolling the shell between the pads of my fingers.

As I reflect I worry for my mother, most of all. Trent is there to look after Aspen, but I’m so scared that my mother has hidden inside her self-inflicted recluse. I pity her, but it also frustrates me that she disappears when she’s needed the most.

Don’t think like that, don’t doubt your own mother, I tell myself. You don’t know what it’s like to have your husband die.

(Or your eldest daughter.)

(Be quiet.)

From where the low bed sits I have a perfect view of the night sky through the window. I’ve found comfort in the stars, moon and evening sky since I was a little girl and try desperately to find a star in the dark expanses above me, something that I know for a fact my family will see if they, too, look up. A reassurance that they could be farther away. Yet I have no luck. There is no way that the sky is overcast as it almost drips with saturation, but there isn’t a star in sight, let alone the moon. I sigh wearily and lie with my eyes closed in a bid to fall asleep while I think up ideas for tomorrow.

Joining in an alliance with 1 and 2 is my best bet, as long as they invite me, but I won’t stay with them long at all. Ideally, I’d take what I want and run on one of the first nights and go about surviving alone. I know Isaac sees them as threats, but I heavily doubt he’ll turn down an alliance if they offered it, regardless of how distrusting it will be. The Arena isn’t something you can plan, that’s for sure. The siren could go and assumed allies could turn immediately, it’s happened before.

Once, about 10 years ago, 1, 2, 7 and us wiped one another out at the Cornucopia and left only the other Districts. Those Tributes never fought one another, and when they did it was clumsy and reluctant. In the end, most of them were wiped out purposely by the Arena, leaving an 18 year old boy from 8 behind. We are little more than pieces of the Gamemakers’ chessboard.

I fall asleep at some point and drift in and out of chilling nightmares. At one point I bolt up gasping and covered in sweat, trying to blink away the images of Lucious and Lillith from 2 charging at me with blades and malicious grins, blood dripping from every inch of their skin. I end up having to lean against the window to regain composure, watching the city that is no more peaceful than it was early this evening buzz.

The city doesn’t sleep, and neither does Annie.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay and the slow buildup of this, I'm trying to focus on filling some of the lack of worldbuilding in the actual books!

Also, me returning to school for my final year means my workload is crazy. I write as much as possible but updates may be about a week apart, if that's not a problem!

Thank you for your patience, interesting things will happen soon I promise!

PS; Taaffeite is pronounced "Tar-Fight", Lucious is pronounced "Loose-shus", in
case anyone was wondering.
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

If they loved us so much,
Why are they willing to let us die?

*It must be a Capitol thing*

When the sound of a knock hits the door I’ve already been awake for hours. The scenes of my nightmares seemed persistent on replaying on a broken reel every time I so much as contemplated attempting to sleep until the film tapes had settled in my fingers and made them shake like the last standing leaves that cling on to oak trees come November. Seraphina notifies me of the busy day I have ahead as she stands silently in anticipation of some kind of recognition. I’ve no reason to remain crossed legged in this sorry state on the floor, so meet her behind the closed door. Her eyes today are a burgundy that is similar to a hue that fills a few of the octagonal shapes tattooed across her skin, and holds an unsettling resemblance to drying blood. She cheers ever so slightly on finding I’m ahead of schedule before scanning the grey dress I’m wearing critically. It must meet standards as she nods and motions through long fingers and pointed nails for me to follow. I move underneath her exorbitant shadow, feeling myself disappear behind flying locks of argent hair and tinted skin. I take the opportunity to compile together some of the composure which had succumbed to my restlessness hours before. If there’s any time for me to need it, it’s now. I can’t show that I’m scared of anyone here in the slightest– doing so is like placing a fish hook through your own cheek.

Isaac isn’t at breakfast and it seems Librae and Ron aren’t either, though Mags and Finnick are. He must’ve returned in the first hours of the morning from whatever social congregation he had graced with his ever so sought-after presence. However it may be something disputable, on account of him sprawled horizontally over one of the armchairs, head and legs overhanging from the arms, whining about how tired he is.

“What kind of unrighteousness or evil must I have committed to deserve being woken up this early?” he asks me on my arrival. I shrug passively, veering down into a dining chair.

“I think we’re all feeling similar.”

He lolls his head upside down over the armchair, watching me evenly. The ensemble of breakfast is entirely different to yesterdays; the food looks as if it took far more preparation. I spot several muffins but hesitate on taking one until somebody else begins to eat.

“You can eat it.” Finnick says bemusedly, answering a question I’m sure I hadn’t verbalised. The purple that tinges the hollows of his eyes has been growing gradually more saturated by the day.

“It’s fine, I’ll wait,” He nods and sits up, reaching out to a mug on the floor. “They’ll be here soon,” Mags tells me, pouring herself something into a porcelain mug. “Coffee?”

“No thank you,” I decline.

“I will,” Finnick’s arm swoops over Mags and lifts the shining jug from in front of her. Falling weightily into a chair, he fills his mug high enough for me to see the swirling dark liquid from across the table. “Sure you don’t want any?” he asks, gesturing to the jug. I shake my head and fold my hands on my lap.

“No thanks, I don’t like coffee.”

“You can’t not like coffee,” he gasps theatrically, slapping a hand over his chest in fake shock.
“No way, you just drink it wrong.”
“How are you meant to drink it?”
“With lots of sugar.”
As if on cue, he dumps six whole piled teaspoons of sugar into the mug along with a brown sugar cube and stirs it forcefully. I grimace at the thought of how sickly sweet it must be and Finnick smirks over his mug when he spots me.
“It must just taste like sweet water?” I exclaim. Mags chuckles and calls Finnick an *inepta puer*, strange child, from over the other side of the table, earning a sideways thrown scowl.
“Pretty much,” he admits. “But it’s liquid gold when you’re running on 3 hours sleep.”

From the corner of my eye I spot Mags smile and turn to follow her line of vision. Isaac is in the archway leading to the bedroom halls, running a tired hand over his face.
“Good morning mella,” Mags says kindly. Isaac smiles stiffly at her and takes a seat next to me. I greet him and the responsive smile, while still rather forced looking, seems more genuine than what Mags got.
“Who is it coming today?” Isaac asks me. “Librae and Ron.” I reply under my breath. He nods once and takes a pastry from its neatly positioned place on a cake stand. Suddenly, a melodious woman’s voice that reminds me of wind chimes hollers from the elevator.

Librae emerges as I turn myself around and rest my hands on the top of my chair. She’s smaller than I had initially remembered, and gives out a kind of eccentricity that isn’t glamorous enough to belong to the Capitol but too idiosyncratic to fit in at home. The gold sequins on her scarf clash violently with the green of her sweater and orange of the skirt that brushes her ankles, and her distinctive lilac hair is piled on top of her head, fixed by haphazardly placed glittery barrettes.
She’s from the merchant’s region of 4 like Mags, and they share the same, now somewhat rare, olive skin and dark eyes. Ron follows closely behind, stockily built wearing a wide brimmed sun hat that shadows most of his pointed face. He must be nearing his 50′s now, but it’s hard to tell; he’s had the same bald head and deep forehead lines since I was a baby. “Hello!” Librae chimes. The way she walks looks as if she’s floating. Mags rises swiftly from her chair and embraces her warmly, followed by Seraphina who kisses both of her cheeks. Mags takes Ron’s hands tightly in her own and holds them up, muttering something to him in Latin. Finnick envelopes Librae in a one-armed hug, chuckling slightly at her, and throws his arm around Ron's shoulders.

"Isaac and Annie?" Librae asks, spinning suddenly to face us both. I nod and she beams back at me. "Okay! I'm Librae, this is Ron," She gestures toward him and he nods politely at us, still half engaged in conversation with Mags. "How are you both?"
Isaac straightens slightly as she speaks and when our arms brush as I reach for food, his is tense. Librae may be far too chirpy for his liking, but it probably doesn't come close to how abrasive he finds Seraphina.
"Well, thank you." I reply, shifting slightly. "And you?"
"Great!" She smiles. "We've been looking forward to meeting you! You'll have to give us runthrough of your plans when we get the chance."
Librae was the most recent winner before Finnick, she's in her early thirties now. I still remember tiny snippets of her Games from what I watched as a small child. Watching a girl from your District split someone’s skull in two as a little girl isn’t something you forget too easily. Then again, the girl splitting skulls could be me.

(And the scared child watching it could be your sister.)

“Librae, we’re going to have Annie this year. Ron and Finnick will have Isaac.” Mags tells her. From next to me, Isaac makes a barely audible noise of suppressed frustration as he sighs. Librae, however, claps once and grins warmly at me. She radiates an energy so positive it almost forces me to smile back at her. I doubt Isaac is pleased at all, and it’s highly unlikely Finnick is either. I begin to contemplate asking about a swap until I remember that this may be the only instance where being selfish is encouraged, and that the second the gong sounds Isaac is as much of a
threat to me as the rest of the Tributes-- no matter how much I don’t want him to be.

“We are running on a schedule from now, everyone!” Seraphina announces, placing her cup of coffee delicately on top of the lace tablecloth. “Prep begins in half an hour, but I recommend you go down before that. We must make allowances, especially with two new stylists!”

“I met them last night,” Finnick interjects. “They seem far better than the last ones already, but that’s not exactly hard…”

“Leave them be,” Librae laughs, elbowing him. “It takes skill to get latex that small on another person”

Finnick smirks and grimaces along with Librae, and the two start to laugh like children sharing inside jokes. Seraphina scowls at them both before continuing.

“Well,” she huffs. “Your prep teams will be waiting for you when you go down. I’ll escort you down there.”

“Have fun!” Librae smiles.

“Don’t die!” Finnick adds, and just as quickly as before the two explode into fitful giggles again, halted quickly by Mags as she bats both of their heads with the backs of her hands.

“Ignore them, they’re *injurious retines liberi.*” Mags tells us firmly. “We’ll all see you later.”

As we wait to enter the elevator Seraphina mutters something about ‘wishing she’d speak properly’ as she repositions a bow on her huge spherical dress.

“She called them naughty children, if you’re dying to know.” Isaac snaps quietly, rolling his eyes.

Seraphina ignores him and instead pushes us both into the elevator.

Once we’ve both been escorted through a white, clinical looking hall to two curtained off cubicles Seraphina wishes us well and leaves us, just as three people emerge and grab me excitedly. They all sing hello’s and guide me to a chair, my mind still hazy as it refocuses to the sudden change of environment.

“Hello darling!” A squeaky voice belonging to a tall woman with powdered white skin and hair pulled into one long spike atop her hair sounds, and she beams at me through golden teeth. “My name is Sheriden. This is Mansfield,”

She gestures to a round man with orange dyed skin and slicked hair to match who waves at me, his cheeks puffing as he smiles.

“And Ambrose.” Another woman with a face that looks carved from stone framed with hair blacker than I thought was possible gives me a crooked, close-lipped smile.

“We’re your prep team!”


“Oh, we *knew* that!” Mansfield says. His voice is nasally and thick with a Capitol accent. “Is this real?” he asks, holding a strand of my hair between two plump fingers. I nod and he hums along with Sheriden and Ambrose. One of them says something about how it must be a ‘District 4 thing’.

I gasp in pain as paper is torn from my leg with a piercing *rip.* This is the second strip of wax on my leg they’ve done, after my eyebrows, arms and underarms had been cleared of unwanted hair. Every time Ambrose pulls the hair out Sheriden will massage a cooling lotion into my skin before moving elsewhere. Mansfield has been washing and drying my hair, constantly commenting about
what good condition it’s in. My head may be stuck in a mechanical clockwork of nodding and
humming in agreement every time one of them says something once this is done.
When the waxing is completely finished, all three take to battling my head hair. Every inch of skin
stings and I find myself still uncomfortable and embarrassed from when they insisted on waxing
around my underwear, despite all three of them being completely unfazed by a near naked body.
“How do you make it so soft?” Sherriden asks bewilderedly, running her long, spindly fingers
over my scalp.
“You must use something on it.” Ambrose adds.
“I put coconut oil on it, that could be it?” I ask. Coconut oil has always been my mother’s answer
to everything—putting it on our faces, hair and skin is a somewhat ritual we’ve had growing up so
that we use it more out of habit than need. The palm trees along the beaches mean it’s easy supply,
and doesn’t have a huge demand from the Capitol.
“You mean Quara’s hair masks, the one with the coconut extract?” Ambrose says.
“No,” I reply confusedly. Any Capitol beauty products are expensive beyond words, any that I’ve
ever seen being sold on the market or by merchants have been priced at more than any person
with a right mind in 4 would pay, even the wealthier citizens. “Just coconut oil.”
All three stop what they’re doing and Mansfield gasps.
“Are you sure that’s... Safe?” he asks gingerly. “Straight from the plants? It’s not even treated!”
“I think so.” I murmur, embarrassment causing redness to surge through my skin and blossom
over my cheeks.
“You don’t get infections?”

“I’m not dirty?”

“It must be a District thing.”

The lives of people here seem so out of touch, yet all they want to do is touch you.

When everything is done to a standard my prep team approve of I’m ushered out again. Isaac is
already outside and practically sparkling under the white lights embedded into the ceiling. His hair
has been cut short so it no longer reaches his jaw, but he hasn’t stopped scowling since we arrived
here.
“Stylists want to meet us.” he grunts, leaning up against the wall.
“Did they rip all the hair from your arms and legs?” I ask quietly.
“No?” The response is mildly horrified. I groan slightly and join him at the wall. “Wait, they
literally ripped your hair out?”
“Yes, and it hurt.”
“I can imagine.”

We wait in silence for a short while, the drumming of Isaac’s fingers against the tiling creating a
soft background noise, until somebody rounds the corner to collect us. A slender, tall man with
tightly curled hair dyed silver and brown skin halts suddenly when he sees us. Despite having
perfectly refined posture, he looks as if he’s hunching.
“Isaac and Annie,” he says softly. “Come with me.”
We both follow wordlessly into an actual room with a purple quilted wall and several dressers, clothing rails and chairs dotted haphazardly in corners. Behind a walnut desk sits a woman with her hair in a gold silk turban, using long nails to flip through a book. Her skin reminds me of the smoky quartz in the ring my father used to wear, a gleaming brown stone that glowed orange in the sunlight. She looks up and stands as we enter, the gems on the ends of her eyelashes glint in the gold light thrown out by the lamp above her. She’s equally tall as the man with us but stands with far more pride.

“There you are,” she sounds professionally monotonous, despite her Capitol accent weighing her words down. “Come sit.”

We both take the chairs in front of her desk that she had gestured to. Her eyebrows are thin and arch sharply above the honey hue of the irises encased by heavy eyelids.

“We’re the new stylists for your Districts,” she says simply. “My name is Constantine, this is Ardor.”

The man who lead us in nods politely, joining his hands behind the golden jacket buttoned over his stomach.

“Usually, we’d take one of you each, but we work together as a unit. I have the dreams, Ardor makes them reality, yes? Thoughts and fingers. Let us not waste time, this is what we’re doing.”

She turns the book she was flicking through towards us and pushes it across the desk into Isaac’s hands. It holds two drawings of two bodies wearing near identical outfits, with small scrawling notes shooting off of arrows joined to different points.

“Both of you stand up quickly, we need measurements for adjustments.” Ardor’s voice is barely audible compared to how resonating Constantine’s is, but still equally well-pronounced. After we both slowly rise gentle hands hold tape measures around various areas of my body—my waist, shoulders, chest, legs. Every time one side of the tape meets the other he calls out a number to Constantine, who scribes it on to a torn sheet of paper. The same is done to Isaac, who stands stiffly scowling at the floor. The second Ardor is finished he drops the tape and hunches over a huge sewing machine and begins feeding fabrics through.

“Let’s get your faces done, yes?” Constantine tells us, more of a statement than a request, for if it was a request it would’ve surely been denied by Isaac; whose eyes have not stop glaring at anything they lie on.

(Put a pretty face over an angry mind. Wouldn’t you like a pretty face? It would make the people in the Capitol so sad when you’re gone.)

The pale blue skirt billows between my legs with every step, the slashes up the side causing it to ripple behind me with the slightest of movements. We are headed to are chariot now, and once again the anxiety has seeped beneath my skin, despite all of the glitter and gems providing extra defences. All of the outfit’s components left me breathless when they finally came together. Those strange cold dots placed on my lips are halved pearls that trail down my neck and across one shoulder, blossoming down my back. Wiring that supports the shell-embroidered corset digs uncomfortably into the tops of my ribs but my stomach remains exposed, only concealed by the dusting of glitter over it. Small lengths of rope and pearl-strung elastic are tied around different parts of my arms and ankles, and after a small amount of bargaining I was permitted to keep Aspen’s necklace on. The huge headpiece made of coral forces me to hold my head up and high
unless I want to suffer a neck ache for the next few days. My hair isn’t hiding the corners of my face any more either, it’s been shadowed around my cheekbones and powdered blue over my eyelids. I’d be lying to myself if I said I don’t feel both more vulnerable and more confident than I have in a while. We got lucky to not be put in the same fish costumes everyone used to be placed in with the old stylists, and Constantine and Ardor work so well with one another that they can carry the other’s request out before they’ve finished speaking. Isaac is dressed identically to me, just without the headpiece. The glitter is almost entertainingly out of place on him.

All 4 Mentors are hanging around the Chariot when we arrive and Librae squeals excitedly at sight of us.

“You look great!” she grins, taking my hands eagerly.

“How was it?” Finnick asks.

“Mind-numbing.” Isaac replies shortly.

“They thought I would catch diseases because I put coconut oil on my hair,” I admit diffidently, earning laughs or smiles from everyone.

“You get used to it amor,” Mags laughs. As everyone falls into conversation I observe everyone else’s Chariots. When my eyes fall on to District 2 Lillith is there, boring her eyes into me. Unsure of what to do, I smile slightly; an admittedly illogical move, because she frowns suspiciously at me before turning her heel.

An intercom suddenly announces that we’re to mount our Chariots to leave, but I stay frozen, a small layer of sweat threatening to break over my heavily made-up forehead. Isaac offers a hand to help me up, which I take gladly-- the Chariot floor reaches my waist, if it weren’t for him offering, I probably would’ve fallen.

“Remember to smile,” Mags tells us.

“And wave.” Ron adds.

“You’ve got this!” Librae says encouragingly, interrupted by the sudden pouring of bright light into the Centre. Our Chariot jolts forward suddenly and I nearly loose my footing, having to lean on the wreath of fake shells and coral lining the Chariot’s edges for support until I regain balance.

The roar of the crowd is deafening, and in the height of my anxiousness I find a smile gluing my cheeks upward as if they’re being held by rope. That, coupled with a nervous laughter makes me look as if I’m truly enjoying myself. I wave at Capitol citizens who are screaming our names so loud that they ring in my ears for seconds afterwards. They cheer, clap and wave back at us, but are little more than a blur of colour as we move. When one throws a rose into my Chariot I press both hands over my chest and mouth a thank you in the general direction behind us. The overwhelming environment displaces me completely and after a few rounds of the streets I’m breathless from uneven laughter, a smile still pulling at my face as we stop in front of the President’s balcony. I pay little attention to what he says, my mind overflowing with a jumble of visions of the crowds behind my eyes when I blink and thoughts that come and go too fast for me to ponder them over properly.

The ride back is just as haphazard and overstimulating to the point that exhaustion pours over me like a tidal wave the second the Chariot stops. We get encouragements of how we ‘did great’ and they ‘love you!’ as we’re lead back to our apartment. On a comedown from my nerve-fuelled excitement I have time to properly speculate about what they really thought of us, and one thing will not stop clawing at the edges of my mind:

If they loved us so much, why are they willing to let us die?
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent underneath.

Only once you get rid of the constrictor around your chest.

Just before we enter the elevator, Constantine plucks the headpieces from the both of us. The hairpins securing it tug slightly on my elaborately curled and fastened hair as she lifts it, but the sudden absence of weight bearing down on my neck is relieving. It allows me to focus my resting gaze toward the floor; something done out of habit, opposed to a lack of confidence that can be exhibited through an elevated posture.

On exiting into the apartment, my exhaustion overrides me. I'm tempted to go straight to bed, however Librae seems to have different plans.

"You can't go to bed yet!" she exclaims, using two hands clasped firmly on my shoulders to divert me from the bedroom corridor. "We've got loads of catching up to do!"

My feeble attempt of a stammered excuse about feeling sick is ignored entirely, to little surprise. She falls gracefully into one side of one of the loveseats, patting the space next to her as she bounces on the cushion slightly. Our hips touching as I sit suggests maybe a larger chair would've been more suitable, but I become accustomed to the feel of her belts blunt edges pressing into my side soon enough. Mags had been trailing close behind and takes a seat opposite us both.

"You looked lovely," Librae muses. "Ron, didn't they look lovely?"

Ron glances up from the dinner table where he had been murmuring to Isaac, both of their backs hunched over the centre.

"Very nice."

I realise it's the first time I've heard him speak properly today. His consonants hold no sharp edges and his tone is soft and breathy, similar to the kind of breeze that makes leaves on sycamores gently rustle. It's short lived though, as his attention is immediately reverted back to Isaac. I begin to pluck the half-pearls from my lips, collecting them in a pile in the centre of my palm while Mags speaks.

"You did very well out there, we can watch reruns if you wish?" she asks me. I reject her offer as politely as possible with a face that feels cemented together by the countless layers of makeup painted on it. I can still feel my eyelashes scrape my eyebrows when I look up, the dense extensions creating a dark cloud over the top edge of my vision.

"Okay, that's fine. Tomorrow we need to be up early, yes? Training is important, only you can decide who you want to be allied with, same goes for the rest of them. Did you have a think about what you want to do?"

"I want to join with 1 and 2, if they let me."

"They will let you honey, they'll take on anyone who can so much as touch a target with a weapon." Librae assures me, laying a small hand upon my leg. Our voices are low in volume, as are Isaac's and Ron's. The separation between the two of us is beginning to unveil itself fully.

Isn't it unnerving, being all alone?

"Any backup plans if that doesn't work out? Don't think Games, just think tomorrow, yes?" Mags asks, watching me carefully.

"I'm not sure... I'd rather go alone, but it isn't really beneficial. The girl from 10 looked like she
could do some damage."
"The angry looking one?"
"Yes. Her, or the boy from 7. Although, 1 and 2 will probably want him."
"Don't assume anything yet honey, we'll just focus on getting with 1 and 2 for now. Are you going to try to intimidate them?"
"No way, no. I laugh. "It's not a persona I'm very practised in." Mags chuckles, calling on an Avox for some drinks. "I want to show I'm not weak, but I don't want to show them what I'm best at-- in case they use it against me."
"You're a dolor puella, young one." Mags smiles. "So no knives?"
"No knives." I confirm. "I can use a sword, if they have them, I'm just not very good."
"You'll be good enough," Librae states confidently. We can practice now if you want."

Maybe she's expecting me to decline, because there is no sword, or something similar, to be found anywhere in this apartment. My silence seems to be taken as a confirmation nonetheless, and Librae is on her feet, peering in corners and tugging on wall hangings for something resembling a sword. She eventually settles on a small wooden stick that needs to be dislodged from behind two cupboard handles belonging to a vanity in the corner of the room. The length is similar to what I remember the handle of a cutlass being, but the absence of a blade makes any practice near impossible. I frown helplessly as she presses it into my hand, my fingers adjusting to the size as they clasp it.

"Okay..." Librae muses. "We'll just look at motions, stances, that kind of stuff. Seeing as we don't have any actual swords." I nod, shuffling out of her way while she grabs multiple cushions from every chair in sight, piling them in her arms. Most of them are dropped on the floor next to Mags, who is watching us intently, her eyes alert and curious. Librae takes a cushion in each hand, the gathered silk and ruffles acting as good grips.

"Right, these are your bodies: hearts, stomachs, necks... Whatever," she begins. "Don't strike them directly with the stick, because you wouldn't do that normally, just imagine there's a blade there and I'll jump around you, does that sound okay?"
"Yeah, that's fine."
Librae nods confidently, momentarily using her knees to hold a cushion as she re-pins a strand of lilac hair with a glittery pink bow. I take the time to find a good stance and positioning, raking through every grain of memory I have in attempts to reabsorb old information that will make me seem a lot more experienced than I probably am. Librae coughs loudly once her hair's sorted, gaining Ron's attention.

"We've got some special confidential physical activity that only we can see about to start," she tells him brightly. Isaac peers over Ron's shoulder and eyes us suspiciously, but follows Ron out regardless. "Great! Let's go, whenever you're ready."
Librae holds both cushions up again, rocking slowly on the balls of her feet in anticipation, ready to react and move the second I do. A nervous laughter threatens to overtake me, but is pushed firmly down before it reaches my throat by a deep breath. I whip my wrist and arm around toward Librae, twisting my torso around to meet her behind me as the stick points toward her. Immediately, she hops around me so she's hidden behind my back and I follow, the routine movements beginning to re-embed themselves in my muscles. Nobody seems to notice me losing my footing on occasion, or twisting the stick between my palm, but I scold myself for it nonetheless. The skirt Constantine put me in billows wildly as I move, folding and moulding around and between my legs. Eventually my hair begins to fall out of it's fancy up-do, causing stray curls to fall in my face. Librae's fast movements and constant cushion swapping doesn't allow me any time to bat them away, so they cloud part of my vision with a glitter sprinkled brown. Every time she decides I've 'struck' a cushion it's swapped until none remain. On throwing the last cushion away, Librae clutches her heart, feigning a strangled noise of defeat.

"You're quick on your feet." Mags tells me. "Very light, weightless. Good."
"Thank you" I smile, slightly breathless.
"She's right honey," Librae grins. "1 and 2 will take you without question."
Their praise ignites a small, warm flame in my stomach. I'm nowhere near the best, but I know
what to do. Confirmation from 2 Victors solidifies it and gives my confidence the boost it's been lacking for so long. We take our seats again and Librae quickly talks me through any criticisms; it turns out she did notice me twisting the stick, but blamed it on the cylindrical shape instead of me. "Sorry for interrupting your pep talk here, ladies" a voice comes suddenly from the elevator. "But I seem to have lost my kid, and Ron."

Finnick has returned after having to quickly leave once the chariots were done and he'd said a few words to Isaac. Now he's leaning with one hand against the wall, a scarf and tartan coat slung over his shoulder.

"Check the halls?" Librae suggests.
"What would they be doing there?" he laughs.
"I sent them out because we had important things to do." Her voice is thick with an obvious exaggeration toward some kind of private meaning and it causes Finnick to raise an eyebrow. "Okay... I'll go check," he says slowly, pushing off of the wall to turn his back, glancing at me before he does so. "Make sure you show me what you can do before the Games start, I don't wanna miss out."

Seraphina comes and goes from the apartment a couple of times as the evening progresses, mumbling quietly to herself as she tidies mine and Librae's hair every time she passes us. The Parade footage is on in the background, but I pay little attention to it, only glancing up when Librae pats my leg excitedly every time Isaac and I get screen time. Ron, Isaac and Finnick return quietly at one point, all locating separate spaces to sit in. Isaac has required an orange somehow, and sits throwing and catching it opposite me. Nobody says much to keep energy levels high, and soon enough I find my eyes growing heavy.

"I'm really tired," I tell Librae quietly. "I'm going to get some sleep. Thank you for helping me."
"It was my pleasure honey!" she smiles, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Make sure you take all of that make up off, sleep well!"
I bid goodnight to everybody else and leave quietly. Fatigue starts to press on every fibre of my body, and it takes cold water splashing on my face tied with the colourfull aftermath of water mixed with make up running down the drain to simply keep my eyes open.

I fall asleep nearly immediately after collapsing into bed, having only removed my skirt leaving the tight fitted corset glued to my chest. Despite me falling asleep so easily, I still can't ward off the uneasiness that plagues my dreams while my consciousness can't fight back. They're nowhere near as graphic, nor petrifying as last night's; but the constant darkness and a paranoia about being followed constitutes to anything but a peaceful slumber.

I awake early out of mere habit. The sun rises foggily in the Capitol, desaturated by the blinding lights of the City it shines on. I have time to wash away any remnants of yesterday's prep in the shower, however most of the glitter and body paint has transferred on to the bedsheets in smears of blue, green and tan. The shower drags the perfectly shaped waves and rolls out of my hair, leaving it hanging heavily down my back and looking far less magnificent than it did 5 minutes ago. I push a hair tie over my wrist to keep for training, just in case my hair is intent on ruining me. All my life I've managed to work around it, and growing up in a place where the wind doesn't rest for even a second lends the ability to function even with every lock attached to my skull whipping over my face.

I'm watching the sun rise slowly over the city, spilling rays of light over the tips of buildings as its height surpasses theirs when a faint knock sounds on my door. It doesn't include the violent scraping of plastic nail extensions that Seraphina's does, plus it's too early for her to call. I invite the caller in and am met with a man who was serving and cleaning food yesterday evening. The Avoxes in the Capitol are far more sinister looking than those on the train, with their heads almost entirely concealed by clumpy white helmets that fasten tightly at their necks. I'm still oblivious as to why anybody would try to betray or commit treason against the Capitol-- it's the most breathtaking place I've ever seen, and its citizens will never have to worry about Reapings or poverty. The man has some neatly folded clothes in his arms which he lays carefully at the foot of
"Do I need to wear those today?" I ask. He glances up and nods quickly, suddenly re-scooping the clothes into his arms and gesturing to the dresser. "No, it's fine," I insist. "Thank you."

He seems slightly taken aback when I smile at him, but with Seraphina absent nobody can scold me for thanking him. Even Finnick thanked the girl on the train. He nods again and leaves hastily, softly closing the door behind him. The outfit laid out must be for Training: a black and grey shirt with the number 4 on the sleeves and back with red trimming around the cuffs with black pants that when tugged on only reach my knees. The collar of the shirt sticks up and digs uncomfortably into my jaw, and takes a short while of wrestling to turn down. I pass Seraphina, who seems more and more excited every time she meets me ahead of schedule, on my way to the lounge. Librae is the only person there, waiting patiently at the table with a glass between her hands.

"G'morning honey!" she grins, pushing her now loose hair behind her shoulders. The bright flowers printed on her dress match her hair exactly and to unfocused eyes create a huge blur of powdery-pale lilac. "Come and eat, before all the good stuff's gone."

I sit opposite her and take some pancakes from a platter, moving them quickly to my plate before the syrup can drip onto the tablecloth. Librae absent-mindedly runs through basic reminders on sword use for later while we both eat. Seraphina joins soon after with Isaac, Mags and Finnick in tow.

"Hello liberi," Mags greets us, guiding Isaac to the seat next to mine with one hand on his shoulder. "Ron's on his way. Now...."

"These outfits are gross," Isaac mutters to me, pulling on the elastic on the shirt and letting it ping back against his stomach. I hum in amused agreement, eating a piece of pancake to refrain from laughing.

"You can't be too early, but don't turn up late," Mags tells us. "Stick together until you go in, then decide between you who you're going to talk to and what you're going to do. You'll all be eating lunch together, so save whoever isn't there first a seat. *Observetis invicem*, you're not in the Arena yet."

"Don't get in fights either," Finnick notes from the end of the table, his voice slightly muffled by the coffee mug covering his mouth. He glances pointedly at Isaac, who rolls his eyes defiantly.

"You don't want to make any enemies before the Games even start."

"You remember what I told you, boy." Ron's voice sounds suddenly. He approaches us from behind and places a hand on the back of Isaac's chair, who nods and continues eating.

"Finish your food, then we can go!" Seraphina trills, snapping her compact shut and trotting to the head of the table. My plate's been empty for several minutes, and it doesn't take Isaac long to finish. Call it idealistic, but part of me hopes the other tributes down there will be as easy to stomach as the sickly sweet syrup that coats nearly every item of food here.

(Don't be silly, Annie.)

"Are you going to talk to 1 and 2?"

My question bounces off the walls of the corridor, vibrating in the silence that it's responded with. Isaac laughs bitterly, glancing sideways at me. We both know his answer already, although his word choices could be anyone's guess.

"I'd rather slit my own throat."

There it is. I can't find any good response so resort to twirling my necklace between my fingers, watching the hall ahead of us carefully in anticipation of the Training Centre. Two vast oak doors that had been closed yesterday are now flung wide, exposing a small plaza occupied by only a handle of people. We enter side by side, analysing the Tributes—my gaze more tentative, Isaac’s haughty. 1 & 2 are here already but not standing together as I had anticipated. The twins from 2 are leant against the wall while 1 are sat by the head Trainer at the front of the room. I don't dare
look at either more than once in case we make eye contact, and instead watch everybody else. 7 are here with their backs to us, the boy's huge frame towering over itself. 8 and 11 are also hunched in respective corners, watching both Isaac and me warily. It dawns on me again that we aren't just threats to each other, but to the Districts who haven't so much as held any kind of potential weapon before. We sit on a group of boxes behind 7 and wait for everybody else to arrive. I can feel several sets of eyes boring into me from different places but don't divert my gaze from the black boots we've been given, occasionally murmuring an exchange in Latin to Isaac, who has had no problem staring down at everybody who enters, then informing me of who they are.

Once everyone arrives, the head Trainer introduces herself as Lavenne and runs through rules with a strong, authoritative tone. They're to be expected: no malicious physical contact with Trainers or Tributes, no abuse of equipment and several others that get lost in the passage between my ears and my acknowledgement.

Suddenly the doors are opened and everybody is filing in. I replay Librae and Mags' words on a loop in my head so I can't forget them as I trail closely behind Isaac. My stomach begins to knot as we enter, waiting for somebody to call for us. It takes about 2 minutes for Luscious to call our District name as we pass the weapons on a tour around the colossal room, surveying each post. His voice is booming, as if it's incapable of being any quieter than a shout, but uncharacteristically high-pitched. Isaac snickers slightly at his tone and raises his chin and shoulders, turning to directly face 1 and 2.

"How about you come and say hello, instead of wandering like lost children?" Luscious jibes challengingly, earning laughs from his sister and Platinum. I turn to Isaac for confirmation, who simply smirks and walks away toward the survival stations on the other side of the room. I go in the opposite direction towards 1 and 2, trying to keep my shoulders back.

"Hi," I offer quietly.

"Where's the Golden Boy rip-off gone?" Luscious demands. "Get him over here."

"I can't control what he does, or where he goes." I reply simply. Now I'm conversing with him, he's more obnoxiously arrogant that intimidating. On hearing my response he narrows his eyes, moving forward to emphasise how much he towers over me.

"What can you do with weapons?" he challenges, scowling up and down my frame.

"I can use swords."

"Prove it."

His accusational tone ignites the desire to pick up a knife and use a weapon I can handle properly, but an exercise in self-control can never go amiss. Taaffeite watches me carefully as I pass him, having not contributed anything since we arrived. The array of swords are surrounded by dummies and a Trainer, whose offer of help using a sword is turned down. There are no katanas or machetes here like there is in the Arena, but that may be a good thing-- havoc can be wreaked with a 1 metre blade. Fortunately, there are several cutlasses that are near identical in size and shape to those used on the boats at home, and the 'handle' I practised with last night. I take one carefully and brush my hair behind my ears, refusing to let the eyes of 4 people far more experienced than me steer my concentration.

Even if I was still at the Academy, my weaponry skills wouldn't be superior to theirs; our Academy is for literal career training. We learn how to hunt fish in shallow waters with spears, knives and tridents, how to make nets, traps and fishhooks and complex self-defence against any man-eating fish and animals that lurk in the waters. It gives us a huge advantage over everyone else, mostly due to our District trade being so hunting and weaponry orientated, but still places us under 1 and 2's abilities to properly fight. The tiny student number meant we would all get jobs in some of the best trade positions in the District the moment we leave at 18- only the 10 to 15 students from the Academy could get places working on the best fishing boats and merchant's businesses the second they left schooling. If people were lucky enough to have fishermen and women as parents, they would often get training at home too, only increasing their abilities further.
My first swipe of the cutlass slashes across the dummies stomach. The second gets the other's ribs, the third it's neck and the fourth swings down and buries in the space between where the neck and shoulders meet. Pride swells in my stomach at my success in both keeping the blade still and hitting the dummies in fatal positions. I replace the sword and thank the Trainer and go to leave.

"Where do you think you're going?" Lillith near screeches. It makes a shiver climb down the back of my neck, but I turn to face her despite my mind's protests.

"Leave her be," Platinum says evenly, her voice deep and scratchy. "You're not all that bad, are you 4?"

I shrug and smile slightly as she turns to eye Taaffeite.

"I've got no objections to taking her," he says silkily, his tone deep and strangely pronounced.

"Me neither." Platinum says, turning to Luscious and Lillith for confirmation. The two scowl at me, their eyes narrowing identically. The angle of their eyes puts a natural glare in their expressions already, making the anger added on even more exaggerated. The share a look and turn to me at the same time.

"Fine." Lillith says. "We're offering you a lot here 4. The second that gong goes off, you meet us at the Cornucopia and fight with us, or we'll kill you."

It isn't exactly an invite, but it's far better than rejection.

"Okay," I accept evenly. "I'm going to look at survival now. Have a nice day."

I can't help a smile crossing my lips as my back turns, I'll go to them at the Cornucopia, but they'll wake up the next morning heartbroken when I'm gone, taking their valuables with me.

Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it. (If only the only snakes in the sea weren't mythical.)

I sit with Isaac at lunch, telling him nothing but the information that I was allying with 1 and 2. They had no desire to order me to sit with them which was a relief, but they haven't spared Isaac any glares.

"I'm getting more food, do you want any?" he offers.

"I'm fine, thank you though."

I spot Luscious rising the second Isaac does, but he's too far away for me to subtly warn him by the time I turn around. Luscious follows him to the food table and I notice Isaac tense as he come up behind him, turning to face him directly. The tension could be ripped from where I am. All I can see of Isaac is one eye, which has its brow raised audaciously. I remember Mags' words and stand to turn Isaac away before anything bad can happen.

"Isaac," I start as I reach them. "Come on."

I take his arm but my grip is shook off dismissively by Isaac who seems intent on staring a gradually more furious Luscious down.

"Sorry about him, he's a little-"

"-Think about it, little boy." Luscious sneers. "You'll regret if you don't."

I can feel the resistance of my renewed grip lessen as Isaac chuckles darkly.

"I've already told you, I'd rather rip my own throat out." His words make me pull sharply again, jolting Isaac sideways as I lead him away from Luscious. A second longer and somebody would've got hit, no doubt. Isaac turns to call mockingly over his shoulder. "Have a good day!"

I don't try asking him why he did it, the blatant satisfaction he wears in his expression shows I wont get an answer I'm happy with. Maybe Isaac's forgotten what he's gotten into.

(Or maybe he's got a plan much better than yours.)
I spend an hour or so of the afternoon at the knot tying station, chatting enthusiastically with the Trainer about my mother's family's net making history as I tie some of the most complex knots I know and weave countless nets. However when the girl from 3 and boy from 6 approach I leave to try edible plants, fire starting, basic survival and medicines. I try to embed everything the Trainer tells me into my head, making note of the most common antiseptics or safest berries found growing. I don't dare look back to the weapons, except when the whole centre goes silent as Isaac strides straight past 1 and 2 to throw several dozen spears perfectly at moving and still targets. Luscious, and probably Lillith, will make a mission of hunting him down, and I'm going to make sure I'm not present when they do. Mental tiredness begins to make itself apparent as Training ends, and on regrouping with Isaac I decide to not mention what happened between him and Luscious to anyone-- it isn't worth the headache.

However it seems Mags already knows when Seraphina escorts us out of the elevator, as Isaac is met with a sharp blow around the back of his head. "What did I tell you?!" she scolds as Isaac hisses in pain. "Stultus puer! Vos mos adepto vestri sui occisi! Vis necari?"
"2 approached Isaac first, he started it." I insist. "Isaac was defending himself, just badly." Mags narrows her eyes slightly, searching for lies in my words. Seraphina gasps at Mags' actions and words, backing away toward the wall.
"Can I ask what the hell's going on?" Finnick asks amusedly.
"No. Non vestra negotia."
"He's mine Mags, of course it's my business."
"He got in an argument with the boy from 2," I tell him. "He said no to an alliance and said he'd rather rip his own throat out than say yes."
"Ouch," Finnick grimaces. "You're a massive pain, you know that right?"
Isaac nods defiantly, turning on his heel to go to his room. Librae comes to the elevator with Ron, who whispers something to Finnick.
"You deal with him, I'll loose it if I have to." Finnick mutters as Ron goes to follow Isaac.
"Hey honey," Librae smiles, apparently oblivious to the events just occurred. "Did you get with 1 and 2?"
"Yeah, it was more of a threat of 'join us or we'll kill you', instead of them genuinely wanting an alliance." I laugh slightly.
"No, that's good. Wel fieri, callidus puella." Mags praises.
"At least yours has her priorities straight," Finnick huffs. "Nice one, sweetheart."

If only they knew how unorganised my dis-aligned priorities really are.

Never you mind, they'll soon find out.

You'll regret it if you get yourself killed.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Disguise yourself with yourself, so only you are to blame when someone gets killed.

I decide that it may be best to start strategizing with the dinner that has already been laid out. I may need to go for days without eating a thing soon, and the heavy foods we're supposed to be eating are more likely to ward exhaustion and famine from my bloodstream than the soup and deserts I've become accustomed to. The roasted meat is so dry it may as well be compacted sand being pushed down my throat by a tongue that wants to repel something that breaks the bounds in which I have known nothing but. However it announces it's presence in my stomach near immediately, a couple of mouthfuls doing the work of nearly a full meal of fish.

Isaac and Ron join the table shortly after we begin eating. Isaac's presence may as well be dragging a thundercloud in its wake, the glumness and vengeance in his expression mingling to create something both painfully grey yet bright with flashes of anger and resent. He shoots Finnick a glare which is responded to with an over-exaggerated grin. Something in the way they're still unable to work together despite the circumstances makes me wonder if this really was a good arrangement after all.

We eat in silence, the only sound being Seraphina's feeble attempts to start a conversation, which go askew as quickly as they're formulated. The fabric of Mags' skirt opposite me brushes my legs under the table every time I move them, and she watches me steadily, nodding proudly when I take more food from the selection laid out. Who's to say greed is a deadly sin? I could be dead next week, vices and virtues fall upon the strangest of things.

"Ooh, Finnick?" Librae's melodic chords flood the room, replacing the heavy quiet with the ringing of voice.

"Mm?"

"Do you have anywhere you need to go tonight?"

The question is tinged with pity-- honestly, I pity him slightly too. The lifestyle of lovers and parties may be grand, but the constant need for his presence must be exhausting after a certain amount of time. Coupled with the amount of business meetings and Victor jobs he attends during the day as he flits between the Training Centre and outside, it's a wonder he finds any time to spend here at all. Finnick hesitates slightly, a dent appearing between his eyebrows as they draw closer.

"Not until later, 8, maybe 9. Why?"

"I need a favour from you,"

"Oh?" he asks challengingly. "Throw it at me."

"Can you do some knife work with Annie? I couldn't throw if my life depended on it."

Despite him being out of eye shot, I can just about see Isaac rolling his eyes. Guilt knocks at my sides at the possibility of him being deprived of attention that he needs just as much as I do.

"It's fine, you don't have to," I interrupt, the volume of my words significantly lower than their's.

"I'm sure Isaac-"

"-I don't need his help." Isaac declares firmly, not moving his gaze an inch away from his plate. Mags tuts, smoothing some silver hair back into the tight bun it's pulled in. Finnick smirks and takes a sip of the golden brown liqueur he always seems to be discreetly drinking just before he leaves, just as he arrives and at every meal but breakfast.
"You done eating sweetheart?" Finnick asks, eyes turning momentarily toward my cleared plate. "We'll go when you're ready."

I glance at Mags for approval to leave dinner. She nods encouragingly, resting her hands on the edge of the table. Finnick and I rise in unison, the chairs making a soft scraping noise against the thick rug they're placed on. Seraphina begins to object, but is silenced by a wink from Finnick, to which she stammers on her rebuke and turns her attention back to the dinner table again. On passing the table's end Finnick grabs a fistful of knives from a basket of utensils. Their tips vary in sharpness: some are completely blunt and rounded, others point delicately outward to finish a serrated edge. I'm oblivious as to where I'm supposed to throw them, but I know that if it's anywhere in this apartment we'll have to wait until Seraphina is long gone.

The table starts to empty shortly after we leave it. Librae disappears to wash her hair before the coffee toned brown beginning to emerge at her roots is dyed the same lilac as the rest of her hair tomorrow, leaving an extremely bored looking Isaac hunched in an armchair out of line with where a knife could be badly thrown, and Mags and Ron conversing at the table still-- Seraphina dwindling at their side. Finnick sorts quickly through the knives, tossing them carelessly between his hands as he separates them into two groups.

"Don't tell Seraphina, she'll kill me." he murmurs on passing, pressing one fist of knives into my hand. I watch him take a cushion and pierce it with one of the blades before hanging it on a frame hook which had sported a landscape picture of a Capitol street that now lies in the cushion's place. The tightly packed thinness of the feathery down within the cushion allows the end of the hook to poke out between layers of satin ruffles, securing it in place.

"I can buy her damn cushions twice as nice as these." Finnick mutters to himself, tugging to ensure the cushion is hung soundly. Something about his querulous tone suggests this isn't the first time he's pinned Capitol owned upholstery to a wall-- and got in trouble for it.

"It's fine, honestly," I offer. "If it'll damage anything it doesn't matter, I'll just try it at scoring."

"A couple of holes in the wall can be the difference between you hitting someone and them killing you, honey." he says evenly. The words are formulated so lightly they could be casual small talk. It must be the air cooling systems that make the shiver creep down my spine.

"So I'm just throwing them at that?" I ask, tentatively analysing first the cushion's thickness, then the sharpness of my blades.

"Yep." Finnick throws himself down into an armchair, checking to ensure Seraphina has disappeared. "You know what to do, right?"

I nod, weighing the handle of a smooth-edged fruit knife in my right throwing hand as the remainder of the cluster are placed on a small coffee table. The plastic of the handle is rough and disproportionately weighted, not the sanded down and hollowed wood or metal I'm used to handling. Despite the restricted aerodynamics of the knife, it's sharp enough to lodge cleanly in the cushion.

"What body part is the cushion representing?" I enquire, placing one foot at an angle behind the other and grinding them firmly into the floor.

"Whatever you want," he replies. His voice has suddenly become distant, distracted. "Heart, preferably."

"How about this knife? The handle's rectangular."

"Hold it upside down then."

The shift makes it even more irregular against the shape of my hand than before, but I try to adjust nonetheless. Raising my arm above and behind my head, I narrow my eyes in attempts of locating and fixing the centre of the cushion. My shoulder threatens to present a feeling of strain at the movement that had been removed from it's memory after years without throwing a single knife, so I propel it forward before the exertion can make itself pronounced. The position of the knife and its handle cause it to veer downwards just before making contact with the cushion so that it slices underneath the centre. The hit would be fatal, granted, but holds the possibility of leaving the person alive with a knife lodged in their abdomen for several minutes before they die. If I have to kill anyone, it'll be so that they don't feel anything.
I mentally scold myself for loosing focus and not hitting the target's centre, I can ponder over the probability of me becoming a murderer during the early hours of the morning where sleep is out of the question and I've nothing better to do than wallow in my own pity, and blanket myself in the darkness of midnight. Taking a different leaner knife with a more curved blade but an identical handle, I readjust my positioning and throw again. A soft thud suggests it may have made contact with the wall behind it, unlike its predecessor that fell to the floor not long after contact, dragging a cluster of stuffing feathers with it. However it still doesn't meet the cushion's centre.

"Am I doing something wrong?"

I try to keep the exasperation out of my voice as I've only thrown two knives, but I should be better than this. My parents didn't pay all of that money keeping me in a school that literally trained me to know how to kill moving fish in 5 seconds flat with the flick of a wrist for me to not be able to hit an unmoving target only feet away from me. Finnick glances up from the floor, analysing the positions of the knives on the wall and floor. He doesn't look bored nor disinterested, just preoccupied. He stands wordlessly, moving to stand behind me. Two hands move through the gap between my arms and waist, taking hold of my wrists. I tense uncomfortably against the close proximity, pushing my shoulders together. Finnick smirks slightly, turning my hands over.

"Hold it however you want, princess." he says silkily, pushing the knife back towards the bottom of my hand. I catch sight of a small graze that runs over a section of the edge of his wrist, just in the way a bracelet would if it were to form one continuous loop. I don't know what he's trying to do, but there are certainly more efficient ways of helping me throw the knives properly. Maybe he's just taking a break to play what he calls 'Prince Charming', as if I don't have anything better to do than fawn over him.

"I'm holding it like you told me to," I reply, refusing to play along with whatever game he's trying to initiate. "Maybe I'm standing wrong."

Finnick laughs slightly, presumably at my defiance, but his overly-casual attitude is beginning to irritate me.

"Finnick, stop messing around!"

Librae's scolding sounds unfamiliar and erroneous as it contrasts with her melodious voice; her constant chirpiness and positivity repeatedly makes me forget that she's about 30, and in an authoritative position over Finnick. Water droplets fall from the hair at the nape of her neck to the floor, with the rest being wrapped tightly into a bun similar to Mags', the purple turned a few shades darker by the water held within it. Finnick smirks and withdraws gracefully from behind me, moving back into the same chair as before.

"That knife's upside-down, honey," Librae tells me gently, twisting it back to the position I had it in before.

"But Finnick said-"

"Stop giving out false information!" Librae tells Finnick exasperatedly, spinning to face him. "I just said turn it over if it doesn't feel comfortable," he says simply. "It doesn't really matter-"

His words are cut off by a hostile ow! as Librae hits him around the side of the ear with the back of her hand. Isaac snorts loudly from his corner of the room, exploding into laughter.

"Honestly! If you could just spare your attention for one minute,"

"Brae," Finnick exclaims. "Just chill out, it's fine."

"In five years we've got three kids into the top eight. Three!" she snaps. "It's our responsibility to help them, we need to start bringing kids back home where they're meant to be."

Something is wrong and too knowing in Finnick's expression, and it soon transitions to Librae's also. He leans back in his chair and checks the time on the wall.

"Fine. We may as well watch the updates before I go then. Half hour should be enough time." he says flatly, flicking the switch on the remote laying on the table next to him. Librae sighs, whispering that 'we'll carry on after' before ushering me into a chair next to her. I catch Mags and Ron watching disdainfully from the table still, both of their faces furrowing and creasing in the
same areas as they frown. The recaps are now loaded with statistics, photos and probabilities for every Tribute, along with a clip from the Chariots. An analysis of Luscious is nearly finished as the hologram flickers upwards, picturing him during the Parade with his skin painted grey and dark make up accentuating every hollow of his face as he grins arrogantly at the cameras and passing crowds. The statistics still remain at the side of the screen, displaying his winning odds as 6/1.

"6/1 is way too high," Finnick mutters. "That's gotta go down."

"It will," says Isaac. "He didn't even have the nerve to hit me."

"Not something to be proud of, on your part," Finnick says firmly. "He probably would've if Miss Congeniality didn't drag you away."

District 3's outfits are so grand they drown out the poor boy and girl beneath them, the integrated lights creating glares in the camera. Their odds are both dishearteningly low, and for their sake I hope they receive good Training scores. I come up before Isaac does, smiling and waving at the crowds. Finnick's nickname of Miss Congeniality circles through my thoughts again as Caesar calls me this year's 'Girl Next Door'. My odds are 9/1. Librae calls the numbers across the room to Mags, who nods evenly.

"Is that okay?" I ask worriedly. Librae nods encouragingly, a glint of excitement flashing in her eyes.

"They'll go up after you get your score," she promises. "So 9 as a start is great, honey."

Isaac looks much older with all of the costume make up as he glances confidently at the crowds, sparing a smile on occasion. He looks as if he knows something everybody else doesn't, like he's holding a secret with the value of every piece of gold ever found, waiting for a time to use it. He is mentioned as 'one to watch' and given odds of 10/1. After us the numbers begin to increase, only dropping as the District 7 boy is given 12/1. The young boy from District 12's number is 51. As they repeat the loop Taaffeite and Platinum are both estimated as 8/1, and Lillith 7.

"Food for thought," Finnick muses, glancing somberly at the clock again. "I've gotta go."

His exit is interrupted by Mags catching his arm as he passes the table, squeezing it slightly, but after that he's gone for another party.

Over the course of the evening I manage to start hitting the cushion perfectly centre until I've used all of my knives up. Seraphina gasps, horrified, every time the wall is struck by a blade, but doesn't order we stop. Mags brings me to the table with Ron to talk about my character portrayal for the interviews at one point, with most of the list she and Ron had compiled being crossed out within minutes. Another personification, 'mysterious', is crossed through by Ron, leaving very little left on the list.

"What about what Caesar said, about girl next door?" Mags asks me gently, my self-directed frustration beginning to swell in my throat. "Is that a good idea?"

"What you're doing right now," Ron tells me, his eyes wise. "Smile a lot, look like the kind of person who would give all their spare money to others, act as the mediator. Be the kind of person everybody wants as their friend. The difficulty comes in the Arena; you won't get by being nice. You need to be able to kill well and put on a show, that's when everyone goes mad for you. A sweetheart with a killer streak. The main obstacle is getting a good Training Score to secure sponsors' confidence in you before the Games start, 8 or above, 7 at the absolute lowest. Otherwise you'll go in with nothing, and by the time you prove yourself they'll have other commitments. It's very hard to get right, but will work wonders if you do."

"Could I get it right?"

"That's for you to decide."

Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it. Isn't that what you told yourself yesterday? Or are you so indecisive that you can't even stick to your own plans?
"What personality thing did you choose?"
Isaac looks up from his hands to gaze at me quizzically. The Trainer he is waiting on to set up the Gauntlet is still fixing and positioning clubs after the boy from 6's unsuccessful attempt at completing it. 1 & 2 have spent the first hour of the morning watching the boy from 7's every move, too fixated on making a decision about how desirable he could be to pay attention to Isaac, or me for that matter.
"Oh... Am I not meant to ask that?"
"I don't know, but a crossover of mysterious and dangerous apparently. Doing just one is cliché." he tells me, putting on a fake obnoxious tone. I have to stifle a laugh in order to keep the conversation discreet. "Want a go after me?"
The jumping from block to block can't be too different from jumping rocks at home before the next wave hits during rising tide, however I'm not sure how well I'd fare against the clubs that the Trainer sends swinging. I caught a glimpse of Taaffeite moving over it as if he were on a gentle stroll yesterday, even beating Luscious and Lillith's times on the board on the wall.
"Sure."
The Trainer calls on Isaac to get ready to run the Gauntlet, only fractionally quiet enough to stay out of Luscious' earshot, much to Isaac's disappointment. A small crowd begins to watch nonetheless, with the young boy from 12 staring doe eyed at the obstacles. Isaac tenses and leaps with a reaction time faster than fish in disturbed water as the Trainer begins the clock. At one point I notice his footing slip an inch, but he jumps and rolls around and over the course with relative ease. His time comes under Luscious' by three tenths of a second.
"God damn." he mutters as he rejoins me. "I'll keep redoing it until I beat him, I swear."
"You built up an audience still, they looked pretty impressed."
"They're not just here for me."
He's right, none of them have moved and every set of their eyes are on me. A tidal wave of self-doubt floods my stomach; but it's too late to turn back now, I'm already at the start point. Didn't you always dream of being noticed?
It's just rock jumping.
I try to visualise a wave passing as the Trainer counts me down, making it disappear the second the formulation of 'go' appears in his voice. Jump the rocks, avoid the sea, don't step on any seaweed and do it fast. I nearly forget clubs are swinging at me until one grazes my foot as I pass it, threatening to trip me. Some swing high, some low. Seagulls and sharks. In the midst of my imagination I don't trip again.
I don't beat Lillith so I'm placed 5th above Platinum. It's a confirmation for anybody who passes it, just a small reminder of my presence and possible abilities. Taaffeite is eyeing me carefully from across the room, but not saying a word to the others. My distrust in him has been growing steadily since yesterday.
I spend the rest of the day alternating between survival stations, only going back to swords when Platinum beckons me over to demonstrate how I used the cutlass again. I repeat the matching puzzle at edible plants and insects until I get every pair correct three times consecutively. At snare-making the Trainer shows me how to rig a net to trap a person's legs. I learn three different ways to make fires, two kinds of shelters to make and how to hunt small animals. I leave fishing and fish hooks until the end of the day, spending the last hour conversing with the Trainer about the different plants and essences fish hooks and nets get soaked in back home to attract whatever is in.
most demand. The little boy from 12 watches from afar for a while, but approaches me only when it's announced we have 15 minutes left.
"Can you show me how to make that?" he asks. His voice is so meek and small that it triggers a pain in my chest.
"Of course I can, choose something you like from this pile."
After 2 unsuccessful attempts, he finally makes a wonky hook that has the potential to catch something. He tells me his name is Pocan in the middle of his excitement at his creation. The innocence only a child as young as him can hold spurs me to want to protect him, but I know I couldn't, even if I tried. Little Pocan is going to die, and the lack of sparkle in his grey eyes suggests he knows it, too. I meet Isaac at the door, distracted by my mind trying to block out images of all the different ways someone may hurt him. I decide that maybe if I run into him at some point, I'll try my best to... look after him.

Today is the day we get scored. This is when I find out if I'm good enough to act out what I please, or if I'm destined to succumb to the blurred grey of the background. The blur where nobody remembers your name.

(Nobody knew it in the first place)

My leg bounces repeatedly, my knee rising and falling with every jolt. The solid soles of the boots make a soft thud sound every time my heel hits the floor. Eventually, Isaac has to place a finger on my knee to still it. It works for a short time, but the subconscious movements are impulsive for a reason. Every bounce of my leg empties a few drops from the ever-filling tank of anxiousness that lurks in my stomach, stopping it from overflowing completely. Mags told us that Gamemakers like us, that they'll pay attention to us, so we must *impressionem facerent*. I don't think I like the Gamemakers, those leering men who watch us from above, calculating our worth from our every move. But now I'm the Girl Next Door, I smile and I laugh and I hit dummies square in the heart with the flick of a knife.

1 and 2 have been and gone already, all leaving with their chins so high they couldn't possibly see the floor. Part of me prays that the doors will lock and the boy from 3 will never leave the gym. I know what I'm meant to do, I know what I need to do, and I know what I'm going to do. I managed to hit the target cushion every time I threw a knife at it yesterday, if I can manage with dinner knives I'd better hit every target in perfect centre with no effort with proper knives. The doors clang in unison with my chest, revealing the District 3 boy behind them. He ducks underneath the door before it fully opens and leaves swiftly, leaving me with more time to sit in silent anticipation.

The computerised voice sounds the name *Annie Cresta*, and for a split second I don't recognise it as mine. The actual Annie Cresta doesn't throw knives at fake people, she doesn't scheme in ways to win a killing game and she certainly doesn't want to act like she enjoys being here.

This isn't who I was meant to be.

(Yet here you are.)

*Suck it up for 5 minutes-- long enough to warm the Gamemakers. This is who you need to be if you want to get home alive. Life isn't fair.*

*Ha, tell me about it.*

Isaac's good luck wish is lost in background noise as I strain my cheeks into an animated smile
and manually place a bounce in my step. The Gamemakers all bore their eyes into me on my entry, some smile pleasantly. Maybe their smiles are fake too.

"Annie Cresta, District 4." I tell them, raising my voice to a near shout to make it audible for them. My vocal chords clench around themselves in attempts to keep my voice sounding normal. The Head Gamemaker, Ophelius Cordell, nods knowingly.

"Whenever you're ready, Miss Cresta."

"Do I have a time limit? I'd like to show you something."

"Take as long as you please."

I know that 'as long as you please' translates to 'as long as we'll pay attention', so I move quickly between stations. It takes little time for me to weave a net of sufficient size, and less than a minute for me to make a hook, the child-taught trades embedded into my muscles' memory. It's only at the snares that my concentration needs to be undivided in order to recap what I learned yesterday. It takes longer than I'd hoped, but the same snare as yesterday is now slung, un-triggered, over my shoulder. They're all still watching me as I cross the room to the knives, only few becoming restless and sipping from tall glasses of bubbling liquid. From the corner of my eye I catch the Head Gamemaker frowning when I pass the swords, stopping at the knives instead. I fill each of the stands in front of me with a blade and move it close enough for me to grab them without moving. I start up the simulator and disengage my thoughts, giving my attention exclusively to the dummies and their light-up targets. If this is to go to plan, the swinging dummy that fakes a running Tribute will appear at the end as it did when the girl from 5 was practising yesterday. The knife count begins to deplete with my confidence, until a dummy is released from the ceiling with a soft click, giving me just enough time to throw and trigger the snare to halt the dummy's supportive ropes' progression. The placement of the fallen structure means the only fatal hit can be the back of the head. It's just a fish, you're hunting fish. But fish move, as does my aim, leaving the knife lodged in the back of the dummy's neck.

It's more than I could've hoped for.

I back away from the scene of the staged mass-murder to face the Gamemakers again, etching the same smile as before on to my lips, just more humble.

"Thank you, Miss Cresta." Ophelius smiles, golden-plated teeth shimmering in the overhead lights.

"Thank you for watching me," I reply. It earns quizzical looks from some, but the reaction is mostly neutral. Before anything else can be said, I bow and leave, forcing my steps to bounce in the same way they did before.

This plan had better work.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Everybody loves a surprise.

Once the elevator doors close I can let go of a seemingly eternally held breath. The air had got caught in my throat after I’d given Isaac his well-wishes, as my overcritical psyche began to dig for flaws in my scoring. For the first time since arriving in the Capitol, the elevator doesn't make it straight to the apartment without disruption. At the ground floor's extravagant reception the elevator halts, bouncing slightly against the magnetic weights that tug it up and down. From behind the parting doors appears Finnick, his eyes set scowling at the marble tiles beneath his feet. His hand leaning and reaching against the wall next to him exposes his neck from below the jacket hiding it, along with a garish bruise of bloody reds and purples splotching under his jaw. The person who marked him with it will no doubt be the centre-point of tonight's news before the Training Scores are released. As he catches sight of me his expression shifts entirely, reverting to his usual self-assured grin. His eyes still remain dark, with his smile placing no spark in them, just an artificial glimmer from the lights above. I’d assumed those were his normal eyes; eyes that show nothing is wrong, until the scowl they hosted as the elevator greeted him proved they suited sombre expressions far better. He subtly readjusts his jacket to conceal his neck again as he enters the elevator. “Hey pretty girl,” he greets, standing across from me. The mirror plated walls reflect us off of one another endlessly—looking at a different surface only gives a different angle. “You been scored yet?” “Just now,” I reply, my voice quieting as I recall all of the ways in which I could’ve done better: maybe if I’d hit the last dummy’s head, or ran the gauntlet, or made the kind of trap that Finnick used to win his games. 

Maybe, probably.

“What did you do?” he asks. The question is not condescending, nor is it anxious. Just curious. He is either ignoring or oblivious to my panic. Maybe the past 5 days of fake smiles and faux contentment has actually been believable.

Maybe, probably not.

“Weaved a net, snared it, then threw some knives.” “You threw the snare too?” I nod somewhat, refusing to look at the walls and their countless mirroring reflections. “Then why are you worried?” he asks. The elevator jolts as it begins its ascent to our floor. “It might not be enough.” “Honey,” he laughs. “I got a 10 for acting like a street seller and throwing a few tridents. You’ll be fine.” “I don’t think our charisma levels are exactly equal,” I mumble, twisting the rope of my necklace around my finger, the tinted glass pieces clinking as they collide. “Irrelevant.” He protests, chuckling slightly. “The people will love you anyway. Oh, also, try to fake a bit of confidence; you’ll give the girls a heart attack.” My memory flickers back to how nervous Librae was this morning: constantly checking over the knives I’d practiced with to ensure she’d directed me right, squeezing my hand too tightly before
we left. It worries me too; she’s put so much of her energy into helping me in every way possible, as has Mags, that if (when) I die there will be nothing but disappointment in their wake at a job which never got done.

The familiar chime of a bell signifies the opening of the doors to our floor. The second we both exit the elevator I’m swarmed by Seraphina and Librae. Finnick slips around them and disappears behind where my eyes can see between their heads.

“Don’t crowd the poor girl,” Mags scolds, barging between them and their ceaseless questions to take my arm. “Come sit amare,”

Once she leads me to the dinner table I try to work through hers, Ron’s and Librae’s questions about what I did and how the Gamemakers reacted, and Seraphina’s enquiries about what they were wearing and how they had their hair—the answers to most I don’t have. The questions and their fumbling answers are interrupted just as they start to dwindle by Isaac slipping through the gap of the still opening elevator doors. His lips are upturned a fraction, emphasised by his elevated chin. This is no expression of someone who doubts their performance. As the questions pick up again and volume floods the apartment Finnick re-appears from what was presumably a shower, judging by his wet hair and patches of skin flushed pink by an attack of hot water.

Isaac took an approach I would never think to do, and, if I did, would dismiss immediately. Rather than throwing some spears at targets and slashing some dummies with swords, he talked the Gamemakers through how fish were killed back home with the same weapons, and transferred it on to the dummies for less ‘cliche 1 and 2’ kills. Mags’ beaming becomes wider with every question he answers, and even Finnick looks pleased.

“You be careful,” Ron tells him. “The higher your score, the higher you are on their kill list.”

“I could score one point and good old squeaky-voice from 2 would still be on to me,” Isaac shrugs, fighting to hold back a laugh. As humorous as he attempts to make the comment, Ron’s warning still stands. Of course, after the argument between Isaac and Luscious at lunch it’s predestined that Isaac will be a major target set by Luscious, but a higher Training Score would only increase the likelihood of Luscious hunting Isaac down. A grudge against a vitriolic 15 year old with a lack of ability holds far less of a hunting thrill than a grudge against a vitriolic 15 year old with an exemplary Training Score. Instinct and common sense both place Isaac as the latter.

Poor boy, silly boy. You’d never be that silly...

Would you?

The afternoon passes slower than treacle off of a spoon. The TV is filled with bets on our scores with the occasional interjection of celebrity news. Just before the showbiz gossip airs Finnick coincidentally finds something to do away from the TV and the reports of him and his new fashion-model girlfriend. The red patches on his arms from earlier still haven’t gone down the way a heat rash typically would, and now run in lines up and down his arms, revealed only when the sleeves of his shirt hike upwards. Since gaining Constantine as a stylist the amount of clothing he wears has increased tremendously; shifting from being bare-chested to always in a perfectly tailored shirt and jacket, and pants that don’t look like they’ve had to be dragged up his legs. The entirety of the Capitol has gone crazy for it, labelling it his ‘transition to adulthood’. He leaves at one point a few hours before Scoring, promising to be back on time.

With every fractional inch the clock hand moves as it reaches closer to 7PM, Mags begins to pace a few steps further, Ron’s knee bounces an inch higher, Librae’s nails drum harder against the wooden filler in the stitching of her armchair and Isaac’s gaze flits more frequently between focal points. Finnick still hasn’t arrived back from whatever event he’s at.

“Ubi est ille ait...” Mags mutters to herself, her eyes set on the elevator.
“He won’t be long,” Ron reassures. “He has to be here, they won’t keep him; they’ll want to watch it too.”

5 minutes to 7. Aspen’s bedtime is seven-thirty, but she’s allowed to stay up later during the Games because they’re ‘special’. I wonder if Trent still tells her they’re special when they’re the place I will most likely die.

Just as the blaring theme tune of Caesar’s show starts up a breathless Finnick barrels in, Constantine and Ardor in tow.

“Am I late?” he asks, slinging his jacket on to the back of a chair. Constantine scoffs and picks it up after him, refolding it and hanging it carefully on a hook on the wall.

“No, sit down and existo quies,” Mags tells him, not tearing her eyes from the screen.

“Of course, mother dearest.”

That earns him a somewhat withdrawn slap across the arm as he passes that doesn’t create the cracking noise which that kind of contact would, if implemented properly. The only empty seat is the space next to me, widened by Librae pulling me closer to her as I sat down. She’s now let go of my hand, instead resorting to twiddling her thumbs in the nook of her crossed legs. It allows me to reposition into the empty space left by Finnick, and the loss of contact with Librae leaves the edge of my leg cold. Constantine remains standing, the sharp heel of her shoe creating a soft click against the wooden panelling as it taps.

Caesar Flickerman’s colour scheme this year is a hue similar to that of tangerines, the bright orange making his hair appear as if it’s on fire. It’s prettier than last year’s sickly yellow, made so bright by the resolution on TV screens that my mother had to crush some of the dried butterbur bought from the apothecary for headaches during the interviews. He sings his greetings and doesn’t waste a second that could be used to express his ‘utter excitement’ at this year’s ‘seemingly promising line-up’! Had this been any other year; where I was simply a spectator at home, another part of the body of people who were lucky enough to have the odds in their favour, I wouldn’t have felt anything by his words. The difference is, the odds weren’t, (aren’t,) in my favour, and his words make my stomach churn.

Nobody says a word; if the TV wasn’t here even a hitched breath could burst an eardrum.

Seraphina turns the volume up, sighing about the poor audio quality. It’s ironic, maybe, considering all I can hear is every decibel that erupts from the speakers—so much so that it almost begins to drown out my anxiety. Almost.

“Don’t bite all of your nails off honey,” Finnick murmurs into my ear, pulling my attention away from the overview of Platinum and Taaffeite. “Never know when you might need them.”

“I’m hoping it won’t get to the point where my nails are all I have left,” I whisper back, our words silent to anybody else who isn’t a finger’s length away.

“Whoa, don’t drag nails, those things are brutal.” The joking is apparent, but so is the causticness that laces his words. Of all traits, a cynic is something I’d pin near the bottom of Finnick’s list, but when have I ever been one to assume correctly?

“District 1’s Platinum; lovely name, with a score of...” Caesar drawls. I can hear the same drum beat in my ears that I heard before my name was called, the augmenting anticipation generating harder snare hits with every tense breath my lungs command I take. “7!”

Ron hisses slightly, his wince shadowed slightly by his hat. District 1 Tributes, especially volunteers, rarely score less than an 8.

“That’s low...” Constantine asserts, dragging one of her long bejewelled nails over her chin.

“One more to rule out, hopefully.” Isaac notes, hanging his legs over the arm of his chair, responded to by Seraphina’s reproachful sigh.

“And Taaffeite, our other District 1 volunteer,” Caesar continues. “With a score of... 9!”

Finnick mutters something along the lines of ‘that’s more like it’. Librae slaps his knee.

“Lillith from District 2, one part of this year’s twin pair, with a score of... 10!”

Ardor weaves around the side of the room, sliding along the gap between the chair and wall to place a light hand on my shoulder.

“And our other District 2 twin, Luscious, with a score of... 11!”
From across the room I’m sure I hear Isaac smirk.

The boy and girl from District 3 earn a 4 and 5, respectively, but their faces and scores are near lost in translation within my ears. The knots in my stomach weave nets that threaten to consume my entire body, ensnaring and tightening at my abdomen. I can feel half-moon indents being carved into my clenched palms. Ardor’s grip on my shoulder increases marginally, not too hard to stop being reassuring, as Librae clutches at my closed fist.

“Ah, now to District 4!” Caesar grins, his words moving too slowly, sounding too relaxed. “We have Annie, with a score of…” Every scratch of his nails on the envelope as it unfolds lasts an eternity and increases my heartbeat’s speed to more than what I thought was capable. Snare drums in my ears become wildly crashing cymbals.

“9!” It takes a second for me to register my score, to register anything. I don’t even notice Librae squeal and hug my shoulders until my head is pushed into her neck. The drums stop and everything goes silent, the anticlimax slashing the ropes around my stomach into nothing more than frayed fibres. I’m smiling, something that could pass as shaky laughter passing through my lips. Ardor rubs my head, fingers ghosting so as not to muss the curls that sit relatively untangled. Mags moves faster from her chair than I’ve ever seen, cupping my cheeks and calling me a *callidus puella*, the lines around her eyes deepening as she smiles. The excitement is short lived however, as Isaac’s name is announced.

“And District 4’s Isaac, our young volunteer, with a score of… 9!” Somebody cheers and everybody’s faces light up. “Ooh, isn’t this exciting!” Seraphina trills. “I just can’t wait for the Games to begin!” Ron rolls his eyes upward from behind her back, but his content smile remains in place. The scores for both Tributes haven’t been this high in years, maybe, (maybe), we might stand a real chance this year.

(Isaac might stand a real chance this year.)

Once the Scoring announcement ends, Mags orders deserts for us all. Constantine frets about outfits for tomorrow’s interviews and resorts to sketching on a napkin, occasionally flashing her work to Ardor. The boy from 7 scored an 8, the angry girl from 10 a 7. I unsuccessfully try to ignore the pang in my chest as little Pocan is scored a 2. The atmosphere has lifted considerably; people smile more frequently, laugh at bad jokes. Finnick doesn’t have to disappear for a party tonight either, which seems to relieve him greatly. Out of context, we aren’t a group of Victors, Tributes, Stylists and Escorts trying to socialise the impending events out of our mind—we’re just a group of people, a somewhat mess of personalities, revelling in a free night wherein nobody is obligated to do or say anything, where we can all just sit and enjoy a few hours without considerable strain to the best of our abilities. The conversations are still slightly forced and overtly civil, with no information given that could threaten to expose anybody’s plans or scheming as if we’re all working with and against each other, but it’s better than a cool silence.

Constantine and Ardor leave first, insisting on altering and changing our interview outfits to fit our scores better. They either under or over-estimated us, I’m not sure I’d like to know which. Our tokens had to be taken for approval by them both, leaving my neck feeling exposed yet constricted without the comfort of Aspen’s craft work around it. Constantine’s heels tap against the floor as they leave, the towering platforms propelling her height up several inches to reach above Finnick’s. It’s beyond me how she walks in them, how anybody could walk in them. Maybe I’ll
learn tomorrow, if fate decides to spare me a broken ankle. "Those two work way too hard," Finnick notes, maybe to himself, since nobody is in comfortable conversational reach of him. "Why do they?" I find myself asking from a few metres away. "Because they need to make an impression. How often do newbies get assigned to a popular District?"

Never is the answer. New stylists start in lower Districts and get promoted through ranks if they work well, but they never start in a District as popular in the Capitol as ours, especially when Finnick Odair is involved. "Then how-?"

My enquiry is cut off as he slides toward me, a devilish smile gracing his features. "Honey, Finnick Odair always gets what he wants."

Eventually it's Seraphina who shoos Isaac and I to bed, claiming we must be ready for a busy day tomorrow. We check the TV again before leaving to see Isaac's odds have risen to 8/1, mine stay put at 9. Platinum's have plummeted down to a 12/1 after the release of Training Scores and despite know how well she can brandish a sword, the lack of trust from the betting agents in the Capitol is a hollow relief. But still the odds are nothing but that-- odds. This may be the first instance where they are in my favour.

I should be concerned at how quickly my body has accepted defeat and fallen into a routine of running on an empty tank, the lack of sleep being the gasoline that is so sought after, but so scarce in measure. I should be concerned at how once fatigue buries pebbles in my pockets and drags me under I'm arisen by cold sweats and a clenching in my stomach that's been underling constantly, the feeling of a boat falling off the top of a broken wave into what could well be an abyss, the sensation of your stomach knotting around itself until it's little more than a cluster so tense it could cut steel. I should be concerned, but I'm not.

Yes I am, of course I am, I just can't afford to be.

I sleep somewhat, regardless of how restless it is. It donates a sufficient amount of energy to my blood flow to last me through the day and night; that's what's important. However it would be helpful if a soft prodding at the back of my mind stopped reminding me that the Hunger Games start tomorrow every time a take a breath. I'm awake when Seraphina raps on the door, but not dressed nor out of bed as I was yesterday. This is recluse Annie, the Annie trying to compose herself quietly, sophisticatedly, by sitting cross legged in the centre of the bed, mummified by a thick duvet. Recluse Annie hasn't come out since her father died.

(Seraphina's sing-song prompts me to move after a short while. I don't shower on instruction by Ardor, who promised that he would clean me up later, properly. There are no clothes out this morning, just an array of bright silks and satins packed neatly into a dresser. Something nags at me, telling me that Seraphina will no doubt have me wearing all kinds of outfits in Interview practice, and maybe an elaborate blouse that takes minutes to get on isn't the most practical of choices. There are alternatives, no less flashy but simpler in build, which agree far better with my lack of knowledge on Capitol clothing than the other items in the dresser.

Breakfast is a little rushed, not drawn out as yesterday's had been. Seraphina's schedule has come into strict play, so much so that even breathing out of line would earn a disapproving scowl, or even a frustrated sigh. Isaac exploits this to the best of his ability, spending only just too long on one thing but not enough time on another, purposefully keeping her temper wavering. One thing I'm confident I can commend her for is her composure, it's not come close to breaking once, despite nearly everybody doing the opposite of what she instructs.
I'm assigned to learn presentation and demeanour with Librae, Finnick and Seraphina for the first half of the day. I'm yet to know how four hours of space can be filled with posture and eye contact coaching, and something about the slightly dimmed lights in Librae's eyes suggests that maybe it can't. The huge sequin-studded ballgown Seraphina has Avoxes haul out for me to wear looks as if it could suffocate a small family; meshing, fringing and petticoats stacking profusely on top of one another to increase the width of the skirt by several dozen inches. Librae has to help me put it on and tie the corset, the sudden restriction of my chest's movement tricking my lungs into thinking they need to breathe faster. It adds tonnes to my weight, causing me to trip and fly forward just walking on bare feet with only Finnick's hand preventing my face from colliding with the carpet. The posture in my back is deemed as good naturally, but my shoulders and chin are the source of Seraphina's fussing, to the point where she assigns Finnick to keep watch of my chin and Librae my shoulders as she has me walk laps of the room, ordering them to manually lift them when my body allows them to fall. By the time the first hour is up the three of us are bored senseless-- even Librae has to stifle a yawn. It isn't until Seraphina presents a pair of heeled shoes that their faces light up.

"Ah, my favourite," Finnick grins, rubbing his hands together. "Ever worn these unbalanced, torturous death-

"-Finnick." Librae warns, trying and failing to repress a smile. "They're not that bad honey, it just takes practice!"

"Well that 'practice' time is running out!" Seraphina reminds us curtly, pacing impatient circles around me as I slide on the shoes, fighting to not loose them within the dress' skirt. Whilst sat on an Ottoman they're no more uncomfortable than shifting my feet on to their tiptoes, but the harsh reality of never wearing anything with a heel of more than one inch, let alone 6, truly hits when I attempt to stand up. The muscles in my legs tremble at the unfamiliar weight distribution, making my knees lock underneath me. Once I'm steadied I try to move, but trip, deciding to fall forwards onto my elbows with a small yelp instead of sideways onto what could've been a broken ankle. Finnick and Librae erupt into fitful giggles so strong that I nearly tug Librae down when she tries to help me up.

"You're like a little fawn!" Finnick remarks once his laughter has ceased. I end up stuck somewhere between joining in with their amusement and glaring, the two reactions confusing themselves in bids to be dominant. However it's disappointment that takes over when I go to reach for my necklace to find it's still not there.

It takes a while for me to walk smoothly, but I manage to do three laps of the room in the heels with books on my head after countless foul calls from Seraphina. They all teach me when to make eye contact, Finnick instructs on what gestures to make, when and how to make them and Librae perfects the intervals between smiles and reactions that the audiences will like. The 4 hours pass quickly despite the struggles, the prospect of a fake interview with Mags and Ron sparking a longing to stay sat straight in a dress and pretty shoes, listening and nodding, maybe walking on occasion.

The switch-over with Isaac greets me with a slightly worn-out but still chirpy Mags and Ron, sat at their usual centre places at the dining table. Being free of the ballgown and heels has alleviated my entire upper body of weight, once again redistributing my balance out to what it usually is. "Hello amare," Mags smiles, exposing the gap between her two front teeth. "How was presentation?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Did she have you in that blue dress and the shoes?" Ron asks amusedly, beckoning to the chair opposite them. I nod as I sit down and Mags tuts, her smile unmoving.

"We won't be doing anything like that, we're going to make sure that you know the answer to any question Caesar would ever think to ask."

"Are there a lot?" I ask, panic threatening to emerge with the possibility of needing to memorise a mental script.

"Millions," Ron corrects. "But for you, not many. You'll be fine."
"You chose well, *callidus puella*. You don't need to act much, just amplify everything so the Capitol likes it. This is for sponsors."

At least if I die, the only Annie being erased from their memories within days will be the Capitolised one.

I'm asked questions in a rotation by Ron and Mags until I can immediately give a suitable answer for anything they ask me. Anything that puts home in a rank above the Capitol is blacklisted, along with more than essential family information, a lack of desire to be in the Games and any kind of sarcastic messaging. I'm not to mention that Penny and I went to the beach the morning of the Reaping as a tradition, or tell Caesar I'm scared. I'm not to gloat and I'm not to give even a slither of a hint on how I earned my Training Score. My job once in the Games is to be the surprise, according to Mags. Nobody is to know how I achieved a high score until the Games begin; the mystery attracts more sponsors.

Ardor and Constantine arrive to pick us up just before interview coaching ends. Constantine disappears to fetch Isaac and Ardor waits patiently at the edge of the room, careful not to lean against the wall behind him. The intricate patterns of his shirt clash starkly with it, the printed silk reaching just below his knees. Despite his height and bold appearance, he blends in smoothly with the surroundings, his presence fading before long.

Mags recalls the basic steps of my conversational replies again, having me repeat them at random, before she lets us go with a departing pat of the hand and a soft 'donec later'.

Ardor takes me to his studio instead of Constantine's, noting apologetically of the requirement for Stylists and Tributes to remain separate for the Interviews. His studio is much closer to what I expected a Stylist's workspace to look like than Constantine's. That, or it's just less organised.

Different fabrics are slung over rails, hung on wall hooks or half fed through multiple sewing machines littered around the room. A hazy, deep amber light fixed to the ceiling tints everything a soft topaz colour; the tone compliments the rich browns, reds and oranges of the decorations in the room, which match the colours of Ardor's shirt.

"Okay," he starts, rubbing his hands together. "We weren't sure what to expect of you and your 'personality', you could say, until we were told yesterday and we could make adjustments, right?"

The silver dye in his hair glimmers under the light he moves across, sweeping the room's width to a mannequin covered by a white cotton sheet that just brushes the dark wooden floor panels beneath it.

"Ready?" he asks softly, the gems in both corners of his eyes sparkling with his irises.

"Definitely."

He grips the edges of the sheet and pulls it swiftly from the mannequin, letting it float to his feet. Beneath it is a dress made of a tightly wrapped desaturated teal silk, the layers rippling over one another like breaking waves. Pale pink millinery flowers shaped like blossoms emerge from one side of the neckline, their density growing as they reach the other side, creating an overspill of flowers to silk. The bodice is cut off at the waist by a skirt of sheer pleated white material, layered until it reaches opacity, then puffed outwards to emphasise the difference in fits between a tight top and a tulle skirt. A silk bow in the same colour as the bodice cascades down the back of the dress, the tails ending at the bottom of the skirt.

"It's beautiful," I whisper. I don't need to try lying either, this isn't a typical dress worn by a usual Capitol citizen, the kinds of outfits given to people whose personalities will get lost in the blur of Tributes and their need to be recognised. This is the dress of someone soft but bold, a mystery, this 'sweetheart' that has somehow become my embodiment. One thing's sure, they really want me to be remembered. It's lucky, without Ardor's talents, or Mags' and Ron's logic, I'd be lost under a sea of overwhelming self-reliance.

(And yet you complain about the odds not being in your favour, don't you?)

"Let's get it on, check sizing and things." Ardor smiles, taking my clothes to an empty space on top of a dresser and aiding me in lifting the dress over my head as he guides me to a mirror. It
moulds itself faultlessly to my body, not one inch disproportioned. The length of the skirt ending at my mid-shins adds an illusion of several inches of gained height to my small frame, and that's sans any shoes. Ardor steps back and analyses his work, frowning critically at anything he could even try to find fault in. On discovering his attempts of detracting are unsuccessful, he nods once to himself and fetches a small box from his work desk. Inside of it is my necklace, Aspen's necklace, laid carefully out on a quilted cushion. However the rope it was strung on is gone, along with several of the sea glass pieces, replaced with a length of string so fragile looking a simple tug could rip it.

"They almost took it because of the glass and the rope," Ardor tells me, hooking the newly added clasps together around the back of my neck. "He did a lot of bargaining to let you keep it."

"He?" I ask, letting my shoulders untense as the amenity of the little comforts from home rest against my chest.

"Finnick," he explains, reaching for the makeup lined up neatly on a vanity. "He spoke to them today, apparently."

I try to work out why Finnick would've made and effort to let me keep my token as Ardor does my makeup. Sometimes he seems so disinterested in what's happening that he could well be kidnapped and wouldn't notice, others he invests all of his energy into working at the rate Librae, Mags and Ron do. It's not the best time for mixed signals, but he has every right to do whatever he wishes-- it isn't every day a 14 year old wins the Games. Ardor curls my hair with a hot rod that nearly burns my ears when it gets close to them, the pristine ringlets falling over my shoulder look like what my mother creates with her pins. When I'm presented in front of a mirror for the final time I couldn't look any more different to what I did for the Parade. Everything is soft and pink on my face, no harsh shadowing or dark eyes, with the colours matching the flowers on my dress. I can stand far easier in the heels on these shoes, their height nearly as large as the ones Seraphina had me parade in earlier.

"Look at you," Ardor smiles. "You look lovely."

"I feel lovely. Thank you, so much."

"You're welcome darling. Shall we go and find the others?"

Isaac's suit is the same dark inky blue as the sea at night, single threads of silver intertwining with the fabric making it look like it's shining. Constantine instructs us to look for them both and the other Mentors in the audience and to speak to them, instead of the thousands of other people watching from below the stage set up in front of the Training Centre. We're both ushered to the waiting area behind the stage where we'll wait until it's our turn to be called up. To say the set-up is elaborate is an understatement-- wherever there isn't a camera, there's a vast glamorous prop, all setting the scene for Caesar. The tangerine suit and hair haven't changed since yesterday as he introduces himself over the roar of the Capitol crowds. TV coverage could never fully portray how many people really watch you. The same nerve-triggered laughter from the Parades begins to scratch at my throat, only numbed when I concentrate hard enough on the preview screen we're given to watch the show on. Attendants and producers pace up and down the line of Tributes, checking and re-checking that we're all in order, all here and all on schedule. The off-screen worker amount is more than I could've even pondered upon before coming to the Capitol. Platinum plays on sex-appeal, constantly giggling and hiking her frilly dress slightly higher every time she answers a question. Taaffeite is much more popular with the crowds, occasionally making a witty joke and not removing a smirk from his face the entire interview. His golden suit is blinding in the stage lights, but doesn't distract from the way he manages to become the person every audience member wants to be friends with within minutes; haughty, but likeable. Lillith plays an entirely different kind of sex-appeal to Platinum in a long black dress that slits entirely up one side. She acts extremely seductive, yet hauntingly dangerous, at points even stumping Caesar.

"So, Lillith, you and your twin brother are here together this year!" Caesar says excitedly, the crowds screeching their approval. "Do you think one of you might win?"

"Oh, Caesar," she smiles alluringly, leaning over her chair towards him. "It isn't a 'might', we will win."

After that, the crowds completely loose all composure; screaming, cheering, clapping for her.
She's captivated them completely with a cross between the safe provocative route and the ruthless, intimidating killer persona. Luscious' angle is far more arrogant and self assured, but brute-like all the same. My focus isn't undivided enough to properly hear what Caesar asks him, but his reply sticks firmly to my mind when he's asked about winning.

"I have no doubt that me or Lillith will win. Everybody else in that Arena is just a small obstacle."

The District 3 Tributes both play on their academic abilities, their facades not as bold as 1 or 2's, possibly not as memorable, but they both know exactly what they're talking about. A pool of anxiety has slowly been filling since the cameras began rolling, the inescapable inevitability of my interview coming in just minutes threatening to make the pool spill over. Just as the boy from 3 goes to enter the stage, Librae quickly rounds the corner, tailed closely by Finnick.

"Ah you're here!" She sighs gratefully, her breathing heavy. "Okay we're what, five rows, four? -" "Six rows back," Finnick confirms.

"Six, and just look out for us, we'll cheer and... Ooh Annie, honey, that dress is so beautiful! Right, okay, just now we need to-" "Remember what you learned today," Finnick finishes before Librae can switch the topic over again.

"Right, eye-contact, what you need to say. You'll both be fine! We'll all cheer for you! Won't we, Finnick?"

"I'll cheer loudest of them all," he grins. A glance at the TV screen is a reminder that the boy from 3's interview is swiftly ending. "We need to go. Good luck."

Isaac doesn't say anything, he hasn't since we arrived, so when the attendants call on me I enter the stage in silence.

The combination of cheering and stage lights could render anybody both death and blind. The lights shine directly into my eyes and cause me to flinch, so I release the pent up laughter in my stomach, the kind that the Capitol thinks is genuine. Caesar kisses my hand and helps me into the chair next to him. His face is far too youthful for his age, which while unnerving, doesn't dampen his grin.

"Good evening, Annie! How are you?"

Shred your vocal chords if it means you form words, don't ruin it now.

"I'm fine, thank you. Although the lights may have temporarily blinded me," I answer. My voice is projected so loudly around me that I could whisper and it would be heard miles away. At least it means I can focus on sounding happy rather than audible. Caesar laughs heartily, giving me an opportunity to scan the crowd for a familiar face. It takes a few seconds to locate the antenna-like headpiece belonging to Seraphina protruding above the crowd, but a general location means I can meet their eyes later, if I need to.

"Oh, aren't they a pest!" he laughs, turning toward his audience. "I might need to start wearing sunglasses soon for protection, how about that?!"

They laugh and cheer their approval and I ensure to laugh along with it. Play the part. Once the noise dies down, he resumes the conversation.

"So, Annie, what do you think of the Capitol?"

"Oh, well, it's just magnificent," I begin, sparing no exaggeration in my awe-struck tone. "The buildings and the lights and the city are so surreal, not to mention the lovely people too," The audience likes that, they whoop and clap and I laugh again, my cheeks already beginning to strain under an unmoving smile.

"What a sweetheart you are!" he coos, looking to the audience for confirmation. I search for someone's eye and find Mags between a gap of two heads. She nods excitedly, boosting my courage up through levels.

"Now... On to the real questions," he grins. I make my smile inviting, encouraging. This Annie is eager to be asked real questions. "You have been marked as somebody to watch in these Games,
what do you think your chances are?"
"I think people may underestimate me; and that's okay," I titter, placing my hands in my lap as Librae instructed and turning my gaze back towards Caesar. "It means I can surprise them."
The crowd and Caesar make an excited 'ooh' at that, so I laugh. Mechanics settle in quickly when thousands of people are watching.
"I cannot wait!" he exclaims. "You also scored a 9 in Training, a very impressive score I must say,"
"Oh, don't flatter me,"
"Haha! I'm only saying what we're all thinking!" he guffaws. "Can we get a hint on how you got that?"
"I'd love to tell you, to tell you all," I pout to a few heads near the front of the crowd. "But it would ruin the surprise!"
"Of course! Of course! Speaking of surprises, this outfit is very pretty! Can we get a closer look?"
"Of course you can!" I beam, rising from the chair and twirling before Caesar can instruct me.
There's not one dress wearing Tribute who has been spared of the request. The clapping and cheering renders me momentarily deaf again as Caesar remarks on how talented our new Stylists are.
"Ardor and Constantine, they're both fantastic," I gush, scanning for Ardor's eye in the audience. "And extremely talented, I'm so fortunate to have been given the opportunity to have this experience!"
Of course, it's such an exquisite way to risk your life.
"Very fortunate indeed," Caesar agrees. "Unfortunately, however, we're running out of time, so I have one more question for you, lovely Annie: what do you think is your most valuable asset when the Games start?"
Mags was right when she said he'd ask this, but it takes just a millisecond too long for me to rake through my memory for the answer.
"My logic and maturity."
"Very important values indeed! Well, it has been an absolute pleasure speaking with you Annie, and I hope, we all hope, to see you back here very soon! Thank you for speaking with us!"
"Thank you for having me!" I reply, raising from my chair. My mic has been turned off so the audience can only see me mouth my 'thank you so much' paired with my hands over my heart.
The applause could cause earthquakes, not ceasing until my final kiss has been blown and I'm off the stage, stumbling down the steps in the heeled shoes.
The assistants remove my mic and fix it to Isaac, who gives me a reassuring nod before heading on stage. I let out a contained breath, collapsing into the side of the wall to watch Isaac. He pulls off mystery and danger incredibly well, always leaving a question slightly unanswered but doing it well enough that nobody realises until he's answering the next. Caesar repeats his question for me about my chances and Isaac smirks.
"These other Tributes, they don't scare me-- and that scares them."
"Fearlessness will never be bad! Now, you're only 15, and some people have been calling you the next Finnick Odair!" Caesar says. The TV coverage flicks to Finnick in the audience for the umpteenth time, showing him smiling curiously up at the stage. The audience screams louder than ever at the mention of his name so that even Isaac winces slightly.
"Ah, Caesar..." he drawls, leaning back into the chair. "If I'm going to be like anybody, it will be someone much better than Finnick."
The camera switches again to Finnick now laughing, arching an eyebrow challengingly at the camera with a confident grin. Isaac's interview passes with ease, and we're ushered away the second he leaves the stage.

Everybody meets us just as we go to enter the Training Centre, our paths colliding at the entrance.
"Ooh honey you were fantastic!" Librae squeals, hugging me tightly. "We've got this completely, we're gonna do it!"
"Calm down my statera, you'll overwhelm the poor girl," Mags tuts, wrapping a gentle arm
around me. "Well done amare, you did great."
"Nice one, princess," Finnick grins. "You watch it, you'll end up stealing my title of Nation's Sweetheart."

After the interview reruns are over we all vacate to our rooms near immediately. I shower away all of my makeup and erase any hopes of me sleeping tonight. The temporary high of the Interviews had made me forget that in mere hours the Hunger Games will start. I watch the parades in the street from my window, the bright colours blurring in the distance and crowds. I run my necklace's conch over my lips, whispering silent prayers to nothing but a silent room. I relent and become sick of the nervousness eventually, tricking myself that watching minutes tick by on a clock will distract me enough to help me sleep.

The red digital numbers flicker slowly upwards, spending eternities to just pass ten minutes. I sit and wait for the fated number to arrive, the four shapes contorting again to go up another hour. The display goes black for a moment, then reappears, the digits 00:00 appearing in mockingly large sizes, the red light making the space above my eyebrows hurt.

Today is the day of the 70th Hunger Games.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

they teach you how to swim, then throw you in the deep end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The nausea won't go away and on my third trip the bathroom I relent and let myself cry. Not much, but enough to drain my eyes so they don't feel like they'll overflow any more. I can't show myself that I'm weak now. I'm more than aware that I am, and that a real Tribute, a real Victor, wouldn't be heaving over a toilet in hopes of some kind of relief through sickness only to find the acid erupts from their eyes instead. Time moves slowly, yet miles too fast, disguised by the ceiling lamps illuminating both the bedroom and bathroom with the warming lie of golden sunlight. I wash the tears from my face with icy water, praying it can get rid of this inescapable self-pity. Never have I seen a wild thing pity itself, the fish that lurk in the shallows won't commiserate when one of them gets speared, nor will the fish speared swim in melancholy instead of the water it's been robbed from. That's what we're meant to be- wild things that fight and kill for survival. We are no more civilised than the animals we hunt upon.

On the way to the bathroom I had swung the bedroom door open for non-existent ventilation. Now on passing it the artificial light spills in to the dark hallway, casting shadows and creating light in the strangest of places. The elevator rings as my hands clasp the edges of the dresser, making my body jolt slightly in surprise. Peering around the door frame I see the tall, wide silhouette of Finnick shuffling down the hall. "Can't sleep?" his sudden whisper is loud from the other side of the long stretch of rooms. I internally curse myself for not ignoring it and going to bed again, avoiding the interaction with one of the four people partly responsible for my life from tomorrow. (Today) "In my dreams," I mutter slightly. He smirks and passes the door of his room to stand outside mine instead, the light beams only just reaching his face. He looks exhausted in ways I can't decipher and the faint scent of alcohol becomes detectable with his presence. "I have some sleeping pills, if you want them?" He offers, voice still hushed. "It's okay, thank you for the offer, though." I decline, keeping my head toward the floor. Suddenly remembering Aspen's necklace I snap my head upwards, before he can walk away. "Thank you for my token too, you didn't have to do that." Something in his expression shifts and becomes more uncomfortable, displaced. "It's nothing, everyone deserves a token." he says courteously. "Try to get some sleep, big day tomorrow." His last words mimic Seraphina's heavy Capitol accent slightly, detaching most of the compassion from them. He gives me a small nod and slight smile before he backs into his own room, disappearing behind the ajar door and leaving me alone again.

I dream that this is all just that-- a dream. I wake on the morning of the Reaping with Aspen in my bed again, shaken from the graphic images my mind had generated of me before the Games, and how detailed they all were. Aspen gives me the same necklace, we repeat the same process, but a girl named Marissa is Reaped and we go about our day as normal. Trent, Aspen and I all go to Meredith at the bakery, waiting on the step outside until she returns to reopen it. We buy salted caramel muffins and take them home, then spend the rest of the day and evening at the beach. Our mother comes with us, the frown indent between her eyes elevated slightly in knowing we're all
safe until next year. When the Games start I let Penny braid my hair instead of watching the TV, allowing her to ignore every time a Tribute is killed. On the night the Games end, there’s a full moon.

When I jerk awake I don't even realise that I was manipulating myself. I pat the bed down in search for Penny but only find a fur-lined cushion which gets flung at the wall with an exasperated hiss that soon becomes silent, desperate sobs. Through clouded eyes I make out 4AM on the clock. Two hours left. Watching the sun spill over the tops of buildings provides no relief. Right now, I crave the warm embrace of the ocean at sundown, the salt that stings your eyes and the beautiful, otherworldly silence created by the rippling waves above. Maybe it's because that feeling of suffocation is exhilarating, the sensation of hollowing lungs dropping with a lack of oxygen only to be refilled with a gasp as the surface is broken proves you're alive. Gasping breaths of cold, recycled air being mechanically pumped by ventilation fans does the opposite. The minute crack in the window does little in the way of replacing the room's capacity with natural substance but provides a cool breeze that washes over my face as I sit beneath it. The oranges and lilacs that emerge in the sun's wake are hazy, bled haphazardly into the fibres of the clouds that dot the perimeters of the horizon.

Ardor's soft knock on the door drags me out of my detachment, and no matter how much my desire to ask him to go away and leave me here overwhelms me, I still invite him in. He leaves a robe at the end of the bed for me to change into. From there I'll be taken to a hovercraft on the roof which will transport me, and all 23 other Tributes, to the Launch Rooms, where we'll get a final send-off before we become clowns trapped inside a glass castle. I linger at the window for a minute, savouring the natural sky and the sun, which even my family can see miles away, for maybe the last time. When I do try to slide the robe over my shoulders my fingers tremble, despite my attempts to tense and steady them. Frustration and agitation build and are only heightened by the abrasive white material scratching against my skin. I avoid the bathroom: partly because I'd probably never come out, and partly because I'm more than aware that I have nothing to exile from my stomach-- making any efforts to actually be sick futile, regardless of how nauseous I am.

Ardor is waiting patiently outside the door as I edge it open, his metallic hair concealed by a flower-shaped turban. He takes my hand carefully, reassuringly, after properly tying the waist sash on the robe so it holds no risk of coming undone. This is all a first for him too, and unlike other Stylists, he's still so young, maybe only slightly older than my brother. He leads me gently down the halls and into the elevator headed to the roof. Similarity in age aside, he reminds me of Trent in how reserved yet silently soothing he is. Having a resemblance of Trent in Ardor's personality is relieving, to say the least. Trent's last words to me may have been lost, but Ardor's won't be. The hovercraft is monotonous and grey scaled. White lights are plastered in bars along the ceiling and meshed dark metal flooring is cold beneath my bare feet. There are benches around the perimeter underneath sealed windows that make a view of the Arena prior to the Games impossible. I twirl Aspen's necklace around my finger until it strangles the blood vessels so it starts to glow a deep red, which is when I release it and repeat the process. I'm exhausted already, emotional fatigue weighting my mind like an anchor. I jump when a stern woman rounds the corner, materialising seemingly out of nowhere. The long, glinting needle in her fist prompts me to shuffle along the bench to get as far away from her, and her needle, as possible. However the closer she gets, the less space I have to back into, and I end up caught flinching in a corner.

"This is your tracker. Stay still." She orders coolly. I feel the rings on Ardor's fingers scrape my palms as he takes my hand again, letting me clutch it until the piercing sensation and flood of a cold, foreign object in my forearm subsides. It feels intrusive under my skin, and my fingers keep subconsciously ghosting over it, as if it will be clawed out if I wish hard enough.

(Well wishing never works well. Look where it got you.)

I struggle to stomach any of the meal presented to me, however I drain the water provided in
seconds, cherishing the return of some kind of moisture to my mouth which can start to tackle the sandpaper coating my tongue. Once the glass is empty I pick at what I know to be filling; the small sprinklings of seeds and nuts atop of everything, the bread on the edge of the plate. However once they touch my mouth it fills with saliva and threatens to repel everything I'm trying to consume, warded away only by my self-targeted threats. I begin to feel dizzy under the blacked out windows as the hovercraft descends, with no view to reassure my mind that I am actually moving, not being poisoned or tricked. The bench provides some support, but I sway nonetheless, counting every inhale and exhale until my lungs feel as if they can stand alone. Ardor makes sure to keep a steady grip of my hand as I'm guided to the Launch Rooms, keeping my steps continuous as I trip over my own feet and the slick linoleum flooring that coats the endless labyrinthine passageways to my designated area. My father would always jokingly call these rooms backstage, back scaena, the place where the animals would be readied before the circus begins. Only now do I truly understand what he always meant by circus sortitio.

"Okay darling," he breathes, clasping my other hand and halting me. The clamminess of my palms is removing the coldness from his ring bands, making them slip against my hands. My throat starts constricting and the same dampness from the Reaping dots my eyes, taunting me. "Hey, no time for tears, okay? You're strong. Take a shower and I'll get your things ready."

The bathroom is white and clinical, not the same luxurious interior of the one in the Training Centre, and nothing but water comes from the shower's head-- no sickly perfumes that block the top of the nasal passage and remain there for hours. Water becomes stinging shards of hot-flashes that feign being cold while they mercilessly attack every inch of skin they can reach, and there's no disguising tears as it. Their burn is one of acidity; cruel, unstoppable, desirous flowing of salt water that isn't sweet like the sea. The towel left on a warming rack compresses my goosebumps back underneath my skin and collects droplets from the ends of my hair. Ardor helps me into my Tribute outfit, the exposure of my naked body completely desensitised to me. The shirt is thin and cottony, dyed a pale, murky blue and fits tightly down to my wrists. Ardor slips a hooded jacket on over the top with sleeves pinned up at the elbows by small metal buttons. The material in some places slightly resembles reptilian scales, separated and divided into irregular shapes of different sizes and tinted muddy green. The pants are thin, made of some kind of scratchy black nylon that makes ripping noises as Ardor's nail extensions pass over it. Over thick socks is a pair of sandy leather boots, fixed only by a single, belted strap around the ankle.

"This is all very multi-terrain," Ardor murmurs. "The jacket's waterproof in places, but that material is used to deflect nearly anything-- it's resistant to friction, heat and water. Water seems your best bet, but you could be climbing a bit too. Those pinned up sleeves are strange, it might be aesthetic, but I'd guess climate and humidity change. Not enough for you to need anything thermal, just enough for it to be discomforting, right?"

He's almost completely talking to himself, drying my hair as he goes, but I nod along anyway. All of his descriptions swirl around and formulate all kinds of Arenas in my mind; a mountain erupting from the sea, a rainforest, a huge volcanic island. All are unrealistic, but possible.

"Do you want your hair up, darling?"

"No thank you," I reply near immediately. One thing I can't get rid of is the comfort of hair shielding the edges of my face.

"Are you sure? You never know when you may need a tie."

Once, about 5 years ago, a girl went in with her hair down and it began acid raining. She had nothing to tie her hair back with and the rainwater stuck in her hair even once she found shelter, eventually ending up burning the flesh of her neck, shoulders and parts of her face off.

"Can you do it so there's still some around my face?"

"Of course, I'll just put in a small braid here."

His fingers weave through my hair, braiding two sections at the sides of my skull and pulling them backwards, securing them at the nape of my neck.

"You make sure you look after yourself," he instructs gently. "And win so you can make whoever gave you that pretty necklace proud."

Tears start to well again as he spins me to face him, dark eyes swirling with determination yet the
Tears start to well again as he spins me to face him, dark eyes swirling with determination yet the compassion that people working in the Games shouldn’t have, if they know what’s good for them. A shrill buzz notifies us that we have 60 seconds to launch. One single minute until I’m thrown into the circus, ready to perform. Dread knocks the wind from me and I have to gasp to regain my breath.

"Don't panic now, darling, you’ve got this."
"Thank you so much, for everything."
I whisper.

Ardor smiles, the silver dipped tips of his teeth gleaming.
"It's been my pleasure," he says, rubbing a hand up and down my arm whilst avoiding the tracker.

30 seconds.

"The Arena is yours, don't doubt yourself. All the others wished good luck this morning, I will now. Good luck, darling."
"Thank you." Strangled is the best way to describe my voice, not finishing my thanks properly. All I can do is hope that Ardor knows how grateful I am, I'd kill to just repeat thank you one hundred times over. How ironic.

He directs me to an opened glass tube, the rubber soles of my boots gripping to a metal plate beneath me. I check the buckles are secure and lean downwards to stretch my legs out. When I glance up some kind of trigger releases and a glass panel begins to shut me in the cylindrical cage. The air suddenly becomes too thin to be substantial and my blatant fear is near tangible. Ardor mouths breathe at me and I try my hardest to comply, absorbing every particle of oxygen available in this claustrophobic tube. I place a hand on my heart for him and he returns it, his figure disappearing before my eyes as the darkness of the tube robs my sight of him and replaces it with nothing but pitch black darkness and an overwhelming desire to disappear, to anywhere but the tube.

A sudden gust of wind and introduction of light, natural daylight, turns my wish back on itself. I'd rather be in the tube, and stay in the tube for eternity. I'd rather be in the tube, and stay in the tube for eternity. I'd rather be in the tube, and stay in the tube for eternity. At least the Capitol is reliant for its lack of technical faults. Several times I blink rapidly, desperately, as I try to refocus my vision to accommodate the new lighting conditions so I can observe my death trap. The air is comfortable, not too warm but cool enough that the jacket is a welcomed edition. It is, however, breezy-- the gusts of wind send strands of my hair flying about around me. It's a bitter reminder of the sea gales from home, but this podium isn't a rock and the dry, grassy plain beneath me isn't the ocean.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," a sudden voice resounds around the entire area, filling all of our ears. "Let the Seventieth Annual Hunger Games begin!"

A countdown appears on the Cornucopia, reaching downwards from sixty. Sixty seconds isn't, will never be, long enough. There are indents in the grass that must reach waist-level caused by backpacks that'll be taken by those too scared to go to the Cornucopia. I'm one of them, but naive little Annie signed an agreement with four people much more dangerous than she is, and now if she doesn’t go to the Cornucopia, the bloodbath will come to her. To my left there is colossal, towering mound of rock that would pass as a small mountain outside of the Arena. There's a clump of forest next to it, separated by a gap of seemingly nothing that digs deep into the Arena past my eye's reach. Away from the pine forest there are different trees dotted more scarcely. I don't look to anywhere else, the countdown has suddenly reached 20. Breathe and concentrate. Everybody here is in different colours of shirt it seems, I spot Taaffeite's tall frame several podiums down, crouched ready to run. His shirt is a dark yellow. Breathe and concentrate.

10 year old Annie once won a beach race at the Summer Solstice festival, beating all the other 10 and 11 year old's there. 10 year old Annie got a cake as a prize for winning and a title as the fastest girl in her age division. 11 year old Annie came second to Lennie Crensdon and quit running races.
Now 17 year old Annie thinks 11 year old Annie was damn stupid, because 17 year old Annie is about to run for her life, and if she's not fast enough it certainly isn't Lennie Crensdon's fault.

Now the countdown has hit five seconds and I'm crouching, giving Aspen's necklace one more squeeze before I steady my heel, watch the seconds tick down and refusing to allow salt water to cloud my vision. Get to the Cornucopia, meet 1 and 2, you know what to do afterwards.

Breathe and concentrate.

**A gong thunders, wrecks havoc on my ears, and I'm running.**

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry about the cliffhanger! Next chapter switches to Finnick's POV, please let me know what you think!
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

pretty boys must be held to their chores.

Chapter Notes

Just a pre warning; although not graphic, there are heavy mentions of rape, non-con, prostitution, abuse and drug/alcohol use in this chapter as it's switching to Finnick's POV for the first time. If you find any of these triggering, I highly recommend not reading this chapter!
Also please don't hesitate to give me your opinions on my Finnick portrayal as I'm not massively familiar with writing him, so any feedback is massively appreciated! <3

Finnick

It starts like this:

There’s a fourteen year old boy who spends his every spare second in the water, letting the sun bake his skin bronze as waves lap comfortably at his shoulders, encompassing him in the warm embrace of an entirely different world. Colours far too grand to be gifted to the Earth grace every living object below the surface, the serenity of silence only amplifying their beauty. The fish are his closest friends, so close that they’d sacrifice themselves to the prongs of his trident with barely a second's hesitation. One quick flash of silver and the jerk of a fin is all it requires to send ripples in every direction and gain a catch. He takes the fish back to shore in a bucket that weighs his arm down when elevated, propelled by a small row boat, and sells them to make his own pocket money to spend on things he doesn’t necessarily want nor need. Sometimes in a day he’d earn more than his older sister did on the fishing boats. He doesn’t need the money, oh no-- the Odair family are wealthy by District standards-- the merchants are just too gracious to take his offerings for free.
Finnegan Odair is the captain of one of the biggest boats in the whole of District 4. Not the biggest however; he refuses to work on those.

("If they be sending out those cheat signals to catch their fish, they'll be calling on all the dumb fish. Only dumb fish follow a boat with a signal. They get more 'cause there's more dumb fish in the sea than smart fish." "Then why don't you catch the dumb fish, Pa?"

"Because dumb fish don't taste any good. The Capitol wants the best fish we got and I'll be damned if I use any trickery to get more earnings off 'em. We owe them our work, Finnick, don't you forget that. We're lucky they let us do any fishing at all. There's too much pride on this family
See, his Pa never liked questions. What he did like is the Capitol and the Games and that's all Finnick knows.

Nobody volunteers for the grinning fourteen year old up on the Reaping stage who's disguising a tear with a sparkle in his eye. His little quirks make him 'authentic': nobody has green eyes like that and nobody turns up to the Reaping with their hair still damp and the scolding screeches of their mother ringing freshly in their ears. His parents don't cry though they both look worried; having their eldest son in the Games would've been an honour if he was an older, stronger, more skilful volunteer who's better suited to fight. What he actually is, is too keen for his own good. But trying to put a pretty twist on an ugly situation is just what pretty boys do, right? It must be, because the Capitol falls in love with him before he even sets foot in the place. People faint during his interview; suddenly everybody wants him as an ally. The mentor with a stern face but kind eyes nearly pulls her grey hair out trying to deal with his sponsorships and enthusiasm. At one point he starts to wonder if he likes her more than he likes his own mother. But that's ridiculous, of course. You can't love anybody more than your own mother,

("I am all you have and the best that's happened to you, boy. Don't you dare take me for granted, or I'll make sure you know what being alone feels like. You make sure you win these Games. Prove yourself.")

Then suddenly "wealthy by District standards" becomes the possessors of money so extortionate that none of them would ever need to work a single day again as the youngest Victor in Panem's history is crowned. The burdening weight of the golden crown won't leave his head, even when it's been gone for weeks. Their new house has more rooms than Finnick can count on his fingers and maybe he's starting to miss running into his brother in the halls and crashing into people as they round corners. The water and fish become more than just friends; they become a salvation, a secluded expanse away from the concerned glances of his sister, the watchful scowls of his parents who never seem fully satisfied-- regardless of how many Hunger Games he could win, and the admirable eyes of his District. But maybe he's not someone to be admired; he's a murderer, right? He killed 11 people, *(he didn't mean to count)*. The Capitol were star struck by him; they paraded for days upon his Victory and the ageless story he'd written with part skill and majority luck. 'Generous' were the family who gifted him his trident, and nature plays a wicked game; pretty boys must be held to their chores.

That's what they don't tell you. Why would they? To them we're all criminals already, just for being descendants of those who pondered a trace of anything remotely treasonous. I never wanted what I couldn't pay back, but I've been in debt since the start. The only difference is, money owed can differ in its components. This kind of debt isn't the kind that can be paid off over years of careful spending and saving, this is the kind of debt that every scrap of gold held to my god damn name couldn't pay. This is the kind of debt that gets compensated for by watching 23 kids die every year, 2 of which are mine to care for. The kind of debt that has pretty little Finnick turned into a pretty little whore by the time he turns 15 without his stupidly idealistic eyes even acknowledging. This is the kind of debt that gets your family picked off one by one when the naivety wavers enough for you to realise that they have you fucking all kinds of creatures for metaphorical revenue before you're legal, but not enough for you to realise that Snow won't take no for an answer,

*Especially from a boy as pretty as you, right?*

I don't feel pretty, I feel hungover. Maybe even slightly drunk still. It's much nicer being less discreet with the liqueur now, I'm starting to understand why Haymitch and Chaff spend so much time at the bar letting fire scald their throats. As it burns a new flame ignites in the stomach and the
rising smoke fogs your brain just enough that everything feels just a little less heinous for a few tolerable hours. When water extinguishes the flame and leaves only destroyed wreckage in its wake, you light another fire to reimburse lost colours. Mags nudges my arm, the sharp ridge of her elbow rousing me from whatever pitiful haze I was stuck in and prompting me to raise my chin, lower my eyelids and slide out of the elevator. We're all to get into separate cars to go to the Mentor's Lounge, if we can get through the barricade of teeming paparazzi huddled around the Training Centre's entrance. Mags and Ron are negligible to them now, they crave pictures of Librae and I: was that a patch of hair dyed half a shade too light at the back of her head? Does Finnick have glitter on his eyelids? Where's the model who (bought him) has been latched onto his arm like a guilty conscience you can't shake off and a perpetual reminder that you're worthless yet worth far too much in a simultaneous clash that would leave even the most stable people dismayed-- let alone their deranged Capitol Darling? Constantine was forgiving this morning and gave me sunglasses to conceal what she calls the 'I just lost a fight' concept underneath my eyes, so photographers won’t notice I've not been sleeping. I was lucky in getting her and Ardor; they take far too much pride in their work to have me near even an inch of latex, unlike the last stylist who seemed to think he had the right to have me when he wanted for free. I may be a plaything but I'll be damned if there isn't a price carved into the chains around my neck. I give the photographers a smile that's good enough to make their magazine as they screech my name. Their hands clutching onto my back and caressing down my arm create minor burns that make their unsolicited contact seem almost innocent, compared with the scalding ridges created by those who pay a price for closer contact. The car is my usual one, with the same Avox driver as always. Shortly after I'd won, and after a tangent of struggled communication between the two of us going awry we managed to solidify that his name is Lennox in a way that was discreet enough so that it wouldn't make the person listening through the microphones angry.

"Morning," I greet, pulling the door firmly closed. The air in the car is cool, circulated manually by fans embedded in the doors. It isn't much easier to breathe in than the oxygen shared by hundreds on the bustled street outside was. The tinted windows desaturate the glaring flashes of cameras and silence the shouts from outside, it's somewhat comforting. Somewhat, because I'd rather be anywhere than here. Lennox nods in greeting, gesturing questioningly toward the radio

"No thanks, its fine."

The radio can be used to gauge my mood: if I want it on I'm either anxious to know what's being reported about me, too numb to care what's being said but in desperate need of some kind of distraction or craving a kind of background noise. The radio off means I already know what they're going to report, along with information far too exclusive to be captured by the prying eyes of reporters. In this case, they'll be talking about Finnick Odair's new 'girlfriend'; a fashion model called Antoinette who has silicone stars embedded beneath her skin. She'd dug through obscure family ties to find a distant relative to whom Snow owed money so she could trial the Golden Boy at a discount. In natural fashion, Snow was more than willing to meet her demands and granted her several days to wear me on her sash, the usual price of which would make her model salary cry. I've attended more dinners and parties with her possessively clinging to my arm then I care to count. I don't need to, because come tonight her trial will end and I'll be passed over to the aristocrats, who are richer, more political and far closer to Snow. The aristocrats who will use me for what they need then toss me back to Snow's caging grip, along with any other Victors who would look pretty on a mogul's sleeve. The doors were flung open with an advertising shout the day I turned 16, calling on the rich who aren't important enough to get access to me before I was legal. Between them I'm flung like a rag doll is between toddlers who don't want to share their favourite plaything. Problem is, there are 1000's of toddlers and one plaything. But we must pay our crimes and revive our gratitude, mustn't we?

We aren't the first group to arrive at the Victor' Lounge, if you discount the Morphlings from 6 who might not turn up at all, we're near the last. The Lounge sits in a penthouse on the top floor of the Gamemaker's building as Gamemakers work tirelessly behind and below us to kill the kids
we're meant to be saving. Ah, isn't that ironic? Fourteen year old Finnick had been excited at the prospect of bringing home a Victor from his District for the 66th Games, that is, until the boy's throat was slit at the Cornucopia and the girl waited around to die for 2 days with a bloody knife wound as deep as half a finger slashed up her back. At first I'd been dumbfounded, astounded as to how she could just let herself die.

("What's she doing? That's stupid, she can't do that! Mags, why's she giving up? Remake can fix her back up, right?

She'll last until everyone else dies; she's lasted two days already! She can't die, n-not now."

"Quod's iustus via vadit, Finnick. You tried your hardest, my amare. That's what matters."

"N-no, it's not the hardest until she come' back, right? Our job is to bring them home, like you did with me, I can't leave her she needs to, she can't... How about we send something? Medicine for her? Then she'll be okay, she'll be fin."

The boom of an erupting canon halts my words as the one remaining light illuminating the portraits of the District 4 Tributes goes out.

Librae stretches her arms out in what could be considered a determined fashion as the elevator opens again, murmuring something about 'saving some kids' as she slides out into the Lounge. Elaborately patterned wallpapers plaster every surface that isn't the marble tiled floor, the swirling designs blurring into a haze if they're stared at for too long. Along the back wall hang gold-framed portraits of every Victor in history, with the centre divided for the 'special' victors; those who set and hold records. The frames are enlarged and a small plaque with the record inscribed into it hangs beneath. Fourteen year old Finnick is there, with a plaque reading "Panem's Youngest Victor: Finnick Odair, 65th Hunger Games, 14 years, 7 months.". The sight of it makes my stomach churn; the innocence in those eager eyes got lost in translation somewhere between the first person I killed and the first person I was forced to fuck, and never found its way back.

We're one of the only groups of four Mentors out of everyone. Us, 1, 2 and 7 until last year when Cassia killed herself with a Morphling overdose. Nobody even knew she was on it until she was dead. Our greeting nods to 1 and 2 are returned on passing-- our relationship with them is civil, but rarely strained. The two lowest Districts have a tendency of partitioning themselves from everybody else mingling in various places across the lounge. Cashmere and Gloss are here again, to little surprise; we'll undoubtedly be sharing several sombre car rides to and from parties and mansions over the next few weeks. Mags and Ron fall into a conversation with Beetee, Wiress and Jakira from 3, who're excitedly thrusting various inventions in their faces. Librae taps my arm, prompting me to follow her as she slides into a crowd around what we discover to be a newly pregnant Cecelia after several moments of inference. Laughing, she glances upwards away from Seeder's hands on her stomach, her gaze falling on us both.

"Oh my goodness," she breathes, making her way towards me. "Finnick, how on earth have you gotten taller? You look older every time I see you!"

"Fortuitous genetics, darling," I smile, accepting her warm hug. I can't feel any protrusion of her stomach, but it's obvious a baby's there-- her face practically glows. "I'd say the same for you, but in reverse; you look two years younger."

"Oh don't," she laughs, swatting my arm and enveloping Librae in a tight embrace. The age difference between the two is so minute to the point they look alike, the clash between lilac and chestnut hair is one of the only things that sets them apart. They won their Games consecutively, Brae the 55th and Cecelia the 56th. I linger around for a while, smiling and laughing along with what the huddle of predominantly women, minus a dazed Woof, converse about. Once they move on to a topic I can't contribute to, I carefully slip away to find who I'm looking for. The stretch of the room is large, occupied along one edge by twelve booths, one for each District, wherein the Mentoring takes place. Each has countless projectors spread in an arch that will eventually show both Tributes at several different angles on separate screens for us to switch between, but for now remain dormant until the Games broadcast starts. Plush couches face the holograms, their upholstery a different colour for each respective District. Ours is a sickly bright blue, weaved with
metallic silver thread that is an unforgiving sight for eyes that have been open and running for at least 30 hours, fuelled only by yet hazed by various narcotics.

I find Haymitch and Chaff half-passed out on the ashy grey couches for 12's Mentoring booth. A bottle that looks as if it would struggle to donate a mere drop of liquid is clasped in Haymitch's hand, whatever liquor that was in it was drained a long while ago. The Games start at 10AM, it's only just turned 9.

"Getting started early?" I ask, leaning against the back of the couch that Chaff lies on. Haymitch jumps slightly at my voice disrupting his and Chaff's blissful silence and turns to shoot a glare at me, his eyes a dark, steely grey.

"We need to reserve our favourites," he slurs, gesturing to the multiple, unopened bottles of alcohol on the table and floor around them before tossing the empty one in his hand toward me. His aim goes askew, but I manage to reach far enough to catch it without needing to move.

"I'll have to come out with you both some time."

"Ha, once you can keep up, pretty boy. What did you have last night? Two glasses of champagne?"

I know he doesn't mean it, but I still have to suppress a flutter of disapproval triggered by his dark humour, only amplified by his intoxication. I've been doing this for far too long, champagne's a mild casual drink to my throat now.

"That's a way of putting it," I mutter, fiddling with the arm of the sunglasses that's hooked around my pocket. If someone from prep doesn't get here before the cameras start rolling and interviews begin to conceal the bruise-like marks beneath my eyes I'll need to put them back on again.

"You want some?" Chaff asks me, raising his stumped arm toward the cluster of bottles on the table.

"I'll pass; I set my limit to midday. I need a good ratio between sad sobriety and substance abuse."

The two guffaw loudly at the comment, perhaps more than someone usually would. Haymitch snorts, raising a newly filled glass toward me, the golden liquid sloshing over the edge with the jerk of his hand.

"He's a smart one," he cachinnates. "Come find us when your kids die, or it hits midday. Whichever's first."

I know they don't stand a chance, odds already against them are stacked even higher than everybody else's, but I still feel sorry for the kids from 11 and 12. They're near always malnutritioned, with coal dust buried deep into the skin of those from 12. I brood over two healthy, usually trained kids from home. It doesn't help that the only people who have the power to help them are wasted before they even get on the train, the negligence already made apparent. Seeder is the exception, adopting the task of caring for 2 kids and the drunken shell of a man she mentored all those years ago. It's easy to see why the two indents between her eyebrows never seem to properly fade.

That's what they don't want people to see, they don't want people to see Seeder shouting at Chaff when her patience breaks and she attempts to go about taking all alcohol from him. They won't show Mags on medication to block another stroke after the stress of hundreds of dead children on her shoulders made her brain shut down not enough to damage her motor and language skills, but enough to leave a threat looming over her head. They won't show Librae drinking until her liver gives in after both Tributes die, the only thing warding off the guilt and the whispers of 'you could've done more' is a liquor so strong that even Haymitch and Chaff are hesitant to drink it. They won't show the bald patches dotted around Ron's skull from ripped hair pulled so aggressively that not even transplants can stay put. They certainly won't show Finnick with cuts, scratches and burns down his skin created in desperate attempts to claw away dissented touches that lay under his skin, inflicted by anything capable of stripping away enough layers to reach down to where their nails claw. Of course they wouldn't, the Capitol needs their deities and the District's need their idols, the beacon that says there is some kind of hope for them, for the kids pulled out of a Reaping Bowl or stupid enough to volunteer.
Librae says our two stand a chance this year. Librae said that last year, and the year before.

Ron and I have the boy this year, a fifteen year old from Aquilonem. All I know is he hates me, he won't leave Ron's side and he's a volunteer. He won't tell us why he volunteered, but he clearly hates the Games. They've been comparing him to me, calling him the 'Next Finnick Odair'. If he gets out, that is. It's only to be expected, any District 4 boy under 17 who isn't Mercatores or doesn't look as far away from someone from a Piscandi family as possible has my name tagged on to theirs. Maybe I should be offended that the Capitol's bored of me already. Maybe I should be concerned that they want even more. Isaac's skilled with spears, has a big mouth and an antagonism with the boy from 2 that will end in nothing but spilled blood. I give him a few weeks and bet murder-- he has far too much pride to let himself be killed off by starvation or dehydration, he'll die with his chin high and a blade through his heart. My betting of death on my own kids has gone far past being a pitiful or immoral paradox.

The girl's seventeen, a pretty thing from what must be Litus family. I don't know much about her except Mags wouldn't let me have her, despite it being my turn to pick who I wanted. I also know she's far too gentle to last in that Arena, regardless of how good she is with a knife. I'd wanted her initially because I knew she'd be gone within days and I could go about working on my debts with a guilty conscience only slightly less taxing than it would be to have my Tribute get to the top eight only to be murdered while I'm not there and instead tied to a socialite's bedpost. I'm starting to understand why Mags wouldn't let me have her: she was too nice and too harmless at I wouldn't fare well when she goes.

I toss the empty bottle Haymitch threw at me between my hands as I head back to our booth, ready to savour the last moments of being left alone before I'm either in an interview, someone's bedroom or the special spectator's seat for Panem's annual death-match. The final sponsor count for before the Games start will appear below the portraits of Isaac and Annie in a few minutes. I don't doubt it'll be relatively high; there's been a considerable amount of interest taken in the two of them. Mags and Ron have been handling most pre-Games sponsorships, they're easier to process-- anyone placing bets before the Games has their mind entirely set on who they want, and all it takes is a few agreements on price. Once the canon goes off the haggling is my responsibility. It took 2 hours of the 66th Games for us to establish that my skill with words and persuasion is the more superior out of all 4 of us, and from there my allocated job was sponsorships. Most are done through meetings when the top of Capitol hierarchy are granted access to the Lounge and can listen to us advertise directly. A select few are done through whispers in the dark, the request for a secret replaced with the call for their wallet's support. I'm still undecided if I do it because I want the kids to live, or if I just want to give my vengeance an outlet by rinsing my buyers of every coin I can. Either way, the select few sponsorships aren't attempted until the kid reaches top 8 and shows real winning potential. Never before, because God forbid the Capitol's top plaything makes his retaliations obvious.

"Ready?" Librae asks as I sink into the chair next to her. "Ready as I'll ever be."
"We've got a chance this year, I can tell, I can feel it," she insists to nobody in particular. "We can do it, I know we can do it, we-"
"Stateira," Mags interrupts her gently. "You promise me you won't go to Haymitch and Chaff if anything happens this year. We're not doing that anymore."
Librae nods distractedly, Mags' words sinking only inches deep. Mags turns to me, placing a firm hand on my knee.
"Don't think that doesn't apply to you too," she warns. "Tu erit turn in pulmentum, Finnick. I won't let you."
"She's right," Ron adds, his gaze far too steady and easy for me to shake off.
"Okay, okay. I'll be fine, don't you worry yourselves." I give her the smile that can always soften her frown, the same one I've been using for the past five years. She does relax slightly, but doesn't loosen her grip on my knee. She may be in her mid-seventies, but her hands still have enough strength within them to bat me around the head whenever necessary.

The short remainder of the hour is spent with both less and more tension. Everybody begins to relax with one another slightly more, hollering across the room and making jokes, but the anticipation of our kids being thrown into an Arena that we have as much of an idea about as they do mounts and weighs down our words. Seraphina joins us just before the broadcasting starts, holding a schedule of meetings, parties, interviews and events I'm to go to that gets thrust into my palm. Librae's schedule is far less busy than mine, but there are a handful of parties that we can attend together until I'm whisked away by someone with a lot of money. The first one is tonight at Snow's advisor's Mansion. A woman from my prep team, Loriela, arrives and smears some makeup underneath my eyes just before the broadcast starts. Once it does, microscopic cameras up on the walls will film us constantly and the footage will be used for coverage by Caesar and Claudius when the Arena activity is low.

We get an inside view of the Launch Rooms before our kids go up. Both of them are nervous; Annie nearly cries at one point, but for the most part they play off relatively well. When the glass tube doors close Librae grips my wrist, but lets go when I involuntarily hiss in pain at the sensation of her harsh grip on the rope burn running in nearly a full circle around my wrist. The tubes have microphones inside and the silence of the room is suddenly disrupted by various volumes of breathing. Mags immediately turns both of ours up so she can hear them properly to find both of their breathing is shaky and hollow, but still rhythmic enough to provide enough stamina for them to run tirelessly for a short while. When the elevators reach the podium all of the holograms flicker on to present what all of Panem can see: a grassy field surrounded by countless terrains-- two small mountains that look as if they're one large unit, a forest, orchards of various presumably poisoned fruit trees and a colossal dam between the mountains that Claudius announces is the only drinking source in the entire Arena. Fantastic. All 24 Tributes become presented simultaneously on their podiums, flinching against the blinding daylight. As they're all exposed I can't help but remember an old folklore saying from back home:

"The first to rise will be the first to die, and if multiple shall rise in unison death's omen is hung upon us all."

Let the Seventieth Annual Hunger Games begin.
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

murder
ˈmərdə
noun
1. the unlawful premeditated killing of one human being by another.

Annie

I can't feel my feet crashing into the dry packed Earth below, or my legs straining under the commands to run faster as I charge away from the podium. My breaths come in frequent and hollow pants, increasing in number as the gleaming silver of the Cornucopia draws nearer. The weapons there are blurred through unfocused eyes, but clumps of earthy colours suggest that survival equipment may be there too. I lunge inside the Cornucopia as one of the first arrivals, pressing my back against the cool metal to shield myself from a threat that doesn't exist yet, but will if I don't grab some weapons and move. A flash of the blue that matches my shirt speeds around me, belonging to nobody but Isaac.

"Have fun," he smirks, grabbing several spears and disappearing as quick as he arrived, weaving around crates to avoid the other Tributes. I reach for a holding belt and fasten it underneath my shirt where it remains unseen, beginning load it up with as many knives as the carrying slots will allow.

"Four! Are you with us or not?"
Lucious' voice rings inside of the metal horn, making the pitch even higher than it was originally. I snap my head around to see him stood with a machete clutched in one fist, ready to slash the flesh of me or somebody else with a second's notice. I don't trust my voice to be loud enough for him to hear so I nod instead, reaching for the only cutlass resting neatly in a stand of swords.
"Good. Clear the field." he shouts, turning around to hunt down whoever dares to come near the Cornucopia. I know I should've expected this, but being instructed to start killing others near immediately roots me to my spot for a few moments. Unless they're directly threatening my life (which they are) I won't kill them. (I can't kill them). But I know this enough: if I don't kill- or at least pretend to kill- someone else, 1 and 2 will kill me. And little Annie's life is more precious...

Right?
I still don't ignore pretending to kill as an option; if played well enough, I could get away without blood on my hands. I mull it over momentarily, desperately trying to think of an instance in a previous Games where somebody got away with no deaths on their shoulders. Anyone who didn't, or couldn't, kill got killed. If I don't stop daydreaming now, I'll be one of them. Taking a deep breath, I emerge from behind one of the narrow walls of the Cornucopia, holding the cutlass in my weaker left hand with a lack of desire to use it.

My feet find their positioning as I spin around, but my path is obstructed as I collide with somebody far smaller than me, running right into them. Right into little Pocan. How he got this close to the Cornucopia is a mystery, but the small frame belongs to no one else. It's confirmed as
him after I drag him between two wooden crates. His grey eyes are more like disks widened by fear, and he crouches completely paralysed, not even attempting to run. I couldn't bear to even harm him, but it's predestined that within moments someone will find us, and if he's not at least injured we're both going down. Sliding the sleeve of his jacket up, I take hold of a knife, internally cursing myself for allowing myself to get into this situation.

"Pocan, you need to run away like you've been hurt. Get out of here, quickly." I whisper urgently, slicing a small cut in his forearm and smearing the blood on his stomach. He nods frantically, stumbling upwards and running off with a purposeful limp. Nobody will target him looking like that, and it relieves me greatly. Unless the cut on his arm gets infected, he should be okay. He already had a backpack from the outer edges on, that should hold enough supplies for him. I rise carefully and scan the areas surrounding me warily for anyone nearby. There are people fighting everywhere. It's mostly my 'allies' against people with abilities inferior to theirs.

I'll achieve nothing just standing around except a death wish. I need to get to organising myself some supplies as soon as I can, but until there's nobody (presently) trying to kill me, the risk outweighs the rewards. A rush of wind suddenly passes me, followed by a heavy thunk or metal on metal. A knife has just collided with the Cornucopia behind me. The girl from District 8's hand moves toward another knife, her eyes darkening at a weapon wasted on a throw she was positive would hit. I've seen her throw; she doesn't hit often, but when she does, it's perfect. However I'm faster and better trained than her, and if I don't stop her some way or another, she'll eventually hit me. I don't aim for her chest, stomach or neck; I throw a knife drawn from my belt toward her leg, and it hits exactly. We both gasp in unison as the red stains starts to stain her thigh as she falls and bile starts rising in my throat.

(She would've killed you she would've killed you she isn't dead neither are you)

Those same words are whispered repeatedly to myself as I force myself to move and get back inside the Cornucopia. Nobody saw me throw the knife, they still don't know I can throw a knife, that's what matters. Empty, larger backpacks are piled above each other in a corner and I take to filling them all equally with an empty water canister, rope, bandages, bread, a knife and the lighter, least valuable medicines: iodine and simple spirits in small glass bottles. I spot a large leather quiver paired with a bow that nobody will use in the corner and grab it gratefully, scanning my surroundings quickly before loading the bottom with the medicines that even sponsor money struggles to buy, an extra (and the last remaining) water cannister, a fistful of more knives and more rope, along with my cutlass slotted neatly between all of the stolen items. I sling it over my back, checking to ensure the sword disguises anything stashed in the bottom.

While separating any remaining items between the five backpacks, a cold blade is pushed to the edge of my neck, my pulse beating against the pressure as a hand grips the back of my jacket.
"What do you think you're doing?" Lillith sneers into my ear, pressing the knife deeper into my skin.
"Loading up backpacks," I answer, my voice little over a whisper.
"Check them." she orders somebody behind us.
Taaffeite weaves around me and rummages through each of the backpack's contents in the same careless fashion he's approached everything with.
"They're all the same." he affirms, equipping himself with one. Lillith lets go of me with a forceful push and takes one for herself, calling on Luscious to collect his. He arrives with a whining Platinum in tow, complaining about the slash on her arm 'that bitch from 10' gave her, vowing to finish her off herself. No attention is paid to her from anybody though, her constant onslaught of grievances pass transparently through my ears. I can't help but notice the multiple blood splatters up all of their clothes-- Luscious even has dots of crimson on his cheek. I still have blood marks on my palms and wrists from where I cut Pocan, but it's nothing compared to the amount of blood they've caused people to shed. As if he could read my mind, Luscious turns to me, eyes narrowing as he looks me up and down.
"How many people did you get?" he demands.
"Two. Girl from 8 and boy from 12." I respond, more smoothly than I did with Lillith. She scares me far more than her twin counterpart. He sniggers slightly, folding his arms and raising an eyebrow.

"Straight for the little'uns, right?" he laughs, as if my 'killing' of other Tributes has suddenly proved me and opened me to some kind of insider joke. "Young blood is always the freshest."

Young blood may be the freshest, but fresh blood dries faster, and dry blood on murderous hands sinks in further than the grooves of fingertips;

Bloody hands stop beating hearts.

"Let's go find whoever got away." Luscious decides, wiping his sword on his jacket, the blood smearing an ungodly brown against the black material. Something clicks in the dark pools of his eyes that looks far more dangerous than somebody fighting for survival does. No, this is blood thirst. After at least an hour of fighting, he only wants more. Finally the motive in his eyes matches the one Lillith's have possessed since the Reaping.

"That isn't a good idea," I offer, toying with the undone zip on my jacket. "All the water canisters are empty."

"And why's that?" Luscious pipes up, his voice increasing to a confrontational shout. "I bet you drank them all, didn't you 4? Are you challenging me?"

"No, I'm not challenging you," I answer evenly. "I didn't drink them either. I'm saying if the canisters are empty, that means we either have to look for water, or compete with the others for it."

A short silence ensues after that. Luscious removes himself from towering in front of me to share a suspicious look with Lillith.

"She's kinda right," Platinum says suddenly. "That looks like a dam over there. They wouldn't have a massive water bank with loads of others. It's probably the only one."

"Why didn't you say then?" Lillith snaps irritably, pulling her spear from where it had been pushed into the dirt. "Let's go."

"We can't, if we leave people will come back and take what's left." Taaffeite sighs, clearly bored by the deliberation over future plans.

"Fine," Lucious announces, turning to me. "If you want water so bad, go get it. Taaffeite, go with her. I don't trust her."

Taaffeite shrugs indifferently, taking his sword and leading the way. Out of the Cornucopia's shade the sun has begun to beam brightly between clouds. It's the kind of sunlight that does nothing to warm you, and just blinds your vision instead. It reflects off of Taaffeite's cheekbones, which are naturally sharper than some of the surgically enhanced ones in the Capitol, and exaggerates the puckering shadows beneath them.

"I don't get why he trusts me," he says suddenly, interrupting the silence as we pace through the long grass.

"Who?"

"Luscious," he replies. "I don't trust him, he's a snake. Then again, you don't trust anyone here. I rely on me to win."

I hum slightly in agreement, unwilling to continue a conversation about people that could easily turn their back and kill me with someone who could easily turn their back and kill me.

"I don't trust you, either," he adds. "You're strange."

"Good to know," I breathe, flicking my cutlass at the tips of grass blades. "What's strange?"

"I don't know if you're just playing nice, or you're actually nice. And you know more than you're letting on."

"I don't know what you mean." I object weakly, keeping my gaze fixed on the floor.

"Sure you don't," he laughs sarcastically.

We continue in silence again until the dam is near arm's length. On closer inspection it looks like the only way to access the top is up the mountains either side. I sigh somewhat frustratedly,
lacking in desire to climb half a mountain to reach the top. "Why don't you throw a huge tape measure up there so we know how far to climb?" Taaffeite quips. "You aimed for that girl's leg well enough."

"Nobody saw me throw the knife, they still don't know I can throw a knife, that's what matters."

(You idiot.)

I feel my cheeks redden as panic consumes my stomach. Unsure of how to reply, I ignore him and turn toward what looks to be an overflow passing over the centre of the dam's edge. "It's fine, I won't tell anyone," he laughs. "I get the upper hand that way, right?"

His personality is matching his appearance the more he speaks; catty. Nervousness courses through my veins with every beat my heart makes, tensing up the front of my thighs and clenching my stomach's walls together. "There's water over there." I reply quietly, still avoiding his remark. Luckily he doesn't press it any further, and silently follows.

As expected, the overflow is there, and has created a small but deep pool where the water hits the ground. I kneel down and scoop a handful into my cupped hands, sipping it slightly and recoiling at the sharp taste spreading across my tongue. "Salt water."

"It makes sense, no one would go to the actual dam otherwise," Taaffeite shrugs, turning on his heel and heading towards the left mountain. I follow uncertainly, doubts and superstitions creeping up my spine at the prospect of there being no drinkable water anywhere near. The mountain is easy to climb, serving more as a steep, rocky hill than anything else. Winding paths are smoothed out and flattened, making it remarkably easier to navigate up, with only a few ledges that had to be climbed. It's nothing like the coastal cliffs at home.

The sun is directly above us when we reach the top, the concrete wall of the dam smoothing to a flat top several metres wide. As Platinum guessed, the dam is huge, with no visible source coming from anywhere around. Nobody is here yet; if they are, they've not made themselves visible. I drop my bag down with a grateful sigh, keeping the quiver still close to my back with the cutlass back inside as I kneel down on the hybrid terrain of rock and mossy grass below, hope ringing in my ears. This time, Taaffeite takes the job of testing the water, drinking some out of his palms before cursing and flicking it away. Disbelieving, (aren't you always?) I try some for myself, my stomach dropping as the same taste as before returns.

The hundreds of gallons of water encased inside the dam, constituting towards what's most likely the one source of any water in the entire Arena, is fully tinged with salt.

(Ha, just like the Ocean you adore so much, right?)
"What do we do now?"

What do we do now?

The reasonable solution would be to go back to the Cornucopia and tell everybody that there's probably no water in the Arena. However the Hunger Games aren't reasonable, and neither are the recipients of our message. I turn my gaze away from Taaffeite's irritated expression, which is probably more so caused by the laboured journey back to the Cornucopia than the lack of resources; if needs be, he could have those sent. The water is still lined with small crests which mull lazily across the surface, slowly retreating away from the points of contact our hands made.

"We have to tell the others," I sigh, keeping my hands curled around the slight overhang of the land's end before the dam starts.

Something about the way the water falls into a dark expanse right below the surface despite the new arrival of a cold sun throwing light into it looks wrong. A blue that's icy in its hue yet pitch black at the same time completely rejects the influences from its surroundings; the wind hits it like a body against a brick wall and the sun a star into a black hole, as if the water swallows whatever natural elements dare to approach it. Either way, the water isn't the natural substance found in the oceans on the coast, or the rivers which channel into it. Man made, just as everything in this Arena is, but altered to be something I don't know.

"Best get going then," he says. "Canons should start going soon; we'll know who to hunt."

His words take an edge, like he knows that my stomach constricts at the thought of people being hunted and murdered. He's been playing me for a while now, toying with strings in my mind that for some reason I can't reach to seize control of. He's biding his time well through psychological jabs, and in fairness, it's probably better for him to unsettle a victim in a way they can't recognise before he pounces on them. I rise and follow him as we make a descent down the mountain's side.

Climbing down is harder, and I find myself often needing to steady myself on jumps down from ledges that aren't kind enough to lend a graduation to walk down. I steal glances at the Cornucopia as we go, squinting to try and see what's going on down there. I can't make out any movement except the swaying of the grass.

(and the absence of dead bodies, only bloodstains in their wake, a tribute, if you will)

I don't know when the hovercrafts came, I don't know if I'm glad they did; (it was hard enough pretending the bodies weren't there the first time, even walking away from them) but the blood will dry and be stripped of its settlement sooner or later. These tributes always die. As we draw nearer to the Cornucopia voices begin to become audible, wafting through the empty space away from the horn's end. Though their voices are regular in volume, they only make noise sporadically, with intervals too long to belong to a conversation. Taaffeite drags his sword through the grass as he walks in front, letting it snap and wither the sturdy blades. It acts as an announcement of our arrival, as Platinum leans out with a spear in hand while we're still several meters away. She's badly bandaged her arm up, and on seeing us whines at Taaffeite, who ignores her completely. Inside, the twins are sat on a crate, Lillith on Lucious' lap. Their proximity is far too close for it to pass freely as any kind of playful contact between siblings. His hand rests on her thigh as she lazily sharpens the individual spiked blades on a mace with a whetstone block.

"It's salt water." Taaffeite says dismissively, leaning against the inside wall and folding his arms.
"What?" Lillith frowns, looking up from her weapon.
"The dam's salt water." he repeats, voice full of boredom, looking Lillith straight in the eye. She
turns a glare to me, shaking off the disgruntlement caused by Taaffeite's stare.
"How do you know?" she challenges.
"We tasted it, it's definitely salt water." I say.
"It can't be," Platinum interrupts, rubbing the bandages on her forearm morosely. "Why would it
be there if it's useless?"
She presses a good point, one that I can't answer, for nobody knows why anything in this Arena is
here.
"I say we go up there and check for ourselves." Lucious announces. I exchange a glance with
Taaffeite, who remains solemn, as he shrugs passively. Lucious has already nudged Lillith off of
his lap and is headed outward.
"We can't, stupid," Platinum says. "Or people will come back here while we're gone."
"Maybe if you did something useful to guard it instead of sitting around feeling sorry for yourself
we could," Taaffeite snaps, his voice spiteful.
"If you don't shut up I'll make something useful out of your dead body." Platinum retorts, twisting
her spear so the tip glints in the light. Suddenly she turns to acknowledge me for the first time.
"Four, you make net things. Make a trap for the supplies."
The forthright ignorance of her statement causes me to suppress a smile, which quickly turns to
frantic planning. I learnt how to snare 'net things' in Training, but I'm reluctant to make a good trap
in case it turns around on me. However if any of them can make traps, they'll know if I did it
badly on purpose. I settle on a nice midpoint; a trap that will be able to easily ensnare anybody
who steps foot in it, but can also be disabled with little effort in little time. Truthfully, other
Tributes getting in on leftover supplies isn’t my biggest worry (we’re all just trying to survive,
right?) and I’d rather get back up the dam to prove the twins and Platinum wrong.

There are pre made nets in the Cornucopia left over which are more than large enough to cover a
sufficient area. The time saved gives me more time to find easily disabled materials to snare with;
and with boxes full of wires, bolts, nails and trip switches I’m nearly spoiled for choice.

The Capitol seems to like spoiling us.

The final result is a rope net which stretches around the circumference of the Cornucopia’s
opening disguised by some cut grass from the surrounding field. If anyone steps within it, they’ll
be trapped beneath the ropes until they can get out or someone finds them. We leave the climb the
mountain again just as the sun passes the midday point in the sky (although I couldn’t tell if it is
midday) and the winds only seem to be increasing to make my hair whip around my face and
occasionally blind me. It’s like the winter winds at home, just without any kind of ocean
propelling it or any slight hint of comfort. At one point, the knives in my belt hidden under my
shirt begin to dig in under my hip, snagging at the skin until I try to discreetly reposition them.

We’re half way up the mountain when the canons begin to go off. I count them on my fingers,
staring down at my hands instead of the images of dead bodies which push at the back of my mind
with every resonation of the booming death announcement. 11 people dead. That leaves 13 of us
alive.

(Isn’t that your lucky number?)

When we reach the top I hang back, cautiously awaiting their reaction. Taaffeite goes up to the
water’s edge and stares in for a second, when a sudden splash sends him flying backwards.

“What the fuck was that?!?” he shouts, slinging his sword out from its holding. Everybody backs
away toward the small cluster of trees a few metres back. I can’t see a thing from where I am so
creep forward as Platinum mutters something about my stupidity. The way the water moved was
far too familiar and my suspicions are confirmed as I see a small school of unfamiliar fish flitting around just below the surface.

“It’s just fish,” I call back. “They’re harmless.”

Regardless, they all move further up the dam where there’re no signs of extra life. When Lucious leans down and sips some of the water from his cupped hand he begins to laugh almost manically.

“You idiots,” he says, the menacing tone in his laugh making it sound more like a snarl. “This is normal water.”

Taaffeite pushes past him and tries some for himself, frowning instead of wincing as one usually would when greeted with a mouthful of salt.

“We’ll stay up here then.” He says monotonously, removing the folded tent slung over his shoulder, searching for a place to pitch it. For a second, I’m speechless. We both knew that was salt; all of it, not just the overflow pool. How long has it been like this for? How did it even change?

My head is still racing with questions when Platinum barges my shoulder, sneering something about making myself useful. My actions still remain distracted—I even hammer in a peg in my tent correctly. The loops seem to have been purposely structured for a quick removal if pitched incorrectly,

(It’s almost as if they knew you were coming)

And it comes as a great convenience. When I’m sure nobody’s looking I fill the extra canister inside my quiver to the brim with water and a single iodine drop. That, along with the one the others are aware of and the water consumed from today could keep me going for days on end before I’d need to return, and even so I know exactly where everybody is pitched.

The sun is just beginning to fall toward the Earth when a canon sounds. It makes me jump, and I turn quickly from the rope I had been playing with to see the boy from 10’s corpse bloodied and lifeless by the bank, with one of Lillith’s knives lodged into his skull, right between the eyebrows. The sight causes my throat to attempt to gag, but I push it down with as much courage as I can muster and close my eyes briefly until the hovercraft takes the poor soul away and back to ten; where he belongs. As I pull on the end of the rope to secure a knot I wonder how long it’ll be until it takes me too.

**Finnick**

The bloodbath is as usual; frenzied, merciless kills strung back to back between the children who see blood on their hands as an iron bar dipped in gold. Isaac runs far into the shrubbery at the foot of one of the mountains, killing a girl on the way. (Maybe 6’s, one of the Morphlings cheered in blindsided joy when her body dropped,

**But it isn’t blindsided, see,**

**She’s better off that way.**)

Annie stays with 1 and 2 like Mags told her to, like Mags tells everyone, because it’s both their best and worst shot at survival. If you can swim with the sharks you can abandon them too, and everyone knows that a shark is to be killed if it comes near your boat. She’s planning something though, everyone could tell after she sneaked all of the Cornucopia’s most valuable items into a quiver. Even Haymitch could see in his drunken state, enough to tell Mags that her girl should act on what she’s planning, if she doesn’t they’ll strangle her with her own blueprints. 11 cannons sound after midday, when I decide maybe I can attempt to repent how much of an unfathomable asshole I’ve been (and still am) by only drinking a flute of champagne instead of Haymitch’s offer of bottomless liquor.
I leave for the party with Librae just before sundown after a tedious session in Remake. It’s in those few hours spent staring at a tiled ceiling that I despise yet try to increase how metaphorically empty my body feels. Although sometimes I swear I can feel my organs dissolving and the blood leaking from my veins, pooling over my skin and taking the form of glitter dust, bronzer and strangely scented oil.

This time it’s oil, and if it’s so early in the Games then the Arbasque family probably have me again. They were so kind and rich enough to take little Finnick under their wing, only just turned 15. (Weren’t they so nice to you? Didn’t they make you feel special?)

Nothing’s better to them than a naive little boy so easily tricked into succumbing to their pleas for paedophilia intimacy. He owed them a vast debt anyway (are you even paying it off anymore? Or is this just surplus?) for gifting him his trident, his survival tool, his one way ticket into indefinite hell legacy. Whatever rationalism Constantine seemed to have before has disappeared as fast as it came, because my shirt seems to have vanished again, along with pants that actually fit.

It’s a lengthy night, although after a few amphetamines I can get fucked by the Arbasques and get it over with, emerging with only a few cuts and scratches which are forgotten in a shot glass soon enough. The worst bleeds enough to run down my torso and soak into my pants, discolouring the charcoal with a patch of crimson. It’s quite unimpressive; really, I can do far worse in the shower with a cocktail of one part comedown, two parts frustration and six parts intangible self-loathing.

On the way to the Lounge I make sure to get hold of my book from my apartment where an attendant had dropped my bags so I can scrawl the date and what Malissa (she was the kindest, wasn’t she?) whispered as the sharpened nail on her middle finger sliced down my chest, before my hand begins to shake. The gossip this year is more lively than usual, it looks like the Ponwren brother and sister have been having an affair with one another, while also, and unknowingly, having a fling with one another’s respective partners. I flick back to one of my first entries, nearly unreadable as the writing size decreases and forms irregularly with the speed my hand moved. Every detail of Snow’s tainted reign sits in between neat, formatted lines, dying to be told to the entire nation.

I don’t know when I’ll do it, but I’ll tell everyone soon,

Maybe this year, then they can kill me with a smile on my face,

What have I got to lose?

The speed begins to wear off as I make it back to the Victor’s Lounge, skin crawling with the desire to scrape away every inch of skin they laid a finger on. It’s dark outside with the late summer sunset, but the Lounge is still wholly alive. I check for any relevant updates just before the Capitol emblem flashes in the sky, revealing all 12 who died. It’s impressive, and good for the kids in there, as less chess pieces means that fewer measures will need to be taken to drive them together, especially with the authentic psychos from 2 on the scene. Isaac has taken refuge in a small cavern between two boulders and is picking at a handful of berries relatively carelessly, though with the activity up at the dam it’s impossible to pay him much attention.

Annie has been placed on first watch by ignorance fuelled by arrogance. The others sleep lightly as she tiptoes carefully between tent pegs and ropes, carefully lifting hers with ease away from its purposely wrong-tied holdings. I find myself almost suppressing a smile at her ability to plan ahead, especially when she slowly transfers all of her quiver’s contents to her backpack and fills the leather pouch with even more water. I doubt she plans to come back for a while. I glance over to 1 and 2, who have her on a single screen as they glare daggers into her hologram. All seems to
be going perfectly fine (even Ron looks impressed when he’s not giving Librae disapproving looks for her heightened excitement).

Perfectly fine until her foot snaps a branch beneath her foot, and all four others are awake, standing, and aiming weapons at her tiny form.

I can feel Mags tense beside me as Annie takes running— not toward the mountain, but towards the dam’s concrete wall. Mags’ hand has found my knee and is pushing increasing amounts of pressure on it.

“What in god’s name is she doing?!” Librae wails.

“She must have a plan if she’s not heading straight down that mountain,” Ron hushes her.

The sudden aversion of direction stuns the other Careers long enough for Annie to start making a running course along the wall. The girl from 1 throws a spear toward her which is carried east by the prevailing winds that haven’t ceased all day, missing her arm by several inches. I only feel a chord of worry strum in my stomach when the little girl from 2 whips another knife out. I saw enough footage on the screens at the party to see the result of coming within her throwing range. Annie halts suddenly when she sees the knife from over her shoulder and Librae kicks the leg of the table next to her in exasperation. The widening of that strange green in her eyes says what we’re all thinking; little Annie is going to die before the second day starts.

Maybe its suicide when she suddenly jumps from the dam’s wall, sending herself hurtling downwards toward the ground hundreds of metres below her.

Librae’s small cry makes me decide it is suicide,

Until I see the deep glassy pool of water right under her feet.

End Notes

Thank you for reading, please leave any feedback you'd like!

PS:// For those wondering, the language spoken is Latin, inspired by the fact it's used in the THG books. I try to imply what's said without having to directly translate, but all phrases should translate well online.

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