**Drowning**

by orphan_account

**Summary**

After the 70th Hunger Games, Annie Cresta is in ill state, both physically and mentally. Finnick is just beginning to learn the extent of her damage, and will do anything to keep her out of the Capitol's grasp. *Anything.*

Set just after Annie's Games, chronicling her post-Games interviews and portions of her recovery with Finnick before returning to District Four.

**Notes**

Hi all! If you've read this story/parts of this story before, it's because it's been up on AO3 before! I'm re-posting it here since I deleted my old account here on a whim, and I've re-made under a new name. This first chapter is more of a prologue to set up the next few chapters, beginning at the tail end of Annie's Games. Hopefully I'll get around to finishing and posting all this and I can post some of the other monsters I've been working on for ages. Thanks for reading!
Resurface

All I can see is blood.

My vision is dark crimson, sunlight shining through a light film of red covering my eyes. Everything shakes, and I try to stifle my screams, shutting myself off from the rest of the world. Could I? I wonder in the midst of my chaos. Could I just go silently, leave this place, return to District 4?

I hear the sound the shortsword makes as it slices through skin and flesh and life, and open my eyes just in time to avoid the head of my district partner flying into me. I collapse and begin to sob, ignoring the shaking.

Days pass, months and years, and when I am sure I am nothing but a shriveled package of dried muscle and brittle bone, I crack one eye open. I can still feel the red in my eyes, creeping in the corners every time I blink. I wipe my face and white comes back red. I find I can draw no conclusion but the fact that I have clawed myself again.

I sniffle, sitting up and stifling a giggle. That wasn't so bad.

I scan the area around me. Still no head. Another dream. I almost smile. I know that one day he'll come again, come to take off my district partner's head. My partner, with sad, vacant eyes, caught in surprise as the other tribute grabs him by the hair and performs a clean slice.

The red returns...

I shake my head, back and forth, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and back until the red is gone. No more of that. No more of that.

The ground is still shaking, and branches are falling from the trees above me. One falls and hits me square on the head, and I laugh until I hear the laugh of the boy with the shortsword cutting through my neck and I now I feel my head shaking of its own accord now, telling me to calm down without being prompted.

I wish the shaking would stop, I wish it would, I wish I could lay down and melt into the underbrush blanketing the forest floor. But I can't, not now, not when I've come so close to getting up. With painstaking movements, I grab the tree behind me for support as I climb to my feet. The shaking doesn't help.

I smooth back the hairs clouding my vision, and recognize the pain in the back of my throat as thirst. I look up, a part of me hoping for some sort of creek nearby, but instead I find a cache of silver parachutes piled up about ten feet away from me, lopsided. It makes me dizzy.

My hearing comes back to me, once I know I'm supposed to be listening. Slowly, the familiar sound off of the beacon echoes around me over and over again, as each little case tries to outdo the one next to it in short, monotone beeps. I inch towards the pile, and as I grab the first one I can place, all of the beacons quiet, and all sounds fade again. I unsnap the lock with shaky hands, and out drops a metal bottle, along with a tiny white slip of paper. I choose the paper first. Anything to distract me from the red.

Mags says you have 13 hours before you die of dehydration. -F
I open the bottle and take a swig. Within minutes the bottle is gone and my vision is clear, my hearing returned. The shaking has subsided, though now even the branches are beginning to shake, and I see two squirrels scamper across the underbrush.

The second silver parachute contains a similar note (I want you to come home. Eat so you can come home. -F) and a larger canister of some warm liquid I can only conclude to be soup. When I open the lid, however, hot, steaming blood pours out from the edges of the bowl, searing my skin. I can see the dark creeping back into my vision, like a velvet curtain. This time I cannot catch the scream in my throat and it overflows from my mouth like the blood from the bowl. I can feel my body rejecting the water along with it.

Miles and miles away, I feel hard, steady rock crack like bones, and a rush of something. Supplies? Maybe? The first thing that comes to mind is blood, and thousands of little heads, with subdued red hair and vacant eyes.

Water crashes through the trees up ahead, and like a firing squad, the cannons begin their song.

I get to my feet, supporting my weight on shaky knees, with the canister of blood that is now looking conspicuously similar to soup as my sole weapon. In the back of my mind, I can hear a few of the beacons start beeping again, but I ignore them. The Gamemakers have given me the one enemy I can take on my own.

The wall of water hits me like a solid brick, knocking the wind out of me. I gasp for air but instead gulp down mouthfuls of freshwater. I spit it all out quickly, and like before, my throat has no problem regurgitating what I have just ingested.

Soon enough, the wave has carried me above the low lying branches in the trees. I must actively avoid the tops of the trees from scratching me, which in turn requires my full and undivided attention to the task at hand, something I cannot offer to anyone right now. Not even President Snow. Did he finally beat me? Did he beat me like Finnick said?

If I look down I can see, far away and just feet from me, the bodies of the tributes who have been trying to kill me for the past six days. Seven days? Some are dead, others dying, others screaming for life as they slip beneath the surface, grasping for my legs and arms as I float, grasping for the sun and the air and the smell of roses.

I float for days and weeks and months again, losing track of time. Every once in a while a tribute will float along with me, dead or alive, conscious or otherwise, always wearing the mask of my district partner, diluting the water with blood that eventually clouds my vision. I always scream, and thrash in the water in desperate attempts to separate myself from the dead boy. For days upon weeks upon months, I scream and I float, waiting for the water to take me.

Far away, the cannons' song has ended, and the Anthem takes its place. The water level begins to descend, and over the roar and crash of the waves as they hit rocks and trees on their way down, seeping into the now-porous underbrush, I can faintly hear a Capitol accent announcing the end of the 70th Annual Hunger Games. I wonder absently who has taken the prize home, and who will bring their district the honor and glory of a victory.

The moment my feet make contact with the slippery, wet leaves, I collapse.

As the last cannon sounds, I can see Mags lift her hand to her mouth, speechless. She puts another on my shoulder, patting it. Haymitch, hovering behind me, has a smile in his voice as he congratulates me. A small part of me breathes that sigh of relief I have been holding in for six long days. But I cannot celebrate. Annie is not well yet.
Her eyes dart sluggishly from the ground to her hands to the sky, where Claudius Templesmith's voice is congratulating her on her victory in the 70th annual Hunger Games. I can tell she isn't listening, and she's already fading by the time the Gamemakers have drained the dam wave down to the tree line.

Her feet touch the ground, and she doesn't even make an effort to support her weight, the water placing her down on the wet leaves of what used to be a forest and is now definitely a swamp. Her hair is spread out across the damp ground, her clothes torn, scars beginning to develop around her eyes and wrists. As the sun focuses its rays on her, I notice small gashes in her sides, where tree branches have torn away her clothes and left marks on her torso. She looks at peace.

I shove the thought out of my mind. She is not dead. She is not at peace. The battle for her has only just begun.

The monitors around the mentoring stations are beginning to shut off, as the other Mentors are escorted out by Peacekeepers. Eventually, only Mags and I remain.

All of the monitors but my own have flickered off. The cameras are only focusing on Annie now. The hovercraft has her in its metal grip, the bars collapsing around her limp body. Her head tips back and her mouth slacks open. Her chest is still rising and falling. How is she still alive?

The monitor flickers off, and I feel myself relax. I hadn't realized I had held my breath until I let out a long sigh. The room is empty, save for a few Peacekeepers guarding the main door. My head is in my hands, and my breathing gets shorter. Tears leak from my eyes, and I can feel Mags put her arms around me, rubbing my back, draping me in her embrace. All I can think about is Annie; she is alive, and she will be with me soon. I am laughing to myself, laughing into my wet, tear-soaked hands. I turn to Mags.

"She's alive."

Mags smiles, grins, laughs a little with me. I can see a sparkle in her eyes, too, and tiny drops run down the crevasses in her face.

We sit there, laughing and crying for a while, before a Peacekeeper approaches us. "We have a car waiting for you outside."

I nod, composing myself. Mags follows me out the main door. I am going to see Annie.

I remember the last time I saw her before the Games started. Her dark brown hair was done up in a bun, her skin clear, rid of all of the distracting makeup from days past: the parade, the interviews. I kept telling her to just find the Careers, find them and she'll be safe. Look how that turned out. She was a bundle of nerves though, and I remember she only stopped shaking when my lips were on hers. I remember her walking away, to the hovercraft, while the frosted glass door slid across to separate us, and the only thing I could think of was that I might have touched her for the last time.

And now she's mine again.

The car ride is long, and the entire time Mags is squeezing my hand, reminding me to stay here, that we're almost there, we're almost to Annie. Mags says more with her actions than even Caesar Flickerman could say with his words. More than anyone could ever say with words. More than President Snow could say if he killed-

The car stops in front of a plain, concrete building, with two stories and a helipad. The hovercraft hangar. Used almost exclusively for the Games, considering any inter-district and Capitol travel is
done by train, I know this place well. But this is the first time I have come twice in a week, the second to receive a Victor.

I nearly stumble out of the car. *She is so close.* Just an hour ago she was out of my grasp, out in the Arena, fighting against her own mind. And now she is here. She is waiting for me.

After the 11th Hunger Games, when a boy who won died of his injuries on the ride back to the Capitol, a hospital wing was built inside the hovercraft hangar. A Peacekeeper who meets Mags and I at the door, motions for us to follow him there. The hangar is cold inside, and behind glass walls I see rooms and rooms filled to the brim with hovercraft. Some of the ceilings are open, admitting some hovercraft that have just returned from body retrieval in the Arena. I look away just in time to come face to face with a sterile metal door, marked only with a red cross and two iron handles. The Peacekeeper opens them to reveal the hospital wing.

And there she is. Brilliant even in unconsciousness, with an oxygen mask over her face and an IV pumping drugs into her arm, she is just as beautiful as the day I said goodbye to her at the hovercraft hangar a week ago. Her eyes have dark bags underneath them, and her face is ridden with claw marks she has dealt herself. There are bruises on her arms and leaves are still in her hair. But she is still beautiful.

I turn to the Peacekeeper. "Can I...?" I motion to the glass wall separating Mags and I from the hospital room where Annie is being treated.

The Peacekeeper simply shakes his head. Somewhere I find it in me not to protest. For now, seeing her again is enough.

Just as I turn back, I see her eyes fluttering open, sea green straight from the ocean contrasting against the pale fluorescence of her skin. Her eyebrows crease ever so slightly, and she blinks under the harsh light. She makes a move to sit up, raising her chest in a sign of repulsion to her new environment, but an Avox nurse pushes her down and feeds more clear liquid into the IV hooked into her forearm.

She turns her head, scanning the room from one end to the other, until, unexpectedly, she finds me. I feel myself falter, then everything simply falls away. It is just me and her. Her sea green eyes, her brilliant brown hair, the light freckles dusting her light skin like dirt. Everything that I have worked so hard to keep is right in front of me.

Deep blue waves replace the sterile white of the hospital room. Bright white sun replaces the harsh fluorescence, and we are home. I lay next to her on a boat in the middle of the ocean, counting her freckles and kissing her fingertips. No bruises, no blood, no claw marks. She is Annie, and she is here in front of me, stretched out across the length of the helm, laughing as I tell a story of a mermaid, so gorgeously plain and raw, stupid enough to wash herself up on land and call herself Annie Cresta. I pull the sails and she sings of the sea we sail on, gazing out at the waters, chin resting on her hand, the other of which draws little circles on the water's surface. I climb down from the sails to sit next to her, kissing her again, silencing her song with my lips. She tastes of seawater in the sun. The Games are gone, and all of the destruction they have brought.

With a blink, all of that is gone. I am back to the hospital wing in the hovercraft hangar, in the Capitol. And she is too. She is gone again, though, her eyelids shut, her body limp. I realize my hand is on the glass, mouth slightly agape. I feel moisture on my face. I step away quickly, composing myself. Mags has her hand on my back, too short to reach my shoulder, and when I turn to her she is smiling. *It's going to be okay.*

In that moment I fully notice her importance in keeping Annie alive. She's been mentoring kids for over 50 years, and she's done her best work in this past week, maybe even better than when she
got me out of the Arena. Scraping up the funds to pay for all of the silver parachutes I decided to send down in a strange panic, when I thought her last breath of life was near, when I shut my ears off to the sound of cannons, afraid it would be hers. Keeping Annie alive while dealing with me. I don't know what it's like to take care of someone that low, but something tells me I'm going to have to find out very soon. I lean down and hug Mags, burying my face into her silver, feather-light hair, whispering a thank you into her neck. For everything.

There is one doctor on the other side of the glass, in a room of Avox nurses, and once Annie seems under control he removes his mask and walks toward us. At first I think he will bump into the glass, but a section slides away to admit him just before he makes impact. Before I can think to sneak past him to cross the wall and be closer to Annie, it slides back. With that thought, my hands feel dumb and useless. What use do I have if not for Annie?

The doctor clears his throat. "She is dehydrated. Severely." He deadpans. "She'll need lots of recuperation before she can have any visitors. Some of the lacerations are moderate to severe, but we've already made some precautionary measures to assure that she does not catch infection. As for her mental state..." He sighs and looks back at the sole hospital bed in the large room, the only solitary structure besides a few medicine cabinets and the machines next to Annie. The Avox nurses have cleared out; one stands in the corner, no doubt as her monitor. "I can only estimate that she will be ready for closing interviews and the president's crowning by the end of next week, at the very most."

I want to say something, anything, even ask questions, but before I can he is on the other side of the glass wall, stopping only to check the numbers the machine displays, then exiting the room altogether through a door in the corner.

I want to collapse. I want to cross the distance between the glass enclosure we are standing in now, which I can only assume is some sort of remade surgical theatre. I push past the Peacekeeper and try the piece of glass that slid back for the doctor. It doesn't budge. I press my fingers against it, pushing it, in vain. The Peacekeeper has me by the arm, telling me in an insistent voice that we have to leave now. I don't have the energy to protest, only able to catch one final image of Annie, alone in the hospital room, her face shielded by the oxygen mask, her perfect face burdened only by the blows of the Capitol.
Annie wakes up to a terrifying surprise. Finnick learns just how far he will go.

No matter how many times I blink, the red is always there, always tinting my vision. I cannot blink it away when I feel myself rise from the podium into the Games, not when I run to the Cornucopia. I cannot blink it away when I find Brine after the chaos of the bloodbath, and not after I have teamed up from the tributes from One and Two.

Red engulfs me when they take off his head.

I wake up with a start, gasping, trying to catch my breath as my chest rises and falls at an unprecedented rate. It is only after I have calmed down, maybe two minutes later, that I realize that Finnick's name has been whispered upon my audible gasps.

He is all I can think about. Him sneaking into my train car on the day of the Reaping, crawling into my bed and kissing me, calming me with sweet nothings he has whispered into my hair. I have not forgotten his face, especially not when my name was called. He said he knew it was coming, the rebuttal from the Capitol for skipping out on a Capitol visit to be with me. He thought that maybe Snow would reap one of his siblings. He had no idea that anyone in the Capitol knew about us. I remember how he strained to keep himself aloof, the smooth, sexy Finnick Odair everyone knew from the 65th Games, while my fate was in question.

The red clears from my vision and I can finally look around.

The first thing I can see are the hands of an Avox around my arm, in which there are now several needles embedded in my skin. I feel something around my face- an oxygen mask. I reach up to take it off, but the Avox presses my arm down gently, but with force. I wince at the touch, and look down to see small bruises blossoming underneath my pale skin. I lean my head back against a lumpy pillow, coming face to face with ugly, blinding lights.

Hospital room.

I'm still alive?

The Games come back to me all over again, especially the last minutes. I can only assume that I am the sole survivor of the flood. Backtracking, I realize it is because of my home of District 4.
Had I not been able to swim, I would have died in there, just like the rest. If my district partner had still been alive, would he have survived the flood? Would it be me who would kill him, instead of the other Careers?

I don't want to think about that anymore. Finnick got rid of the red, didn't he? If I think about him, maybe it'll go away forever. It is a thought I have to cling onto until...

Until when? Will I ever get better?

I hear a door creak open and shut before I can dwell on that any longer. All I can focus on anymore is the distractions. Without distractions all that I am is the Arena, engulfing me in blood and water. The light above me is shaded for a moment by an object I cannot place until I can focus my eyes. It is a man, a doctor, I can only presume, judging by his lack of an Avox mask and his quick precision as he checks the machines at my bedside. I didn't realize they were there, but now that I notice them all I can hear is the beeping. The beeping, like those silver parachutes in the Arena. I want you to come home. Eat so you can come home.

The doctor, with wiry, thinning, carrot colored hair and a seedy smile brimming with Capitol niceties, locks eyes with me for the first time, as if he has just noticed I am awake. "Ah, Ms. Cresta. It is so good to see that you are here with us again."

I make a move to wipe my eye, a gesture half in fatigue, half in restlessness. A strange feeling, very fragile. The doctor blocks my arm again, just like the Avox nurse did minutes ago, laughing nervously as he does it. "Now, now, dear, we can't have you messing up those bandages now that we've just patched you up!"

I motion to my oxygen mask with what little hand movement I have. The doctor seems to recognize this but does nothing, continuing to blabber on about my condition. "The Arena seems to have taken quite a toll on you!" Another laugh. "You've got a few cuts around your midsection, but nothing too major. The stitches have already dissolved and everything." He winces. "Your face, however, has been a little harder to... work with." He smiles plaintively. "The worst of your injuries was dehydration, and malnourishment. It's a good thing the Games ended when they did; you would have been dead by nightfall from exposure."

I could make a comment about what he has just said, but that would mean digging under my surface thoughts and actually thinking about the Games. I can't do that right now. I ditch the idea of getting the oxygen mask off my face and try to speak through it: one word. "Finnick."

At first the doctor is puzzled, but after a moment he closes his eyes. "Yes. Your mentors have been notified that you are conscious again. I'm sure they are on their way." At the mentions of Finnick, all laughter has vaporized from his lungs. He is as silent as the nurse that has retreated back to some corner, maybe outside the door, coming from the cabinet to the right of my bed back to my side, busying himself with needles and vials and liquids. I look away, towards the opposite side of the room, and feel my eyes flutter. I am remembering one of the picnics I took with Finnick last summer, a soft, lovely memory to drift off to, when out of nowhere I feel a prick in my forearm. I wince and recoil from the slight pain, snapping my eyes open to assess the damage. The doctor glances at me apologetically. "We've been taking small blood tests for the past couple of days, monitoring your recovery."

Blood. Is that really all it takes? I feel my fists tighten into balls, sharp and unkempt nails marking my palms with bright red crescents. Breaking skin like that sword broke skin. I can't breathe. I can't breathe and I feel myself drowning in the wave of the dam-

Far away, I hear the doctor's voice, thin and strained. Almost uncomfortable. I latch onto it like an anchor and try to drag myself out of my nightmare.
"Ms. Cresta! Ms. Cresta, please, are you alright?" A small pause. Another noise, too quiet to point out. Suddenly his voice is much quieter as well. "Ms. Cresta, you have visitors!"

Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no oh no no no no no

He is here for me already. He gropes at the glass, trying to pry it open with his fingernails. How did he make it out of there? I thought I was the only one. I had to be the only one if I wasn't the only one then he could kill me he's gonna kill me oh God oh God oh God

I slide off my oxygen mask and curl myself into a ball, my knees pressing so hard against my chest I'm sure it will bruise later. The doctor presses hands into my arms, trying to pry me apart, flitting from one side to the next. I shove him away with all of the energy I can muster. I feel my arm rip, and then it is red again, and I can see him again, him and Brine again, Brine and the Arena again. The Careers. The Games. I turn around, peeking an eye through my hands, through blood-tinted vision. Watching him grasp at the glass, slam his fists into it, exasperated, gives me a strange satisfaction, though every bang on the glass drives a stake into my heart. I give myself a moment to blink, and suddenly the glass has disappeared. I can see him, and before he even starts towards me I feel a scream rip through my throat. I'm struggling to free myself from the prison of the hospital bed, and in my focus to keep one eye on him and one on the floor I'm trying to stand on, I crash to the ground, taking with me a breathing machine and a few trays of clinking surgical tools. I scamper to the corner of the room, my hair falling limp and unwashed around my face. He is after me. He will kill me. He will whip out a machete and he will kill me and I will be dead just like Brine was just like he was he'll take my head off and there will be blood everywhere-

He stops. The surgical tools have settled, and i feel my own voice stop, my feral attempts to put as much distance between us stilled. My breath claws itself up past my vocal chords, coming out of me in loud, labored breaths. The doctor has left without a trace, but, but him, he is as still as water, until he tilts his head. "Annie?"

How does he know my name? How does he remember? How does he know who I am? "S-s-stay away from me."

"Annie, it's me." His voice is so calm and practiced it unnerves me.

He carefully extends his hand out to me, and I curl into myself again. "Get away from me, please, please, please don't kill me, get away from me, you're going to kill me, you'll kill me-"

"Annie, I won't kill you." He is advancing on me, and I want to scream again. My eyes dart about frantically, looking for anything to defend myself with, and when they land on a scalpel, ten feet away, my mind works in double-time, calculating every move he makes as I shift between him and the blade. If I catch him off his guard I can sneak past him and grab it, by the time he gets to me I can put it in his neck. I can move myself towards it, slowly, and he'll follow me, and by the time I'm close to it, he'll be close to me, too, and I can kill him. Why does he move so slow? Why won't he kill me? Why aren't I dead yet?

"Annie, please, listen to me. You need to calm down. Take a breath. Please. You aren't thinking straight. Don't do this. Calm down, Annie, please." He inches closer and closer. Every step he takes towards me displaces me closer to the scalpel, and I struggle to keep my eyes on him.

As I inch closer towards my weapon, the heel of my hand collides into something cold and smooth- no doubt another tool- and I slip for a moment, falling onto my back for a second before I can prop myself up again with my other hand. This averts his attention, and I see my chance.

I dive for the scalpel. I swing out my arm to grab it, grunting, but I am too late, and my fingers can only graze the cool gray handle. I see him move towards me in my periphery, and I try to move
away, turning towards him with one hand outstretched as if to shield myself. I squeeze my eyes shut in anticipation as I feel his body arch over mine.

And when I open them, Finnick is leaning over me.

I collapse with relief. My breathing slows. I can't look away from him, can barely dare myself to blink, because it has been weeks and months and years since I have seen him. His face is inches away from mine, and I can smell the sea on his skin, the smell of District Four. His eyes are searching my face, searching for... something. His lips are moving. Is he saying something?

"...Annie? Annie, are you alright? Annie? Annie, baby, it's me. It's Finnick. You know me." He cups my cheek in one of his hands, long and lanky fingers reaching all the way to my hairline. "Annie."

"Finn" is all I can muster.

He breaks out into a grin, a great, big, goofy grin. "Annie, baby, I found you." He's laughing, and I find it in myself to laugh with him, and then his lips are on mine. My eyes flutter shut and the beaches of District Four expands out around me. The sunlight is twinkling on a calm sea, warming the sand until it is hot to the touch. Farther off, small shops and homes are constructed out of molding wood covered in peeling paint. A breeze rustles the palm trees and whistles through the air, kicking up golden grains of sand. And then his lips are gone, but when I open my eyes he is still there, real and in front of me, I can reach out and grab his face and he won't disappear into thin air or turn into someone else. He is a warm and golden sun in a cold, dark place.

He drags a hand through my hair, bringing me out of my thoughts. "You want up?"

I nod, and in one fluid motion he slips one arm under my torso and another on the back of my knee and scoops me up as if I weigh nothing. Our faces are so close together I feel like kissing him again, but before I can he sets me back up on the bed, letting me go. I curl up, my arms around my knees.

He steps back, sighs. "So. You're back."

I can't help but giggle. "I'm back."

"I'm so sorry for-"

I stop him with a wave of my hand. "Finnick, you apologized enough for one lifetime before I even went into that Arena. Right now, I don't want to think about... about that place at all. Or this place. I'm just happy to be with you."

Finnick takes a moment before he nods his head. "Okay." He sits down on the bed next to me. "Alright. We don't have to talk about it. Not until you're ready."

I stare at the cabinets, studying the glass bottles filled with medicine. "I don't ever want to be ready. I never want to face what I had to face in there." My fingers start to tremble, and I have to screw up my face to keep from crying. "Finnick, it scares me what's happened. I was going to kill you, just then. Because I thought- I thought you were-"

"Shhh." He takes me into his arms, and I don't recognize that there are tears running down my face until they are soaking into Finnick's shirt. I wring myself out there, in the crook of his neck, letting myself shudder and sob in his grasp, while he rubs circles into my back. "We said we won't talk about it, so don't talk about it. Don't worry about any of that. You're right here with me, you're safe with me, I'll keep you safe."
No matter how much he holds me, or kisses me, or tries to convince me that I'm safe, I can never escape the fact that I was inches from killing him. If I had grabbed that scalpel, he would be bleeding out on this hospital floor right now, probably already dead. The image of it haunts me. My nightmares have always been filled with Finnick dead at President Snow's hand. I always thought that was the scariest thing there was, that President Snow was the only person that could instill that much fear in me. But the idea of Finnick dying at my own hand is a thousand times scarier than the president ever was.

Eventually, my breathing slows, my grip on Finnick slackens, and I pull away to wipe my face. When I look up, a few Avox nurses and the same doctor are lining the wall opposite us, the doctor smiling nervously. A part of me knows what this means.

I turn back to Finnick. "Do you have to leave now?"

I have to look away when I hear him sigh. I'm already trembling again. "I don't want to leave, Annie. But that's the only way you can get better." I feel him put his arms around me, lay a kiss on my temple. "I'll be back here, first thing tomorrow, I promise you. Then we can work on getting you back home."

He grips my hands in his for a few seconds, resting his head on mine, before moving back. By the time I've lifted my head to look at him, he is already gone, back behind the glass door. He turns around to meet my eyes, and for a moment he looks as if he's convinced himself to stay with me through the night, but the door is already open, and a Peacekeeper is already ushering him outside. I can just catch a glimpse of Mags waiting outside, but before I can make out anything, the door has shut. I draw out a long sigh, wiping my face of tears again, and lean back against the pillows propped up on the bed for me. The nurses have already begun reattaching cords and plastic tubes, and I give in. I feel a prick in my arm, and my eyelids droop. A minute later I am asleep.

I return to the hangar as soon as the sun rises next morning, wiping sleep from my eyes and pulling my arms through the sleeves of a coat as a sleek black vehicle drops me at the entrance. I've memorized the pathway down to the hospital room, and when I see the gray metal door, my heart skips a beat, and I jog down the rest of the hall. When I open the door, Annie is still on the bed, fast asleep. I breathe a sigh of relief, and the glass slides open for me when I move towards her. I am careful, stepping lightly, trying my best to avoid another episode like the one yesterday.

When I'm close enough, I run a hand through her hair. (Something safe, I reason with myself. Anything else could bring her right back into the Arena.) Her eyes flutter open, and when she meets my eyes, her face relaxes into a smile. I sigh with relief. Nothing like yesterday. Part of me absently wonders what triggers what, as I climb into bed next to her. She lays her head on my chest, and I brush my fingers through her dull red hair, still matted. I pick out dirt and leaves as I go, and make a note to tell someone to give her a shower. She falls back into a deep, motionless sleep soon enough, her breaths evening out, becoming longer and heavier. But I cannot force myself to sleep with her. I have to hold her tight, protect ourselves in a world I have never trusted, a world that is vying for the chance to kill her, to kill us both.

Annie has been asleep in my arms for a while when I see the carrot-red hair of the Capitol doctor peeking through the grated window of the metal door. His tiny face is screwed up in what could be stress, and he waves his arms madly, trying to grab my attention. When I finally make the mistake of locking eyes with him, he becomes even more urgent, motioning me to come in with him. I sigh internally and carefully peel myself away from Annie's sleeping form, crossing the room to push open the metal door.

I find myself in a long, narrow hallway, with unmarked doors lining both sides. I tower over the Capitol doctor, who is clearing his throat and gathering his thoughts.
"I trust you understand that her recovery will... hinder her closing interview."

I swallow. Suddenly my throat feels thick, and my tongue weighs a million pounds. "I understand."

"President Snow has contacted me personally and suggested that you could perhaps drum up a little excitement about this? People are going to be wondering what's happened to their little victor."

I'm still stuck on his first words. "It was a suggestion?"

The doctor gives me a look. "I think you understand what he means. His other suggestion is that Miss Cresta's interviews take place tomorrow."

"No." I deny him before I can even comprehend what that means.

"Then I can confirm you for tomorrow night's broadcast?"

Something tells me that this doctor's work isn't just subject to the hangar. "How much longer before Annie has to do her interviews?"

"Snow had the end of this week in mind."

"That only gives her four days of recovery. She'll bomb the whole thing."

He gives me a look, as if to encourage me. "Did you have anything else in mind?"

He's baiting me. "What does Snow want?"

"There is a particularly demanding Capitol citizen asking Snow for a night with you and another victor."

"Who?"

"I can't say. They've yet to confirm. But I trust you'll-"

"I'll be there." I have to look away in order to forget about what I'm agreeing to. "If you can promise Annie gets an extension on her recovery."

"I can." The doctor looks solemn for the first time, or just less cartoonish. I let myself trust his words.

I feel the weight of my deal with this man, this carrot-haired doctor I hardly know, begin to weigh on me. I lean myself up against one of the hospital walls, grappling with things, trying to remind myself that everything I do is for Annie. The doctor tries to slip away, but I gather myself long enough to ask him one more question. "Will she be okay?"

The doctor laughs to himself, hardly bothering to turn back to me to give me an answer. "That's an excellent question, Mr. Odair." He almost scurries down the hallway, like a rat, entering a room and leaving me alone.

Chapter End Notes
So how was that? Believe me, it took a lot of editing and re-writing to get their reunion scene just the way I wanted it. It's a little sad and a little gruesome, but this is the Hunger Games after all. (Please comment and tell me what you thought!)

Now, down to business. So I'm trying to limit this work to five chapters; originally it was supposed to chronicle Finnick and Annie's relationship from her Games to the Quarter Quell, occasionally going back to how they met and romantic stuff like that. But after some deliberation I thought it would be best if I just kept this work to the events immediately following Annie's Games. However, if you really like this and you want to see more, please comment and let me know! I'm thinking of starting a whole series all about Finnick and Annie pre-canon, and the more encouragement I get, the more likely it is that I bring it to the front burner and really dig in on it. Thank you all again for reading and I will see you at Chapter Three!
Showcase

Chapter Summary

Finnick's interview and the events directly afterwards.

Chapter Notes

Hi all! I want to sincerely apologize for taking a hiatus from this work. My only excuse is that college happened and I couldn’t keep up. I’ve written and re-written this chapter to make sure it’s just the way I wanted, while also keeping pace with the amount of chapters I want in this work. I also just wanted to hammer this out and publish it today because the last Hunger Games movie comes out tonight! It’s the end of an era and I’m sad to see it go (but I will admit I’m really excited to see Finnick and Annie’s wedding, among other things- it’s a scene I’ve been imagining for years that I’m very excited to see play out on-screen). Let me know if you’re seeing it and what you thought. Without any further ado, enjoy Chapter Three!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few stylists flutter around my face, fanning me with powder or spraying my mussed hair into place. Occasionally, they make quiet, one-word comments to each other, too quick for me to understand. They are so involved in their work they hardly have time for chit-chat, and I tell myself they must be the quietest Capitol citizens I’ve ever known.

For the Capitol’s standards, I am modestly dressed, wearing a clean white button-up and tie paired with a wool, heather-grey suit and dark grey slacks. The stylists have sprayed back the sides of my hair, and left the rest mussed on top of my head. I’m just thankful that no one has broken out the hair gel or body oil. Tonight I am not the smooth sex icon the Capitol makes me out to be. I am just Finnick, a mentor reporting on the status of his victor’s health.

I spent the morning with Annie, talking with her about District Four and all the things we’ll do when we get home, while she had a sad breakfast of oatmeal and crackers. My plan was to stay with her until she fell asleep. I didn’t want to lie to her about the interview, and the next couple of days, but I didn’t want her to know about that just yet. So I said nothing about the Capitol, talking only about Four well into lunch. The doctor comes in and sedates her after she eats, and I lay with her until the doctor waves his hands at the door again, my signal that the interview crew needs me. After that it’s like any other event. A Capitol escort comes to pick me up (at first I’m shocked it’s not our usual escort associated with our district, before I remember that the entire prep team is out partying, celebrating Annie’s win), and takes me to Caesar Flickerman’s studio, and some generic prep team sticks me in a suit and makes me up.

A few minutes before I’m set to prep with Caesar, Claudius Templesmith enters the room, his squashed face covered in white makeup, donning a bright yellow wig. He gives me crinkly smile that makes my insides curl. I fake the most stunning smile I can muster in return, and get up from my chair to shake his hand. “Claudius. To what do I owe this pleasure?”
I tower over him by at least a foot, but his presence still fills up the room, drowning me out. “Oh, I wanted to congratulate you personally on winning your first Games, as a Mentor.” He grins at me the whole time, and almost instantly I pick up on an underlying message he’s communicating. “It must be strange, finally getting a Tribute out alive, after four unsuccessful tries.”

I try and keep up the charade, not letting my guard down. “Yes, the past few years have been difficult. I still remember every face and every name I sent into the Arena.”

“And I’m sure you’ll remember Miss Cresta’s more than any other. You two seem to have a special relationship.” We’re crossing dangerous territory.

“A Mentor never forgets his first Victor.” I flash another smile his way, but I can’t tell if I’ve convinced him, so I keep going. “I do care about her. I only hope for the best for her.”

“Let’s hope so.” Claudius’s voice drips with disdain, but I don’t care. I’m just anxious for him to leave the room. He turns to the door, gripping the handle, but at the last moment he turns back to me. “I almost forgot- here’s the points Caesar intends to cover with you about Miss Cresta’s Games, and her recovery. We don’t want you going into that interview blind, do we?”

“Of course not.” I comply as Claudius hands a small stack of carbon-black index cards to me, engraved with the notes for the interview. I thank Claudius and he leaves without another word.

The whole exchange leaves a sick feeling in my stomach. I knew why Annie was reaped this year, and it wasn’t the odds. But I’ve come to terms with it, especially since she won the Games. Snow can’t be happy. I know he reaped her because I was getting too comfortable with her. I was getting too comfortable with everything. And when I refused to come down to the Capitol for him, he made sure that the bowl was filled with Annie’s name come the day of the Reaping. He meant to kill her, and putting her in the Games while I mentored her was the best way for him to exact his revenge. In his mind, Annie was never going to survive. And how could she? A weak, vulnerable girl with almost no skill set to boot?

I try to distract myself from the conversation I’ve just had with Claudius by looking at the cards he gave me. The points for the interview doesn’t stray much from what I expected: discuss her Victory, the extent of her injuries, the length of her recovery, and of course, the interview. Caesar will be sure to embellish here and there, turning the conversation on me or anyone else if he feels like it. I’ve never had a problem interviewing with Caesar. As long as I play up the Capitol charm and say the right thing, Caesar feeds off of it, and our interviews make record ratings.

An Avox knocks on the door after a few minutes, and signals to me that it’s almost showtime. I can find my own way to the studio floor, where the interview will take place. I’ve done this too many times before.

Caesar’s studio is always changing; I’ve never seen it the same way twice. Today it’s set up as a luxurious sitting room, with two plush chairs facing one another, and only a dark wooden end table between them. The walls are lined with ornate wallpaper, and the carpet is as soft as a cloud. Caesar is sitting in his usual spot, studying his own notes, and when he notices my arrival he jumps from his chair and greets me with outstretched arms, as if we’ve been friends for years. “Finnick! Such a pleasure to see you. And on such short notice.”

“Yes, some… plans had to be… rearranged. I’m sure you’ll understand.” No doubt Snow told Caesar the true nature of this interview, and what it entails. Caesar Flickerman has been acting as Snow’s puppet for as long as anyone can remember.

“Yes, yes, of course.” He graciously shows me to my seat before taking his own. “I trust you don’t have any questions concerning the material we’ll be discussing?”
“No.” Even if I did, there wouldn’t be anything either of us could do about it. This is Snow’s interview, not Caesar’s, and certainly not mine. “I’ve always been able to handle what you’ve thrown at me, Caesar.”

He breaks out in a raucous laugh then, throwing back his head and letting his voice fill the room. “That you have.” I even dare to crack a smile.

A producer somewhere off-set announces over the intercom that we are two minutes from going live. Men with cameras and lights scurry about, and stylists with small compacts of makeup descend upon Caesar and I to check every little detail. I breathe deeply. No matter how many times I do this, it never gets any less nerve-wracking. I’ve gotten better at it, and I’ve always had a knack for these interviews, but the seconds before always make my stomach turn. I take one last glance at the cards before stuffing them into my inside jacket pocket. Caesar warms up next to me, buzzing his lips and doing all sorts of vocal exercises. The producer crackles onto the intercom again, announcing one minute. The stylists flutter away then, taking their seats in production chairs in the very back of the studio. Set designers leave too, after making sure every detail of the background is absolutely perfect. Production workers fix lighting drapes, sound editors work on huge boards by the cameras. One producer wearing a headset signals that we have thirty seconds until we’re live, and another shouts, asking for silence on set, please. Caesar leans over, making some offhand joke about the producers, but I don’t hear him. All I can focus on right now is tapping into the Finnick Odair that the Capitol knows and loves.

We get down to ten seconds, and the set is completely silent. Five, and the producer begins to count down on her fingers. I bow my head, waiting for Caesar’s voice to cue me in as I concentrate. And then the lights flash, the music plays, and Caesar’s signature greeting echoes through the studio. When my head bounces up, my mouth curled up into a flashy smile, I am the Capitol’s Finnick. Snow’s Finnick.

“Tonight I’m joined by Finnick Odair, Victor of the 65th Hunger Games.” Caesar turns to me, sporting a toothy grin. “Welcome to the show, Finnick.”

I smile back at him coyly, crossing my legs. “Thank you for having me. It’s a pleasure to be here.”

“Now, Finnick. Of course, we all know you as one of the youngest- and most successful, I might add- Victors of the Games.” He pauses for a quick chuckle, and I turn the corner of my mouth up as if on cue, even daring a wink. “But this past week, you’ve taken on a different role, one as Mentor to the Tributes of your district. You’ve been doing this for a few years already, but this was your first successful Games as Mentor.” He stops there, posing the statement as a question for me to answer.

I sit forward in my chair a bit. “Yes, that’s correct. I’ve been Mentoring every year since my Victory, and learning more and more each Games, thanks to Mags, our district’s other Mentor. And at first, it was difficult. At first I wanted everyone I sent into the Arena to come out. And now I’ve realized that it doesn’t work like that. You win some, you lose some. And I was glad to finally see some payoff to my hard work this week.”

“Yes, of course. Congratulations to you and your Tribute Annie.” Caesar flashed another grin again. “Tell us… was this Victory particularly special to you?”

Don’t let him phase you. “Well, I mean, of course. I think every Mentor out there can agree that you never forget the first kid you get out of there. I think there’s always going to be a special bond there.”

Caesar smiles empathetically. “Of that we have no doubt. And I believe you have an update as to
He's shifted the topic back to Annie. This is where I have to focus, and sound objective as possible. "Yes. As we all saw, Annie was not in the best shape at the end of the Games, or during the Games, for that matter." I can already feel myself losing my words, struggling to keep it together. "They're never easy on anyone. But they were especially difficult for her. She's still recovering from her battle scars, but I can assure you, and the rest of Panem, that she will be in good health in time for her interviews."

Caesar’s smile seems genuine. “I know we’re all glad to hear that. Panem is certainly worried for her. And is she in good spirits?

I have to stop myself from wincing on camera. How do advertise this to the rest of the country? How can I lie about her mental state to everyone when they’re going to see the truth eventually? “I’ll be honest with you, Caesar- everyone saw how shaken up she was at the end of the Games.”

“Of course.”

I choose my words carefully here. “It’s… certainly a difficult process. Every Victor does go through a bit of a… shock, when they come out on the other side. But Annie is strong- if she can make it through the Games, she can make it through anything. It will just take some time."

When I finish speaking, I can tell Caesar wants to pull more out of me, but he refrains, instead reining the topic back in. "That's lovely. So inspiring. And I'm sure everyone in Panem is so excited to meet Annie again in her closing interviews, which, unfortunately, have been moved back a few days." Caesar sticks his bottom lip out to the camera.

"A few days? We were promised more time than that. "Yes, I do hope you and the rest of Panem will understand. Annie and I want to give you, the viewer, the best impression of these Games that we can. We don't want these final days in the Capitol to be marked by her recovery; we want them to be filled with memories of her Victory."

"Wonderfully put, Finnick." Caesar remarks next to me. "I know we all agree. I'm afraid that's all the time we have, but thank you, so much, for being here tonight with us. " He reaches across the table to pat me on the wrist. It's the first contact we've had the entire interview, and it sends shivers down my spine. I can feel myself coming back down to Earth, and I smile back at him as he closes things up.

"Always a pleasure."

With one final nod he pulls away, and turns his gaze to the camera, segueing to another topic of tonight's broadcast I'm too shaken to listen to. I sit and smile for the rest of Caesar's speech, on the off chance the camera decides to flash back to me. The minute Caesar utters the words "We'll be right back”, the cameras are down, the lights are dimmed, and the entire studio seems to sigh in tandem, myself included. A producer shouts, and two Avoxes spring up out of nowhere to take me away. I peel myself out of the chair and shuffle awkwardly from the studio, without even Caesar to tell me goodbye.

After what feels like hours of snaking through the production building, the Avoxes leading me along, I return to the front entrance. Outside the glass doors I can see thousands of Capitolites with cameras, swarming the place, and a sleek black car waiting for me at the end of it all. I take a deep breath, wave my hand at the Avoxes to signal their departure, and rush into the chaos.

Warding off photographers and reporters left and right, I somehow make my way into the backseat of the car. No one is waiting for me in the backseat, and as soon as I close the door the
chauffeur peels away from the sidewalk and merges into Capitol traffic, undoubtedly following orders to take me back to the Training Center. I have half a mind to go back to the hangar, to Annie, but I stop myself before I can, barraging myself with menial excuses. *She's probably sleeping. She needs to rest. Mags will worry about you. Snow's watching you. Snow's watching her.*

Instead of relaxing, I instead turn my mind to the interview, mentally skimming what I said, repeating it to myself, looking for errors, any way for Snow to undermine Annie or me. My mind clings to one of the last things Caesar said. *Moved back a few days.*

*Is Snow playing with us now? Giving us hope and then taking it away? I was promised more than just a few days. I made sure of that when I agreed to...*

*No, Snow wouldn't. He's not the type of person to make plans and then take them away. He's just trying to mess with my head, trip me up. I know better than that.*

The car pulls up next to the back entrance of the Training Center, and I don't waste any time leaving the car and entering the building.

Mags is waiting for me on the sofa when I arrive back at our apartments, holding a letter in her hands. The television is on; she must have been watching the interview. At first she doesn't notice me come in, but after a knock on the counter by the door she turns and smiles at me, patting the spot on the sofa next to her. I pull my blazer off and set it on a nearby chair, and collapse into the seat beside her.

She sets aside the letter, and takes one of my hands in both of hers, holding it as if its a precious item. I lean my head back up against the cushions, closing my eyes, resting my brain and my body for the first time all day. I feel Mags run one of her hands through my hair before resting it back on top of my hand.

I open one eye. "What does the letter there say?"

I can see the distress in Mags's eyes. She shakes her head. *Don't worry about it.*

I sit up again. "No, Mags, I want to know. What is it?"

She sighs, already admitting defeat, and hands the letter to me. She doesn't even give me a second glance, just gets up and strides off to her room. I don't call after her, too focused on the contents of the letter. I throw the envelope to the side and unfold the sheet of paper. It's off-white, and crisp cardstock. It reminds me of marble.

*Finnick Odair,*

*This letter has been brought to your suite to inform you of an impromptu appointment orchestrated by Capitol officials. The meeting shall take place at the Central Building on Presidential Row two nights from today, and you will be accompanied by Ms. Cashmere Fontaine...*

I can't read any further. My head starts to hurt, and I toss the letter on the table. *Cashmere.* I try to be thankful that I've been set up with another Victor I know well, but it doesn't help. Is this what I'm buying Annie's safety with? A night with a stranger, with only Cashmere to keep me company? I've done this so many times before that it shouldn't hurt like this, but it does. This time the stakes are higher, and the comedown will be harder.

I can hear my voice mingling with Caesar's as the television plays reruns of the interview. It makes my stomach twinge, and when I meet eyes with myself on the screen, I scramble to find a
remote to turn it off. Suddenly I feel sick, and I close my eyes again, letting my head fall back onto
the sofa. *How did this happen?*

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you thought! Also I had to take some artistic license to give
Cashmere a last name, and also name some buildings and streets in the Capitol. I
hope it was as seamless as I tried to make it. Now, Chapter Four is going to be a little
more gritty and real, and this is where the "Mature" rating is going to come into play.
I'll be talking about that more when I publish it.
Thank you guys again for reading, and please leave me a comment telling me your
thoughts! It really does make my day. And enjoy Mockingjay Part Two! If anyone
else is seeing it tonight let me know so we can gab about it in the comments :)

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