Deadman’s Float

by rabbitprint

Summary

Set between the 65th and 74th Games, spoilers. Surviving the game inside the arena isn’t much different than surviving the one outside -- at least, not for Finnick.

Notes

"It takes ten times as long to put yourself back together as it does to fall apart."

Dead weight doesn’t really float for long. Corpses bob only while there's gas left inside them, pressing and leaking, forcing skin to puff out. They’re buoyed by their own rot. The process of decomposition inflates them like balloons. Decay pushes them to the top.

Decay, surprisingly, elevates a number of things.

Living people among them.

Eventually, as gases escape and cavities become saturated, the body becomes too waterlogged to stay up. Fish do their part, picking and nibbling at the feast. Tissues become soft threads, diffusing into clouds like half-digested vomit purged into a partially filled sink. And bones -- well. Bones sink. Everything sinks. Sometimes, floaters are so common in District 4 that they don't bother hauling out bodies immediately upon discovering one, as long as it's not in a key water channel. Give it enough time, and the water takes care of the bodies completely, dragging them down and
But people, living people, can stay up for a very long time, swollen and bloated for years as they drift in lazy rotations of the current. Living people rot much more slowly.

Finnick floats.

The year after Finnick wins, they assign him to mentor the female tribute.

She's older than him, taller. He's only a few months into fifteen, and she's a few months after sixteen: younger than the optimal seventeen-plus, but better than all the rest of the options that year. A surprise achiever, just like him. Finnick already met her before, in passing -- they all trained together, after all, together and against each other -- but when he sits down to go through the preliminary greetings on the train, he sees her swallow hard.

This makes him pause, distracted from trying to remember his lines about how much her family may earn if she wins, and how much they'll understand if not. "What's wrong?"

"I don't think I'm ready," she whispers back.

Finnick blinks, uncertain now that they've veered off-script. "You were at the top of the Careers," he ventures. No one has to force themselves to excel; there's enough competition in District 4 that it's easy to slide down in rank if you're unwilling to fight.

"I know. I know. I didn't think --" The girl pauses, inhales sharply, and steadies herself. "I didn't think I'd win."

Finnick shifts back against his chair. The train rumbles around them, groaning vibrations into his bones. He's not unsympathetic. It didn't feel real himself, when he'd been picked so young; all he'd cared about while in training was pushing himself harder and harder, racing against numbers and scoreboards until he pushed himself right into the lead, and then face-first into death. "You didn't take the easy option out."

It happens sometimes. Two reapings back, the male candidate had refused to volunteer at the last minute. The boy whose name had been drawn had waited and waited on stage, first confidently expecting to be saved, and then shrieking as the Peacekeepers had dragged him away. His substitute Career had passed eligibility a few months afterwards and had moved away up the coast, fixing nets and having a lonely -- but safe -- life.

The girl snorts, her first sign of stubbornness. "And be a pariah for the rest of my days? I'd rather have a fast death than a slow one."

The words are distressingly apt. Finnick watches the reflection of the sun as it flickers and bounces off the silverware, and wonders how much she knows.

"Fast is better," he agrees at last. "Much, much better."

After that, there's really nothing else to say.
The girl's in good shape, lean-muscled with a swimmer's endurance, armed with a Career regime of combat and tactics and sense. That's where her suitability ends. Her form is solid, but her aggression scores below average; according to the instructors, she pulls her punches on the Training Center floors. In talking further, Finnick is quick to learn that she was chosen to compete not because her family thought she was a natural fighter, but because they'd already had too much debt lined up and had selected one of their children to carry the bulk of the family tesserae, bartering the safety of one in exchange for the whole.

She has the delicate fingers of a fly-tyer, and they tremble when she tries out stances in her quarters with imaginary weapons. Finnick gives her only a minute of holding a trident, watching her attempt to mimic his posture exactly.

"No," he insists, shaking his head. "Don't try to be me. You have to figure out how to win through your own strengths."

"But I'm not strong," she says, her voice as little as a sand-piper newly hatched and wobbling. "I mean, I know I was picked to volunteer, but I'm not that brave. And people won't like me like they liked you."

Kindness opens Finnick's mouth for him; experience shuts it before anything comes out. He forces himself to set aside his own perspective and look, really look at her, with a stylist's cold assessment. She's right: her chin is broader than Capitol fashion prefers this year, and her eyes are too big. She scowls when surprised; she doesn't smile enough. She's pretty, and she's capable, but the Capitol will be twice as hungry now that they've had him, and anyone else is doomed to fall short. She'll be found wanting simply because her personality isn't Finnick's, her charms aren't Finnick's, her body isn't Finnick's, and there's a cold knot in his belly as he considers how something so petty can tip the balance of her life.

"Just survive," he tells her, feeling a little desperate in how vast a realm those two words fail to encompass. "Any way you can. It doesn't matter if you'll be the only one who's proud of yourself in the end. Use anything and everything you can think of, and if it comes down to it, die in a way that you choose."

The girl doesn't make it to Day 3.

Finnick had flirted and charmed every favor he could manage, hoping for any tool, any gift that might beat the odds, even as he saw how quickly everything was collapsing inside the Arena walls. District 4's boy had died that morning -- Mags sighing, muttering, spreading honey on her breakfast muffins with a controlled ferocity -- and Finnick had watched the surviving tributes close in around each other, driven by desperation and the Gamemakers' traps. He'd kept talking anyway, scraping up every grace of humor he could find as two boys flushed his tribute out of her hiding spot. He only stopped once she got stabbed through the throat. Even then -- midway through a wry joke with a Capitol politician -- he'd continued the words automatically, dry-mouthed, mixing up half the verbs as he watched the screen while she died. He even managed something witty about temptation as the District 8 boy sawed a knife through the corded muscles of her neck.
Later that night, after everyone else has gone to bed fashionably tardy to pretend they hadn't seen the lackluster hints of dawn, Finnick tunes in to the replays of the deaths. He's in one of the communal viewing lounges, littered with plush chairs and monitors larger than he is, lists of names scrolling across every corner of the room. Both District 5 tributes died faster than his. That might be a comfort.

He's not particularly surprised to find President Snow sitting down beside him.

There are no sponsors around Finnick now; there's no need to woo them now that his District's entries are finished, but they'd clung to him anyway throughout the rest of the day, some of them commenting on how nice it was to have his undivided attention now that his tribute was finally dead. The gall of her to last so long, one woman had snickered, and Finnick had smiled graciously as he'd refilled her drink.

He glances at Snow, but isn't been able to decipher the man's expression: cool, bland, blank as his namesake. The President's glass is half-filled with liquor, and the ice cubes are crisp, but one look at the steadiness of his grip and Finnick knows that Snow's been nursing the illusion of imbibing all throughout the night.

"Only the third day. Could have been worse, I suppose." Cushions squeak as Snow leans back in his chair. "I do so hate it when you Fours never even get out of the Cornucopias. Barely worth calling you a Career District when that happens."

Finnick thinks of noontime oceans: smooth, placid. Effortless. "She wanted to die fast," he states slowly, as if shaping the words like a metronome might strip them of any possible sedition.

"Then she failed."

Maybe, Finnick thinks, maybe, but Snow's already clearing his throat.

"Your performance was even better than hers, I daresay." The president tilts his hand, swirls alcohol around the lines of his palm. The ice hasn't melted an inch; Finnick's willing to bet the cubes are glass, crafted into shape to help Snow play pretend.

Finnick's mouth feels parched, sticky from the liquor he'd befriended in lieu of actual people. "I had more experience with tridents," he replies. "It makes a difference."

"I wasn't talking about last year." Snow's voice is dangerously loud. The room is that much quieter by comparison, hushed velvet animals of the furniture huddled together in fear. "I've decided. You'll come back next year to mentor too. And the year after that. You'll be good for your District. Help even the odds."

Part of Finnick's mind stirs, a part so far below the surface that it barely ripples the current. A few other male victors from Four are still alive. Finnick's not the only option. "Or else?"

"Or else you'll suddenly discover how much harder it is to keep your tributes alive when no one wants to lend them a hand in the arena. You might not know this, considering how lucky you were, but you saw an unexpectedly vast bounty." Again, the liquor in Snow's glass swishes, but the President still does not lift it to his mouth. "It could even be called unprecedented -- at the time."

On the screens, a boy stumbles through razor-sharp grass, clutching his own innards like wet sausages in his arms.
"Did you ever imagine what it must have been like for the other tributes, being on the receiving end of all your gifts? To know that their opponent was so much better armed, better fed, that their enemy wanted for nothing? Hardly fair sport. Surely you wouldn’t want any of your tributes to be in that same position, someday in the future." The President turns his head; the ruthlessness in his eyes dares Finnick to look away first. "Or for their enemies to be so very, very fortunate."

Finnick swallows.

"I understand perfectly, sir."

The year after that -- the day that Finnick turns sixteen -- President Snow arranges everything.

His birthday celebration is held in the Capitol. Finnick's brought in special, just for the party, even when there isn’t a Game yet in session. The train that speeds him along carries only him and his guards. There are streamers at the station when he arrives. There's fanfare.

Snow arranges that. Snow arranges his quarters. Snow arranges the television crews and the surprise interview questions and the guest list.

Snow arranges the woman that Finnick goes home with that night.

Finnick doesn't struggle. He doesn't protest. He smiles when he meets the woman he's meant to escort, and compliments her butterfly-shaped eyelashes. He remembers to be charming as he accompanies her to her social affair, and flirts all the way through dinner and drinks while she giggles and casts him sultry glances.

Mags had already told him what to expect.

She had told him all the consequences.

So the first time that Snow rents him, Finnick is prepared. He knows how the night will end, and doesn't hesitate when he's asked -- cajolingly-- to take off his clothes. It isn't even the first time someone's touched him, but those times had been with other teenagers, fumbling in the boat docks after classes, all of them aware that they might have only one more year to fit an entire lifetime into. Fourteen was a time to claim inexperience, but not innocence.

But at fourteen, Finnick’s encounters had been limited to a few clumsy hands and mouths, and one really awkward attempt with a carpenter girl that had been over before he figured out how to make it last. He was a Career, after all; none of them ever bothered to hold off, and no one expected them to, within reason. Everyone was too busy waiting for them to line up and die. No one begrudged their fleeting attempts to live.

At fifteen, Finnick had had more things on his mind than who to bed.

So he's less of an expert than he'd like at sixteen, but there's no time to regret, no time to care. The perfumed chambers of the Capital give him no ideas for how to perform, but he's young enough to go through the motions with enthusiasm, shedding his pants like the scales off a fish. He isn't any better with endurance, either, but the woman giggles and coos into his ear as he thrusts inside her, clumsy and slippery on the angle, having to use his hand to help jam himself back in place
whenever he leans out too far. He overbalances more than once, almost catching himself on her hair, elbowing the pillow and trying to figure out where his weight's supposed to go.

Afterwards, he rolls over in the covers, wondering if he's supposed to feel anything: angry, afraid, dirty, tainted, ashamed. *Anything*, instead of a strong craving for a shower, and a mild desire to be alone for a while. Everything inside him is blank, blank and distant, just like the same reaction he'd had when the hovercraft picked him up out of the arena and the techs had asked, as they mopped drying blood off his body, *so what does it feel like to win? What does it feel like?*

*Nothing*, Finnick had thought back then. He thinks it again in the crisp sheets of the luxury king-sized bed. *Winning feels like nothing at all.*

The woman who'd rented him stretches, rubbing small, idle circles into her belly. "*That wasn't bad,*" she observes pleasantly. "*Altogether satisfying. You certainly do not disappoint, Finnick.*"

"*I'm a Career,* *m'am,* he almost adds, but catches himself in time. "*I was raised to do this.*"

"*To do this?*" she giggles, and he blushes.

At the sight of blood rising in his cheeks, she lifts a hand to cup his jaw. "*How cute you are!* *It's part of your allure.*"

*Allure.* Finnick glances away, quick as an eel escaping. His throat feels tight.

The woman doesn't comment on his sudden aversion, possibly mistaking it for flirtation. "*I want to give you something, Finnick,*" she muses. "*A little token of our encounter, so you'll always remember me.*" Her fingers trace down his face to his neck, drifting next to his arm. *"Bracelets are all the rage these days. Shall I send you something to wear?"

Faster than he can stop it, Finnick catches her hand, trapping both her bones and his own in place with a sudden burst of panic. He can imagine it: first her decoration on his arm, then another's. Then another's. So much gaudiness all over him, the competing marks of everyone who's had him, like piss stains against a wall.

"*Your company alone is gift enough,*" he manages. The lie is crude, so he bends his mouth to her fingers and dots light kisses over her skin. "*I don't need anything more.*"

"*But I want to say thank you. I can't let you go like this,*" she gasps, aghast, terrible in the sincerity of her innocence. "*Not when I paid so much.*"

The words are so blunt that they don’t make sense at first. Finnick hears them, rattles them around, and still can't interpret them. Then comprehension hits, and his breath hitches.

Of course -- his value. The price she paid reflects that. Her *pride* reflects that. Like rearing a purebreed dog: if you don't feed it properly, you can't feel good about yourself later when you see it on the track and think, *that was mine.*

*Look what a good person I am, I treated something so expensive so well.*

His first instinct is to refuse. Deny any claim she has, any option that might wipe clean her conscience. His second instinct is more rational. Automatically, his mind flashes back to all the faces in District 4, counting off names about who might suffer if he refuses, if an idle comment is dropped to President Snow in precisely the wrong way. Finnick’s family is gone -- his family is
safe -- but he's not without friends, not without faces that brighten when he sees them, and who make him brighten back.

He thinks of Mags -- sweet, elderly Mags -- and just like that, his decision is already made.

He won't be another Haymitch.

The smile he produces is radiant, fit for the cameras. “Anything,” he tells his client, placing a kiss as a distraction, relieved when she coos. “Anything you want to give me, I promise to treasure always. You’ll always be special, my dear. It'll be our little secret -- just between you and me.”

Mags is waiting for him in his quarters when he returns in the morning.

He is sticky and sweaty and overperfumed. He had refused the offer of a shower with as much tact as he could manage, knowing better than to be drawn into a trap that would have him lingering just a little longer, delaying for food or comforts, only to be pulled back into his client's bed.

Mags is in the foyer of his apartments when he drags himself inside. He'd barely had time to see the place when he had arrived at the Capitol, hadn't noticed all the furnishings that must have been tailored around his theme. Everything is white and blue, glassware and fountains and one long table facing along the entrance of the central room, coated in ripples of light from a distorted sun.

On the table, lined up in narrow stacks, are dozens of folded sheets of paper. Piles and piles of envelopes, arranged like tombstones on a lawn. Notecards, peeking out from between them. Letters.

Invitations.

Finnick stops as he realizes what they are. "So many?" he blurs, dry-mouthed with disbelief. So many more faces to lie to. So many more nights, one after another, until he can't even imagine where they'd stop.

Mags is silent as Finnick toes off his shoes, kicking them aside with muted thumps. He peels off his clothes, brutally unshy, but -- just as he's struggling through the buttons of his undershirt -- his fingers stop working. They give up, and he does too, sitting down hard on the jumble of his clothes, a pink frog curled up in crumpled white weeds, lint sticking to his thighs.

Mags glances away, back to the table. "Your charm helped me get you so many sponsors," she remarks sadly. The bony fan of her fingers taps one of the envelopes idly, as if hoping to incinerate it with a touch. "But I knew it'd catch up to haunt you. That they'd want -- more than just promises. More than just a face --"

"I'm not sorry I'm alive," he tells her fiercely, before she can feel bad about using every option available: before she has time to doubt herself, to berate herself for putting his immediate survival first. It doesn't matter that she'd had to make a decision with whatever resources she had at hand, and that he had been one of them -- because in the end, the boy she released into the arena came back breathing, and that was what mattered most. "You're not responsible for what they do to us."

“Finnick, boy,” she says, and her voice is very soft.
"I'm alive," he repeats, staring hard at the table with its warrant-list of requests. "There's no reason to apologize."

The papers blur together in his vision. Finnick blinks until they clear, ignoring the dampness streaking down his face.

*I can do this*, he thinks, his eyes straight ahead, memorizing the geometry of envelopes and pages intersecting. *They're just like weapons. Lined up on the Cornucopia, in the Training Center. Just more things to fight with.*

"Mags," he says, and if his voice trembles just a little, they both pretend not to notice. "Tell me what to do next."

She spares him by walking down the length of the table, neither one of them looking at each other as they regard the enemy sketched out in promise and pen. With a deft hand, she sorts through the envelopes so briefly that he knows she's already read them, has already seen what people are willing to pay for his body and has compared the offers in advance without having to check his opinion.

Part of him is grateful for that reprieve.

"This one's most likely," she answers eventually, pulling it free from the stack. "Secretary for one of the branches. If I bet, Snow'll send you to him next."

"Is he the highest bidder?"

"No. The real cost will be something else." Mags's voice lacks all doubt. She speaks with the cold confidence of a doctor who has buried a thousand stillborn infants. "Some favor that Snow needs from 'em. Some observation he wants them to make about you while you're there. Some... demonstration of his power."

She kneels beside him, close, too close, and Finnick realizes he's recoiling, reeling back from another human's proximity. He forces himself to stop. Mags can read his body language; she doesn't come any closer with her hands or her body, only leans her head in, as if to murmur condolences to a child.

"Keep your ears open, Finnick. Do just enough to appease him, but keep something for yourself too. Arm yourself."

*Arm yourself.* Another Game. People giving him things. People's favors to win. Finnick starts to tilt his head back and then lets himself exhale, one long stream of air that bubbles out of him and leaves his lungs numb. The world floats around him; he lets it go, trying to assemble his weapons in his mind, the threats to weigh, sorting them into things he can beat and things he can't. He has to *focus*; he has to put everything that doesn't matter *away* somewhere, away to where it won't distract him, away until the time is safe again to take it out.

He can do it. Day by day. Hour by hour. Step by step.

Death by death.

He manages to unwind his arms from around his knees, and suddenly realizes that Mags is speaking.
"Finnick," she says, in the patient tone of someone who's been repeating the same word over and over until it became only a jumble of noise. "Finnick, boy."

He blinks, and realizes that he can't understand at all why she'd be concerned.

"The Game never really ends, does it?" His limbs feel like dead weight. Too heavy to lift, too empty to matter. "We're still fighting to stay alive. The odds are never in our favor."

Mags seems about to answer, and then she rests her gnarled fingers beside him on the floor -- not touching, simply close. "You know this's a terrible thing," she murmurs. "What he's making you do."


"It's no harder than killing," he replies, truthfully.

Mags looks at him again, and the sadness has a different weight in her now, something that makes him want to reach out and comfort her, reassure her that everything's all right. If only he could move. "You were one of the calmest victors I ever saw come out of that arena," she says. "But that doesn't mean you didn't get hurt, Finnick boy."

Finnick closes his eyes against her voice, against the sympathy that -- if he stops to let himself think about it -- might bring everything down around him like a hurricane. It has that weight; he can feel it. It could destroy him if he tries to confront it directly, if he thinks about it too long, the years and years of the future-to-come just waiting like a landslide, with no chance of escape.

So he doesn't. He cuts off his train of thought, tucks it far behind the immediate threats, let himself focus only on what he has to do next. Keeps his breathing slow, just as he would during a dive gone wrong. No need to panic. Save the oxygen. Life is just another arena. You survive, however you can.

"I want a bath," he says aloud, and corrects: "I want a swim. I just. I just."

He senses Mags come around in front of him, her body between him and the window light, casting comforting shadows against his eyelids.

"Mags. I want to swim."

There was something the instructors always used to say, when the lessons got too repetitive and the complaints would start up:

*Every single one of you here will panic when you step into the arena. It doesn't matter how prepared you think you are, or how many matches you win in practice. You can rehearse killing your fellow students a thousand times. You can even beat each other unconscious every day if you want. It won't matter.*

*When you're brought into the arena, the environment changes. Noises change. Smells are strange.*
Your clothing against your skin, the humidity on your face. It'll be different enough that -- no matter what we do out here -- it'll make everything feel wrong. It'll knock you out of your comfort zones.

You'll panic. We know you will. Everyone does.

That's why we make you repeat these drills, until you can do them on autopilot. So when your thoughts freeze up, your reflexes take over. It's not your minds that are going to keep you alive in those first few minutes. Your minds aren't what will save you.

Your bodies need to survive first. Everything else -- well. That, you can fix after.

Finnick thinks about the difference between survival of the body and survival of the mind years later, when they bring back Annie, and it's his turn to be Mags.

He's been Mags from start to finish this Game, using every resource he could come up with to call in sponsors. The odds were against Annie; no one wanted to bet on a girl who was too terrified to fight. So Finnick sold Annie's resilience, her instincts, her ability to endure and hide. He sold her durability. He sold himself. Trading promises and secrets and smiles and fingers and lips, and all together it was barely enough to bring a victor back home alive, but she came back anyway, she came back, and that's the only thing that matters.

The techs have her hooked up to a dozen machines in her quarters. She's barely been conscious even after being officially released. All her scars and scratches have already been smoothed clean, the marks of the Arena erased. All the external blemishes that the Capitol thinks to wipe away, as if that could reset someone again, make them clean, make them better than new.

"We'll need her up soon," Annie's stylist says, displeasure in the lines of his jaw. "She's got to be able to speak on camera."

Mags folds her thin fingers around Annie's hands. Finnick stays back, sitting far away from the bed. Every time he looks at her -- his surviving tribute, the one that finally made it out alive despite the odds -- all he can see is how the struggle will weigh on her once it's placed on her shoulders. This is her future: this is the penalty for her audacity for wanting to continue to breathe.

Years, and years, and years, he thinks. Years and years, now waiting to engulf Annie too.

I'd rather have a fast death than a slow one.

But Annie survived, just like he did. She became a victor and in doing so, made it to the next level of the Game. Finnick knows the shape of the Capitol arena now, just as Mags showed him. He’s still Annie's mentor. He can help her through this. Different weapons, different defenses, but Finnick can teach them too. He knows about quiet rooms, and tea with the kettles set to turn off before they can shriek a whistle. He knows about windows that go opaque at night so you never have to worry about what might be looking inside at you. He knows about wide doorways and open halls and about sitting quietly, very quietly, like a piece of driftwood on the open ocean as everything floats away around you, and you pull yourself slowly out of someone else's bed.
He knows about watching the sunset in silence, staying mute for hours as the waves turn from gold to crimson to black. He knows about Capitol prices and District politics and coffee with Mags in the early mornings, creamy bowls of shrimp bisque set beside her aging hands as she pats his fingers and mumbles about tides, and he asks if she's remembering to take her vitamins, and neither one of them pretend to be normal because normal is nothing now. Not for them.

Annie made it out alive. She's strong enough to keep going. She's strong, and Finnick's strong, and he has to believe in that. They're not broken. They're not damaged beyond repair. Either of them.

Annie trembles, even in her morphling haze. Mags sighs, a soft wheeze of breath like a sail's death rattle.

Finnick gets up, and goes to draw a bath.

Annie stays home during the next year's Game. Mags -- despite her health -- offers to mentor again in her stead. The Capitol agrees, though Finnick wagers less from mercy, and more from amusement in how heavily Finnick had worked the sponsor list last Game. He bargained down in position, made himself publicly vulnerable. If Snow indulges District 4's mentors now, it's only because he intends to collect the price elsewhere.

Finnick doesn't expect to escape a visit from Snow -- the longer the president drags it out, the worse Finnick's punishment will be -- so a sick twist of relief blossoms in his belly when he hears the patient, steady executioner's tread climbing the stairs to his observation perch. Finnick's chosen refuge this time has a balcony view, an open-air seating box that gives him as much of a chance to observe the sponsors as the screens. He doesn't try to hide his location; it works in his favor, ironically, to be so exposed. It makes it harder for would-be patrons to make a move on him with too many eyes nearby.

This year's Game has been moving along at a healthy clip, alliances formed and betrayed with the speed of Capitol fashion trends. They're down to a bare handful of survivors now. It won't last a week.

Snow leans heavily on the railing beside Finnick, as casual as if he, too, were a sponsor there to comment on the accuracy of the kill odds. Below them, the screens shimmer, decorating the ballroom floor with a million colors of reflected blood.

"Annie isn't much use to me as the picture of a triumphant victor. Almost as bad as those damned addicts in Six. Even though Four's supposed to have Careers, your District hardly compares to Two or Three." A snort of a laugh that turns wet at the end, and Snow turns his face, presses his knuckles against his mouth where Finnick can't see. "She's of exactly zero marketable value. In fact, this young woman is almost entirely... useless."

It's strange. Finnick should step away. He should recoil from Snow, resist the threat the man embodies, the demands implicit in each word. But the cost is no more than Finnick expected. He's used to it. It's normal now. He can take it, he knows how, it doesn't bother him. His body keeps going. He's been doing it for years.

But Annie shouldn't have to keep fighting. Not anymore.
When Finnick shifts his weight, one knee gone stiff, he's surprised to find his hand stuttering on the rail. He eyes it, as startled as if he found a stingray in his bathtub: a foolish reaction. He feels nothing but calm. Like he's stepping out of the arena for the first time all over again, his mind empty of everything but what might kill him next.

Finnick checks his expression, pushes his mouth into the shape of a smile. "That might be true, but I stay useful, don't I, President?"

Snow studies him, and then grunts a begrudging, "Yes."

On the screens, the District 4 girl narrowly misses escaping from a pack of muttations; the collective groan of disappointed spectators ripples the air as she's pulled down and apart. Finnick exhales slowly. Her family had had such hopes. He hadn't known how to dispel them.

Snow purses his lips. "Well, that settles that, then. Don't you have a waiting list to attend to?"

"Tonight's evening has already been scheduled in full, sir," Finnick murmurs, and doesn't turn his head to watch the other man depart.

It's routine by now, what Finnick does with the Capitol. What's done, in turn, to him. So routine that Finnick doesn't bother keeping track of how many nights and how many days, letting the tally slip out of his hands, a sea of whispered secrets filling him up instead. He's already twenty somehow: six years a veteran, six years a winner. Eventually, time will spill over and tip the scales. The Game marks a line in Finnick's life, Before and After, and the latter keeps getting bigger and bigger.

As long as Finnick stays alive, it's inevitable. At twenty-eight, he'll have spent half his life as a Capitol pawn. At twenty-nine, more than half. Eventually, those first fourteen years will be nothing more than a dream, a footnote in another script.

Being a victor -- being this -- will become Finnick's true life, and nothing from before will be real anymore, because that child will be long gone.

His routine check-ins with Snow are becoming equally commonplace. Snow likes to keep tabs on him, though never with anything so crass as actual physical contact. Snow never tries to touch him; Finnick doesn't try to push his luck where that's concerned. The president takes far more satisfaction in seeing Finnick's degradation, to know that he can control and color a victor, that he can remake a fishing district's boy into something that eats up every decadence and spins it back into self-indulgence. All Snow's creature. All under his control. All his, to have ruined.

Finnick knows there's a cautionary tale here, something about losing yourself when you're playing a role too long, but he doesn't feel in danger. There'd have to be something left in him for the Capitol to touch. Right now there's just himself, and Mags, and watching over his surviving victor -- Annie -- and the people back in District 4. Everything else slips away, like leaves claimed by the current in a storm.

The next Game, President Snow finds him in the foyer of one of the audience buildings, late enough that almost all the tributes are already dead. Truth be told, Finnick hadn't even noticed the delay. His patrons this time have been a tricky batch, unwilling to become sponsors without assurances that it would benefit them personally. In comparison, Snow is a welcome relief; Finnick already knows what he wants.
The lack of quarrel must be on the President's mind, too, for the man sits heavily on the bench beside Finnick, making no attempt to loom intimidatingly first. "Damnable leeches," he grunts.

Prying openly would get Finnick nowhere; that's not how the best gossip is lured out. "I thought the Game would be over before I had a chance to ask, but do you have any favorites this time around?"

"Do, or did?" Snow's correction is acidic. "Let's just say, I've been re-evaluating the options. Sometimes winners can surprise me. Sometimes they don't." His fingers drum on the leather of the bench, rolling raindrops of pressure. "You've certainly taken well to the Capitol. The best victors always do."

"Well, you see, sir," Finnick acknowledges, glancing up at the president coyly through his lashes in a reflex so smooth he almost doesn't realize he's doing it, "it's a different kind of hunting."

On the screens, the District 8 girl hacks through another tribute, snapping limbs that do nothing to block an axe's slice. She's surprisingly ferocious now that the Game's in its last few stages, nothing like the cowering youth who screamed in terror at the first sight of blood. There's a private betting pool circulating through all the mentors: if the Mason girl is naturally vicious, or if the arena has snapped her mind and pushed her so far into crazy that she wouldn't even recognize herself now.

Finnick, so far, hasn't bet either way. Perceptions are only tools. They're weapons. What you do with your identity -- with your mind, with your personality -- is all for the purpose of keeping your body alive. There's no reason to judge further.

He's learned his lessons so well.

Snow makes a thoughtful noise deep in his throat, and reaches forward to tilt the nearest screen towards them. The Mason girl's finished her kill, but is taking the time to make sure; decapitation means never having to doubt.

From the angle of the camera, Finnick can't tell if she's grimacing, or grinning.

Johanna finds him next year.

The first time Finnick talks with Johanna alone, outside of the crowds and cameras, it's when he's coming back from one of his Capitol assignments. He's sticky again, all down the back of one calf, and in a hurry to get back to his lodgings. Discretion on the part of his patron allowed him mechanical transportation; discretion carried Finnick only a few blocks away before he insisted on making the rest of the trek on foot, restless at being trapped inside metal, wanting control over his own progress. Gossip rides fast in the Capitol; gossip would mark his method of returning to his quarters, either way.

He doesn't like showering at the homes of his clients, and a hastily-scrubbed towel only cleans up so much; the musk of someone else's body lingers in unexpected crevices, ripe and reeking. The client this time had been hard to manage, constantly asking for things that Finnick would have preferred to avoid, impossible to sidetrack onto easier pleasures. Faking it had been exhausting. Finnick had emptied himself out in the effort of playing along, scraping up every bit of sincerity he could imagine as he'd gasped and purred and panted.
So he's worn out, wrung dry, senses too dull to register at first when someone steps out of a side road and casts an inhumanly long shadow across his feet.

Finnick stops. Not with the dead-abrupt stop of a freezing deer, but the slow ease of tree branches coming to rest. Sudden cessations of motion can be just as eye-catching to a predator.

Johanna's face is a hard oval, reflecting back the lights overhead. Automatically, he checks her for a weapon. Then, he checks her again to measure the safe distance between them. Bare hands mean nothing with Johanna; he's seen her kill.

She allows him time for those fast glances, a bemused twitch in the corner of her mouth as she recognizes -- and approves -- of his priorities. "Finnick."

"Johanna."

"Finnick," she repeats, in a tone so dangerously identical that his defenses go straight into overdrive. Only when he meets her gaze directly does she continue. "You could always say no."

He blinks, but she refuses to look away. When he tries again, shaking his head in an attempt to dislodge her glare, the edges of her mouth press and turn down, pinched at the corners. And -- with that -- he knows that she knows: they all know, at one point or another, but Johanna's proven to be faster than most.

Breaking eye contact is dangerous -- it proves accusations, shows submission, gives attackers the opening they need -- but Finnick drops his chin anyway to study the sleek, engraved lines of the pavement, if only so she'll stop looking at him.

Johanna is unexpectedly generous, giving him a wide berth as she strolls down the road, each step rolling in the same careful precision as a hungry cat. "Sure, they have leverage, but only if you let them. When you try to protect someone, all you do is make that person into a bigger target. You'd be doing everyone a favor if you just let them die. After that," a shrug, "you're untouchable." She's smirking when his eyes dart back up to her face. "If you really want to be kind to your friends, Finnick, then don't have any."

Finnick finds himself mirroring the curl of her lip; his face refuses to do anything else. “Sorry, but I don't think that's something I can manage. So, doesn’t that mean,” he adds, the words coming out harsher than he intends, but he can't keep them suave, can't leech the bitterness out, "that I have only myself to blame for all of this?"

Johanna is quiet for a long moment. Around them both, the Capitol lights shimmer, dripping rainbows across sleeping homes.

"Do you really believe that?"

Words jam in Finnick's throat. Yes, he wants to shout, wants to scrape out all the bile and self-revulsion that's coating each cell of his body, yes, because it's what everyone would agree if he told them about what's been happening: yes, it's his fault for going along with the rules, yes it's his fault for giving in, for giving up, for giving everything up. For not fighting. Yes. This is his fault. He went along with it. He let it happen to him. He didn't protest. That's as good as giving permission. Yes.

But anger beats inside him too, like an undertow of lava that knows every inch of power that lives underneath Finnick's well-groomed skin, that refuses the labels and gossip and judgements of his
character. Finnick's not weak for surrendering, and neither is Annie, or Mags, or even Johanna, and none of them deserve it -- not even Cashmere, who rolled her eyes at him the last time they met, but who Finnick saw limping down a stairwell two days later with the help of her brother, fingerprint bruises speckling her body through the rips in her clothes. Not Cashmere. Not Gloss. Not even most of Finnick's clients, whose greatest crime is a childlike ignorance of their appetites. None.

Finnick tilts his head up to the sky, to the buildings, to anywhere but where he might encounter Johanna's face. Through the bitterness choking him, he manages the truth: "No."

It's Johanna’s short, dry laugh that bring his eyes back down again. In the darkness, her smile is as jagged as a broken saw. "Good. You're not half as stupid as you look."

He finds the corner of his mouth turning up as she spins on her heel and disappears down an alleyway, walking alone, walking fearless by herself in the city night.

Even after everything he’s been through, Finnick still likes to swim. Water's an element that typically gets underestimated, both in and out of combat. The other tributes in his Game had treated the arena's rivers as a hazard at best, so Finnick had hidden in any body of liquid large enough to take him, keeping careful watch on his body temperature to avoid being chilled. He spent all of two evenings happily prowling one particular lake, dragging people down like an overjoyed alligator before the Gamemakers had sent packs of leech muttations to flush him out. Water can kill him and protect him; water has been his weapon since birth.

But he wouldn’t call it swimming, what he does for President Snow. Swimming is part of what you do to survive, to fight, to flourish. Swimming is honest. What Finnick does in the Capitol is not.

His quarters in the Capitol are always well-maintained, but not due to any particular kindness on Snow's part. Unlike other victors, who might only show up for the narrowest of windows around the Games, Finnick's annual visits are always a little extra-early and stay a little extra-long, stretching out the anticipation like a languid massage. He settles in each time as easily as slipping into a warm bath, trailing his fingers over dustless banisters and crisp sheets that never have time to get creased.

Sometimes, his visits are months in advance, depending on Snow's client list for him. Sometimes, it feels like he never leaves.

The interior decorators assigned to him chose waterfalls for their central theme, fountains and channels rushing through his quarters, pumped up to the top of his apartment tower and running down constantly in white-noise gushes. Clear tubes stud the walls like veins. Everything obeys gravity, merging into fountains and pools and walkways, down to brew inside a single, giant suspended pool that's balanced like a blister: the sleek belly of his home, as private and vulnerable as the untanned skin of a child. There, in the luminescent silence, Finnick puts himself on display, and waits for the orders to roll in.

The Capitol sells tickets for people to watch.

The pool is entwined with massive supports to support the crushing weight of all that liquid, and yet still give it the illusion of cradling something as light as air. Holograph panels line the inside;
discreet walkways, the out. The spacing of viewpoints is paramount: Finnick entertains multiple guests each time he swims, but they're not there to socialize with one another. The reflecting pool is built solely for other people to reflect upon him.

He could flip on the environment settings, initialize the holos so that they project different worlds on the glasswork facing his side: an ocean, a river, a training pool filled with measuring marks on endless walls, all lies to make him more comfortable. He could flip it to mirrors and pretend that he's alone, seeing only his body reflected back at him, or switch it to an ocean, free and filled with animals -- but Finnick prefers knowing who comes to watch him. He keeps tabs. He's performing, always performing, and if he's going to be doing *that*, he'd like to know who's in the game.

There are coffee table holobooks of him, taken from his performances. The animations are scanned and filmed from his body in motion. Rich men and women of the Capitol own three-dimensional models of him sinking wantonly through thin air, arched and twisting like a candle flame, hair bristling in an urchin's puff.

The Capitol arranges the photographers, the royalties, the rights; the Capitol takes all the profits, too, but Finnick doesn't care. They schedule his swim times and keep track of private tickets sold, and Finnick ignores it all.

Finnick's stylist loves him, insists on a million forms of moisture-resistant paint to decorate his body. *Always giving me such opportunities*, he hears purred in his ear whenever he schedules a dip. *You're such a rewarding boy, Finnick.*

He's half the show for District 4 each Game. Even in his earliest days as a mentor, he was advertising himself on display, playing for the crowd's devotion with the same unblemished coyness that worked so well for him as a fourteen-year-old with blood streaking his hands.

Now, he schedules sessions in his fishbowl and watches the people who are watching him, all those voyeurs hypnotized by how the water strokes and caresses him in all the ways that they crave. They imagine their fingertips tangling in the seaweed of his hair, taste their own lips with their tongues unconsciously while they stare, hypnotized by the liquid sliding along Finnick's skin, over his thighs, into each and every one of his crevices.

He wets his body for them. They whet their appetites.

Water is good for Finnick. Water is the one thing that doesn't really change on him, that's always constant in its mutability. The Capitol tries to alter it -- heats and steams it, adds chemicals to make it harder or softer, adds salts for ocean buoyancy, poisons it and stains it with color. But no matter what they try, it's always familiar. It always welcomes Finnick and takes him in, like he's a kid again seeking refuge from the other tributes, waiting in the downbeats between each fight. His secret ally, shielding him without asking for anything back.

Finnick thinks about the water sometimes when his clients tell him to lean back, that he's so *good*, that he's the best they've ever had. That they've wanted to have him for so *long*. That he's everything they've fantasized about, a dream to own at last. He thinks about the water, and he lets himself go.

It doesn't matter if he's in his Capitol fishbowl or in the tides of District Four. It doesn't matter if he's actually submerged in the ocean or not -- everything's liquid all around him, ebbing and pulling, tugging him in currents that only lead him back around and around in the same small circles. Finnick doesn't mind. He flows effortlessly wherever they take him, without resistance. He's weightless by now from all the years spent drifting, like the heaviest parts of himself have
already sunk to the bottom and let the rest of him rise free: a skeleton detaching and slipping through the gaps in his pliable tissues, leaving behind only soft, dissolving flesh.

What's held at the surface is all that remains. Muscle, skin, smiles. His bones are forgotten, desecrating the pool floor: the bones of a boy once named Finnick, dead like all the others in his reaping, left behind because they were too heavy to keep on floating.

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