Starcrossed

by thefatesallow (comewhatmay)

Summary

It is the Fourth Quarter Quell. Kurt, the Victor of the 98th Hunger Games, is braced to return for his second year as a mentor. All he hopes for is a quick Games so he can return home and battle his nightmares until the next year. But then Blaine Anderson is reaped.

Read story notes before proceeding! :)

Notes

I have been working on this for the better part of the last four months. The idea has been with me for longer.

This fic is neither a complete crossover, nor a complete AU. It straddles the line, with elements of both Canon!THG world and Canon!Glee world mixed together.

In this story, Katniss/Peeta and all the events that unfolded with them do not occur. They essentially don't exist. The Panem here is the Panem we are introduced to at the beginning of The Hunger Games. I have taken some of the supporting characters from THG and re-worked them here with a time-jump. Hopefully it is coherent!

Regarding Warnings: THG-series level of violence, some possible mature/sexual content.

Character Death: I thought long about whether revealing this would in any way take away from this story, and the answer I arrived at is no, it won't. So, I'll go ahead and say, Kurt
and Blaine are safe! Neither of them will die, in case that is something anyone is worried about! All other characters are fair game though :D

The next 10 chapters are already written, I expect there to be another 10 chapters on top of that. I will update with one chapter every few days!

I hope you enjoy! I am rather nervous about this work, so any and all comments would be lovely! Thank you :) 

Can also be found at: LJ || Tumblr

Disclaimer: All recognizable characters, phrases, plotlines, situations and universe-elements either belong to creators of Glee or Suzanne Collins. Not mine! All unrecognizable elements are the outcome of my overactive imagination and insomnia though :D Thanks for reading!
Chapter 1

PART I: The Reaping

Polivia Glass, the garish and vapid Capitol woman who is District 12’s escort, totters around in her neon-green high heels, checking the microphone and fussing with her brilliant-pink hair while the children of District 12 file in to their allotted sections in front of the Justice Building. It is Reaping day.

The afternoon sun shines directly in his eyes and Kurt squints, wishing it would all just be over, so he can shut himself in a room and block out the world again.

Mayor Anderson stands proud and tall on one side of Kurt and Haymitch stands on the other, already roaring drunk and swaying on his feet. Two years ago, Kurt would’ve judged the old Victor’s behaviour; would have turned up his nose in disdain and made a cutting remark about what a spectacle he was making of himself.

Two years ago, Kurt wasn’t the Victor of the 98th Hunger Games.

Watching the children of District 12 spread out before him, being offered up like lambs for the slaughter, he kind of wishes he is as drunk as Haymitch right now. In the next 30 minutes, six of those children will be chosen to die. And no matter how many times Haymitch tells him otherwise, he knows it is his fault.

Has known it is all his fault ever since his best friend Mercedes got reaped for the 99th Hunger Games and he watched her get blown to bits. And returned to District 12, grief-stricken and alone, only to find a new Head Peacekeeper waiting for him there, enforcing Capitol tyranny on his home worse than ever.

Kurt is drawn back from his tired, ever-present guilt by Polivia tapping the microphone and clearing her throat. The loud noises echo around the still, silent square.

It’s time to begin.

“Happy Hunger Games!” she trills, bright and bubbly as she stares out at a crowd of frightened twelve to eighteen year olds. “And may the odds be ever in your favour!”

Kurt bites his lip, training his gaze determinedly at a far-off tree to avoid gazing over the crowd. The odds are never in their favour.

Polivia chirps out a few heavily-practised, Capitol-praising monologues before calling upon Mayor Anderson to deliver the speech about the Dark Days.

Mayor Anderson steps up to the podium, looking tired and beat, as he narrates the same story that is read out every year – about the Dark Days over a hundred years ago when the districts rebelled against the Capitol, about how twelve of them were defeated and the thirteenth obliterated, how the Treaty of Treason was formed and the Hunger Games were started to serve as a reminder and a warning against future rebellion.

“It is both a time for repentance and a time for thanks,” the mayor intones, finishing the story, before reading out the names of the past Victors of District 12.
There have been four District 12 Victors in ninety-nine years of the Games, of which only two are still alive - Kurt and Haymitch.

Haymitch Abernathy is something of a living legend in Panem. He is the only person to have gone into the Hunger Games twice and survived. He won the 74th Games at the age of 16 and was reaped in the Third Quell, the infamous All-Victor Games, along with his mentor Maysilee Donnor.

There was no Victor from District 12 left to mentor them in those Games and Haymitch’s surly uncouthness did not endear him to the audience. Yet he won against all odds. Fought tooth and nail to survive. Only to do his best to drink himself to death ever since.

Mayor Anderson steps down from the podium and Kurt smooths his face into careful blankness as Polivia once again takes the stage.

“It’s time to choose three brave young men and three brave young women for the honour of representing District 12 in the 100th Hunger Games!” she exclaims with a cheerfulness that makes Kurt want to scream. “Ladies first!”

She wobbles to the glass ball containing the names of all the girls in District 12 and carefully fishes out three slips, before turning back to the crowd, beaming in excitement.

Kurt doesn’t really hear the names through the dull roaring in his ears, only sees the frightened, shocked faces as each girl comes up to the stage from the crowd. A Seam girl from the 16 year olds section, tiny and delicate, her face pale as she walks on stage. Another Seam girl, a tall and menacing-looking 18 year old, grim determination shining in her eyes. A 17 year old merchant girl who Kurt vaguely recognizes was in his year at school, before he became Victor and was no longer required to attend. Her blonde hair unfurls from its strict bun as she walks on stage, visibly trembling.

There are three more children to be reaped and Kurt already feels sick to the core.

“Now, onto the boys!” Polivia squeals, her clapping hands resonating loudly. The tapping of her heels is the only sound in the silent square when she moves to fetch three slips of paper from the bowl containing the boys’ names.

“Jac Soreen,” she calls out, and Kurt takes a deep breath as a burly, hulking Merchant boy walks up from the 18 year old section. Before Kurt became a Victor, before… everything, Jac used to bully Kurt, used to push him around and make his life a living hell. Kurt tamps down on the inrush of conflicting emotions, glaring out into space as Jac climbs onstage.

“Lory Ramson!” is next, an emaciated 13 year old from the Seam, eyes so dulled by starvation and suffering that he doesn’t even look particularly terrified at being reaped.

Polivia opens the very last piece of paper, smoothing it out and Kurt can feel his nerves beating in his ear, can feel the anticipatory, terrified breathlessness of the crowd as they wait for the last name to be called, the last person to be sent to face death, while the rest will have another year to live.

Kurt doesn’t even have anyone he would pray to be spared.

It’s been just him and his dad for so long, ever since his mother’s death nearly ten years ago. The only other person he ever cared about was Mercedes and she is dead. Because of him.

Kurt shakes his head, trying to clear his thoughts. At least there is no one left for Snow to take from him this way. At least he has that one small comfort.
With that morbid thought giving him strength, Kurt stands up straighter just as Polivia calls out the name. And it turns out he was wrong even about that.

Because the name that is called out is Blaine Anderson.

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No! Everything in Kurt screams vehemently. He feels like he is choking, all the air is caught in his throat and he can’t breathe.

A small calm, clinical part of him is dissecting the ferocity of his reaction, trying to figure out exactly why he cares so much. It’s not like he knows Blaine. They haven’t exchanged more than a few words and one memorable conversation in their entire lifetime.

But.

Kurt’s fingers travel to his pocket, the one with the little, gold mockingjay pin he never goes anywhere without. He feels a panic so crushing he’s briefly sure his knees are going to buckle.

There is a commotion on the other side of the square. He turns to see Blaine’s older brother and Mayor Anderson’s eldest, Cooper, struggling against his mother and a blonde Merchant kid, screaming his head off, trying desperately to break free.

“I volunteer!” Cooper screams, scrabbling against his retainers. “Send me in instead, please, I volunteer!”

Kurt can feel his heart squeezing with a dozen more emotions along with the raw, nameless panic. Cooper is 25 years old; he is not within reaping age. He can’t volunteer for Blaine even if he wants to.

Blaine still faces the arena unless someone else within reaping age volunteers to take his place.

Three other Merchant kids detach from the crowd to help Mrs Anderson and Blaine’s friend (Sam, Kurt thinks his name is) subdue Cooper. Together they all manage to herd the still-screaming man away from the square. It is for the best. The longer Cooper protests, the more the chances of severe punishment to him and his family.

Kurt turns a fleeting glance to Mayor Anderson, who is still standing straight and tall, his face an impassive mask. His only open show of emotion to the ripping apart of his family are his clenched fists. Kurt’s heart hurts.

“Well,” Polivia exclaims, clearly happy to have such captivating entertainment from their boring district. “He just didn’t want to lose all the glory to his little brother I see! Too bad he’s too old to be reaped!”

Kurt has never wished to punch her more.

“But no matter!” she continues, searching out someone in the crowd. “You will win for your family, won’t you dear? Bring some glory to the District?”

Kurt follows her gaze instinctively. And wishes he hadn’t.

The Peacekeepers, who were distracted by the commotion, have finally reached Blaine and are herding him towards the stage.

Blaine looks like he’s desperately trying to regain control of his emotions, his beautiful honey-gold
eyes wide in a riot of emotions as he walks closer to the stage, panic and terror and heart-
 wrenching sadness clouding their usual sparkle and warmth. But by the time he climbs the
 podium, he is under control. His face, so like his father’s, is just as impassive. He quietly moves to
 stand with the other male tributes and turns to face the crowd.

And then something happens.

Like a ripple going through the square, every person in the crowd holds out the three middle
 fingers of their left hand in silent salutation, in a custom as old as District 12. It is a gesture of love
 and loss, one made in funerals to say goodbye to a loved one.

It is as though watching tragedy befall the Mayor, someone who holds such a position of power
 but is still so clearly at the mercy of the Capitol, has shaken something in them. As though
 watching Blaine, who has touched nearly everyone in the district with his kindness and his gentle
 heart at some point, being sent to near certain death has finally stirred them.

And the tired and defeated people of District 12, who normally do not even show enough energy
 to be considered interesting by the Capitol, stand tall and proud, openly defying the unspoken rule
 of apathy and submission, making their loss and respect known.

The mayor’s impassive armour cracks and he heaves a shuddering breath. A single teardrop rolls
down Blaine’s cheek. Kurt bites viciously down on his lip and feels the skin break, drawing
blood.

The anthem blares on the speakers, Polivia chirps out some more useless Capitol epithets and just
like that it is over.

The population of District 12 disperses, to celebrate the relief of having survived yet another
reaping, to celebrate having their children safe and sound for one more year. Six families stay
behind, weeping for what they would lose. Six children file into the Justice Building to say
goodbye to their loved ones, before they would be lead away to an arena to face death.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

All notes and warnings from part one still apply! Hope you enjoy! :) 

Kurt Hummel was reaped for the 98th Hunger Games at barely 15 years of age. He felt the entire district’s horrified sympathy as he walked up to the stage. Everyone knows and respects Burt; he owns the district’s only electronics store and is their only electrician/mechanic after all. It was clear they did not expect Kurt to come back. That they expected Burt to end up alone, end up losing both wife and son.

What no one expected was the Capitol’s reaction to Kurt.

With his tall lithe form, brilliant blue-green eyes, chestnut-gold hair and elfin features, the Capitol audience clamoured to him during his Games. They adored how pretty he was. He was showered with sponsors and gifts in the arena, which tipped the scales in his favour. The fact that he was naturally resourceful and clever and agile made them root for him even more. Following Haymitch’s advice, Kurt played it up for all he was worth, grit his teeth and charmed the hateful crowd and they fell in love with him.

When Kurt won, it was by using his brains rather than with physical strength. He made it to the final six with hardly any injuries and not a single kill to his name, sustained by generous sponsors.

Two weeks into the Games, when it was just him against five Careers hell-bent on killing him, Kurt made his first offensive move. He had grown up helping his dad at their electronics shop, knew his way around any gadget. He dug up the mines used to prevent kids from stepping out of their pods too early in the arena and managed to reactivate them.

Kurt didn’t aim to kill with his plan. He simply intended to blow up the Careers’ supplies and destroy their camp; make a dent in their chances of survival in the arena. But the plan went haywire. The Careers arrived halfway through his setting up the mines. They were blown to smithereens and Kurt himself was thrown into the air.

And just like that, the 98th Games ended, five careers killed in one fell swoop and the lone victor, Kurt, fished out of the arena unconscious and bloody, his right foot blasted clean off and turned into a bloody stump at the ankle. The Capitol gave him a prosthetic made of steel and synthetic skin; surgically soldered artificial metal rods to his bones and stitched up his flesh till he could barely even tell the difference.

Kurt returned from the Games with an artificial foot and a heavy load of guilt over five deaths he didn’t mean to cause, but knew were inevitable for his survival anyway. Plagued by nightmares, he lashed out. Showed insolence and anger at every turn where he was expected to show triumph and joy over winning. Disdainfully pointed out his own little act of rebellion against the Games; at using something the Gamemakers did not intend to be turned into a weapon and surviving because of it.

And Mercedes was reaped for the 99th Hunger Games.

President Snow summoned Kurt right after Mercedes died by a Gamemaker-engineered lightning
Kurt sat in Snow’s garden, nose assaulted with the cloying scent of roses and blood, numb with grief after watching his best friend vaporize before his eyes. President Snow frankly told him that the reaping was rigged. That Mercedes, his best friend and the closest thing he had to a sister, was killed in the arena as a lesson to Kurt. That if he didn’t toe the line, his dad would be next.

Kurt, through the pain and horror crushing him, got the message loud and clear. Being the new favourite Victor of the Capitol does not mean he has any control over his life, doesn't mean that he has any power. Everything he loves could be snatched away in a second and any illusions of power and safety are merely that – illusions.

The Capitol holds all the power.

The announcement for the Fourth Quarter Quell came six months after. Kurt sat alone in his new home at the Victor’s Village, waiting for the axe to fall. The Quells always have a special horrifying twist to them. For the second Quarter Quell, the entire family of the tributes chosen were sent into the arena. For the third, the tributes were chosen from a pool of Victors. He fully expected something else to happen, some other way for Snow to directly punish him.

But instead, Snow announced, “On the hundredth anniversary, as a reminder that in any rebellion against the Capitol, for every dead Capitol citizen thrice as many rebels will die, this year each district will offer up six tributes instead of the usual two.”

Kurt’s first reaction was indecent, terrible joy. His dad was safe! No matter what they do, they wouldn’t be sending Kurt back into the arena!

And then the announcement sunk in. Thrice as many tributes. He will have to mentor six children in his second year of mentoring. Watch them die as a warning to anyone who so much as breathes a rebellious thought.

As a warning to him.

Kurt wondered then if the Games were already decided this year. If there were already specific orders to have all the District 12 tributes killed.

Another six deaths that he will have caused.

That was the first time he wished it wasn’t just his foot that got blown to bits in the Games.

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Kurt stands against the door of the room allotted for them in the Justice Building, while they wait for the tributes to finish saying their final goodbyes. Kurt has already made his goodbyes to his dad. Right after the Reaping, outside the Justice Building, Burt offered to come in. Offered to wait with him till he leaves. But Kurt insisted that he return home immediately. After his last two times waiting for the train in the Justice Building, one for himself and one with Mercedes, Kurt wants his father away from there as quickly as possible.

Polivia is prattling on about some nonsense in a corner and Haymitch has already started drinking again. No doubt the sight of thrice as many kids marching to near certain death is pushing him to seek oblivion in a bottle even faster. Or maybe it is the fact that Mayor Anderson’s son was reaped. Kurt has always thought Haymitch feels some connection to the family. Maybe he even knows Blaine and is fond of him. Well, as fond as Haymitch is capable of being about anyone…

Blaine Anderson.

Kurt supposes it’d be hard not to like him. The boy just exudes a sort of innate light and happiness
that is rare and precious in a world such as theirs. It used to draw Kurt’s bewildered eyes every
time they were in the same room, back when he was still at school.

Blaine has always been something of a puzzle to Kurt – he just doesn’t understand how anyone
can be so gentle and sweet in this cruel world. Where even merchant kids with a little more wealth
tend to be degrading and violent to those with less than them, Blaine is the mayor’s son and yet he
never parades it. Where everyone in the District follows the unspoken class divide between the
Merchants and the Seam folk, Blaine never makes such distinctions, beams the warmth of his
presence on Seam and Merchant alike, and treats them based on who they are, rather than where
they are from.

Kurt never actually talked to him growing up. Blaine was a year below Kurt when Kurt was at
school and they never really saw each other much, beyond the occasional glimpse in the hallways
or during lunch. In fact, over the course of their lives in District 12, Kurt has had exactly one full
conversation with Blaine Anderson.

Just once, but a memorable encounter that Kurt doesn’t think he’ll ever forget.

He strokes the little mockingjay pin he hasn’t parted with for two years, biting his lip thoughtfully,
musing on that memory from two years ago.

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Kurt watches Mercedes and his father being herded out by Peacekeepers, Burt’s face a heart-
breaking study of panic and anguish, all his goodbyes choking in his throat. Kurt has just been
reaped. There is nothing he can say that can make a difference. He takes a deep breath, trying to
use those last few precious minutes to gather himself before being lead out to face the cameras
again. He lifts up his wrist to wipe his eyes on the cuff of his fancy reaping shirt, when the door
opens and snaps shut quickly. He drops his arm and snaps up to find Blaine Anderson standing
there, looking so completely devastated that Kurt freezes in bewilderment.

Blaine crosses the room in a few quick strides and takes Kurt’s right hand in his own, slipping
something into it.

“You are allowed to wear a token from your district into the Games,” Blaine whispers urgently,
like this is the most important thing in the world. His earnest, wide eyes swim with unshed tears.
“You are allowed to take something with you, as a memory from your district. And I hope you
will take this.”

Kurt closes his fingers around the warm metal something when Blaine draws his hand back, at an
utter loss on what to say. Stares at the way the tears clump Blaine’s sweeping eyelashes together,
the droplets diffracting the sunlight filtering into the room.

They have never even talked to each other before, he didn’t even know Blaine knows his name,
so why is this so important? Why does Blaine look like his heart is breaking?

“Please,” Blaine whispers.

So Kurt opens his hand and there he finds a circular, golden pin showing a small mockingjay in
flight.

“My mother gave it to me at my first reaping,” Blaine says, a lone tear rolling down his cheek.
He reaches up to wipe it off, a sad smile curving his lips. His eyes hold Kurt’s again, mesmerizing
and bright. “She said it’d protect me. I really hope you’ll wear this. Maybe it’ll protect you too.”

“Of course,” Kurt manages, still shocked and confused by the whole conversation. “Thank you…
Blaine.

Blaine opens his mouth as if to say something more, but at that moment the Peacekeepers sweep in. Two of them drag Kurt away while two others stand next to Blaine to prevent any outbursts.

“You can win this,” Blaine calls out, sudden and desperate, just as Kurt steps over the threshold. “You are smart and fast, if you try you can really win this! Please just win and come back to –“

Blaine voice abruptly cuts off, the Peacekeeper has closed the door between them and Kurt is herded off towards the train.

As he walks away, Kurt says a soft mental goodbye to Blaine Anderson, just like the rest of District 12. He doubts he’ll ever see them again.

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That is the only time he’s ever talked to Blaine.

Kurt had spent that entire first train ride to the Capitol puzzling over the incident and what Blaine meant to say. Come back to – what? District 12? Blaine? He had then proceeded to aggressively stamp down that last thought. It wasn’t the time to get lost in fantasies when he was facing certain death in a few short weeks.

But then he won. He survived the Games and returned to District 12, broken like only the Games could break someone. He holed himself up at his new house in the Victor’s Village, barely seeing anyone apart from Burt and Mercedes and Haymitch. Sometimes he considered returning the pin to Blaine, meeting up and seeking an explanation for what the gesture means, but the thought of parting with the thing after holding onto it through the darkest times of his life felt impossible. Blaine never came to ask for it and Kurt never tried to reach out to him. Their paths never crossed.

Until today.

Kurt wriggles his shoulders, settling back more comfortably against the door of the waiting room, thinking, thinking; idly playing with the pin in his pocket.

He doesn’t understand the ferocity of his own emotions when he thinks of Blaine’s name being drawn at the Reaping. Doesn’t understand why the very thought of Blaine in that arena makes his heart clench and the air to disappear from the room.

It is just one conversation. Kurt doesn’t form bonds easily, has always walled up his heart fiercely against everyone. He doesn’t let himself care for people easily, because what is the point when they could just die anytime, what is the point when you have no power and no way to protect them…?

So when exactly did Blaine Anderson manage to mean something to Kurt?

Maybe it has nothing to do with Kurt and everything to do with Blaine. Maybe it is just that Blaine is so good. Blaine cares for people, helps people, makes everyone around him better.

Kurt knows from old, whispered talk at school that Blaine secretly took tesserae to give his share to the people of the Seam. Sometimes when Kurt went there on house calls for his dad, he would see Blaine accompanied by his brother or a few friends, walking around with a discreet bag full of food, dropping a loaf here or a roll there.

Mayor Anderson does his best, but the truth still remains that the Capitol does not consider District 12 a place to waste its precious resources on. The Capitol never cares for its people and the
people have grown to care only for themselves.

Blaine cares for everyone though. Someone like him should not be sent to die.

But even if Blaine somehow survives, even if he wins the Hunger Games, he won’t come out the same person, won’t be him anymore. The light will have snuffed out, and Blaine will have become just as jaded and cynical as the rest of them. No one wins the Games unscathed. No one wins the Games without killing and maiming and turning into something twisted and broken. A mere shell of the person they once were...

Sudden pain shoots through Kurt’s shoulder blades. The door he is leaning on pushes forcefully against him. Before he even registers it, Kurt spins around lightning-quick with deadly feline grace, whipping out the sharp penknife he always keeps on him, training it on a wide-eyed Peacekeeper.

The Peacekeeper slowly raises his hands, wary eyes fixed on Kurt, who is standing stock-still, taking deep calming breaths and trying to quiet his pounding nerves.

“Sorry,” Kurt says finally, pocketing the knife and slipping into the playful façade with which he charms the Capitol crowd, “You can take the boy out of the Games, but you can’t take the Games out of the boy!”

The Peacekeeper drops his hands, though his eyes are still wide. He turns to Haymitch, who has his eyebrows raised at Kurt.

“It’s time to board the train,” the Peacekeeper announces to the room at large, before leaving with a shake of his head.

Haymitch stumbles out the door first, Polivia following him to go fetch the tributes. After one more deep breath, Kurt straightens his clothes and starts following Haymitch to the car that’d take them to the train station. A small gathering in front of one of the rooms catches his eye and he stops, moving closer to the wall to watch.

Blaine is being hugged by his mother and Cooper, while Mayor Anderson and a small crowd of Merchant and Seam kids alike stand around them. All of them are crying.

The Peacekeepers arrive to escort the group out. After a few teary protests, they all start moving, leaving Blaine’s lone, miserable form behind. Kurt watches Blaine’s face till the door closes shut, obstructing him from view. He feels that clawing panic in his gut again.

Blaine just looks so vulnerable and innocent and tiny. Has he always been this tiny? He does not look capable of hurting a fly, let alone surviving an arena of seventy-two kids all trying to kill him. How on earth is this fair, how is any of this fair?

A hand drops heavily on his shoulder and Kurt has already halfway pulled out his penknife again before he realizes it is Cooper Anderson.

“You have to help him,” Cooper says without preamble, crowding in on Kurt, eyes half-crazed and full of desperation. Kurt takes a step back, putting some distance between them, raising a hand to placate him.

“It’s kind of my job to help him, of course I will,” Kurt replies, trying to sound as reassuring as possible.

“No you don’t understand!” Cooper snaps, with an intensity that mildly scares Kurt. “He won’t help himself, he won’t kill! You have to convince him he should, you have to help him see that
the most important thing is to live, that he should do everything to live! You have to bring him home!”

Kurt stands still, trying to suppress the onslaught of emotions that rise up in him again at the thought of Blaine fighting in the arena, Blaine dying...

“Promise me,” Cooper says, taking another step closer and clutching Kurt’s shoulders, “promise you’ll make sure he wins, promise me you’ll bring him home!”

Kurt wants to tell him that he can promise no such thing, that it is beyond his control, that he has other tributes. That there is no way to help.

“I promise,” he whispers instead. It slips out before he can stop himself, but he doesn’t take it back because what is the point if everything good and beautiful dies? “I’ll do every single thing I can to keep him alive, I promise.”

Cooper takes a shuddering breath, looking deep into Kurt’s eyes before nodding and releasing him. Kurt watches Cooper walk away, head spinning and exhales shakily before heading to the car that will take him to the train station.

He shouldn’t have promised that. Not when so many things can go wrong, not when he has five other kids to help as well, not when death can come for any of them in a second and he doesn’t have the power to do anything but sit and watch...

But Kurt Hummel always keeps his promises.
Chapter 3

Kurt closes the door to his train compartment with a weary sigh and leans against it for a moment before moving to undress quickly. There is a luxurious bathroom that comes attached with his compartment and he plans to take full advantage of it before dinner. He walks into the shower area and adjusts the pressure and temperature to just how he likes it, before stepping under the warm spray and relaxing his muscles.

It’s been an exhausting day.

He thinks of what he has to do while shampooing his hair. After the shower he will have to go to dinner and face this year’s tributes. He will get to know them personally over the next several days. Only to watch them all die in a few short weeks.

Even if the odds are in their favour, only one of them can survive. No matter what the odds, five of those kids will die.

Kurt just wants to bury himself in the soft blankets on his bed back home and never come out. Instead he towels himself dry and pulls on black pants that hug his legs magnificently, one of his own creations. He chooses a light blue dress shirt to go with it. Cinna designed it for him during his Victory Tour two years ago.

Cinna, his stylist, is probably one of the very few people Kurt met at the Capitol that he actually likes. For his Victory Tour, Kurt was required to have a “talent”, some skill to show off as his future hobby or profession, when he isn’t fulfilling his mentor duties. Kurt, who has always harboured a love for clothes, chose fashion-designing. After some tutoring from Cinna, he discovered he actually does have a great aptitude for it. Cinna is one of the very few people in the world Kurt fully trusts.

When Kurt enters the dining car, everyone has already assembled and dinner has been served. He drops into the empty chair next to a drunken Haymitch, avoiding eye-contact with everyone.

A few minutes of tense silence, broken only by the tinkle of cutlery.

“Well!” Polivia exclaims, breaking the awkward quiet and clapping her hands. “Why don’t you all introduce yourselves properly, so we can all get to know each other?”

Kurt rolls his eyes before going back to stab at the roast chicken in front of him. He wonders what exactly goes on in that idiot woman’s brain. These kids are being sent into an arena to fight each other to the death. The last thing they’re going to want to do is to get to know each other.

The strained silence continues and no one speaks. Polivia’s maniacal smile twitches slightly. She brandishes her fork like a baton, pointing it at the blonde-haired Merchant girl, who startles in her seat at the attention.

“Let’s start with you! Tell us about yourself, dear,” Polivia says, smile growing even wider. The
girl looks mildly alarmed.

“Um,” the girl begins hesitantly, “My name is Abbie, my father is the district shoemaker? Um. I’m seventeen, I was in the same class as Kurt in school actually, before he – before –” she trails off, darting one quick glance at Kurt before looking back down at her plate.

“Oh, excellent! Were you two friends?” Polivia pokes, and Abbie just shakes her head, not looking up. Kurt goes back to chewing his food and ignoring Polivia.

“Well, let’s move on,” Polivia says, when it becomes clear neither of them is going to say anything. She gestures to the surly-looking Seam girl sitting next to Abbie. “You next.”

The girl looks up with a scowl.

“Coraline. Eighteen. Father sells liquor at the Hob and mother takes in clothes for washing. Three brothers work in the mines.”

With that, she goes back to eating her food and completely ignores any further attempts at conversation. Polivia looks utterly lost and Kurt hides his snort of laughter behind his hand.

When he looks up, he catches Blaine smiling at him, a fond little upturn of his mouth that should not look so intimate, like he knows Kurt, knows what he was just thinking…

Kurt straightens abruptly in his seat, blushing. And then has a quiet crisis over blushing, because he is supposed to be a cold-hearted, ruthless victor, dammit.

“Jac Soreen. Eighteen,” he hears and snaps out of his thoughts. Polivia has continued down the line and his old bully is lounging cockily in his chair, smirking at everyone. “My father owns the granary and mother works at the Justice Building. I like to wrestle and I’m pretty strong, like Kurt here can tell you,” Jac finishes, directing his smirk at Kurt.

Kurt bites the inside of his cheek, trying to restrain himself from whipping out his penknife and carving out one of the bully’s eyeballs. It is probably frowned upon to murder one of your own tributes before they get into the arena.

“Janette. Sixteen,” the tiny, petite girl sitting next to Jac pipes up. “Father and mother both work in the mines and my sister’s been a cook at the Mayor’s house for a year now. The Mayor says she makes the best chicken pot pie in the district.”

She beams around the table, face glowing with pride over her sister’s accomplishments. Kurt thinks of Mercedes with a sad smile. Of how excited and proud she had been when the first crate-full of Kurt’s own designs arrived from the Capitol, right before his Victory Tour.

“She cooks really well,” Blaine agrees with a grin, turning towards Janette. “And she is definitely much nicer than old John. He used to throw knives at us every time Cooper and I stole cookies.”

Blaine seems to become aware of everyone at the table staring at him. With a self-conscious little smile he turns back, eyes flickering towards Kurt before flitting away.

“My name is Blaine,” he says. “I’m sixteen years old. Janette and I are in the same year at school. My father is, um, the Mayor and my brother works at the Justice Building.”

Blaine looks unsure what else to say and after a few seconds, Polivia turns to the last tribute. Lory, Kurt recalls, from the name called out at the reaping. The boy is attacking the food in front of him and only seems to realize they are waiting for him to talk after a few seconds of silence.
“Lory, I’m thirteen,” the boy says, between shovelling food into his mouth. “Father died in that mine blast three months ago, mother is out of work but she helps the seamstress sometimes. I’ve got a younger sister and three younger brothers.”

With that he goes back to his food like he hasn’t eaten in months. Judging by the way his bones are poking through his skin and his sunken dulled eyes, he probably hasn’t. Kurt stares at the boy sadly, wonders if he is only here because of all the tesserae he no doubt must have taken.

Polivia makes a trill of disgust.

“I suppose you’ve never had fare this delicious but that’s no reason to utterly forget your manners and eat like a caveman,” Polivia says in that ridiculous Capitol accent of hers, turning up her nose at a starving child who is being sent to fight to the death for the entertainment of people like her.

Kurt’s temper, already stretched thin by everything that has happened today, finally snaps.

He slams his fork and knife on the table with a resounding thunk and turns to Polivia with a glare. She recoils from him in no slight terror.

“Not everyone has so much to eat that they have to take puking juice just to make space for the rest of the feast,” Kurt snaps in cold anger. “Or go under the knife to cut out body fat because it makes them less pretty. Most of us don’t get to eat enough to put weight. When you’re starving and haven’t eaten for days, the last thing you’ll be thinking about is manners, I assure you, Polivia.”

Polivia gapes at him, looking like a fish out of water. Kurt does not let up on his glare, tilting his head with as much haughtiness and icy disdain as he can muster.

“Well,” she explodes finally, a blotchy blush making her face resemble a bruised overripe plum. “Well I have never! You make one small mistake and they demote you to escort District 12 and look at what I have to deal with now. Drunkards and barbarians and horrible, nasty children, I never…”

“Yes, our hearts go out to you in this period of extreme suffering,” Kurt interrupts, sarcasm dripping in every word. “How terrible it must be to be escorting starving, terrified kids to get slaughtered, instead of bloodthirsty thugs from District 2. Almost makes you realize they are actually just children doesn’t it?”

Polivia stands up, face completely purple now and grabs some napkins before storming out, dramatically sobbing.

Kurt rolls his eyes and starts buttering a roll.

Haymitch, who has been face down on the table for most of the evening so far, suddenly sits up and lets out a loud guffaw, clapping Kurt’s shoulders.

“Ah, bless you, kid,” Haymitch slurs between bursts of laughter. “You’re a never-ending pain in the ass, but sometimes I’m actually glad you didn’t decorate the arena with your intestines and managed to get out in one piece.”

“Well, not exactly in one piece,” Kurt retorts with morbid humour, gesturing to his prosthetic foot. Haymitch chortles some more, before his head thumps back to the table.

Kurt suddenly remembers they have company and looks up to find five pairs of eyes trained on him intensely, each with varying combinations of emotion. The sixth pair which hasn’t bothered to watch is, of course, Lory, who is still too busy wolfing down the food to pay any attention to his
surroundings.

“You should stop eating now,” Kurt tells him, more to break the silence and stop all the awkward staring than anything else. “This food is rich. Even if you’ve been eating three square meals a day, too much will make you puke, and you…well.”

Lory doesn’t so much as pause and Kurt lets out a huff of annoyance, going back to his roll. Well fine then. The kid can puke his guts out and learn his lesson the hard way.

“He’s right you know,” he hears Blaine’s soft voice say. “It’s going to make you sick if you don’t pace yourself.”

Lory actually looks up from the half-eaten chicken leg he is currently wolfing down. He stares at Blaine before turning a longing gaze at all the food piled on the table.

“Tell you what,” Blaine says, grinning conspiratorially. “You stop eating now and I’ll tell the Capitol attendants to give you a small portion of food every two hours. That way, you still get to eat it all and you can hold it down without making yourself sick.”

Lory seems to mull it over before he nods, finishing the chicken he is already holding in his hand before pushing his plate away. He gives Blaine a tremulous, tentative smile, and Blaine’s smile in reply is like sunshine.

Kurt holds his breath and stares.

As though feeling Kurt’s gaze on him, Blaine turns his head and catches Kurt’s eyes. His smile widens, eyes crinkling adorably, everything about him sweet and open and lovely and breathtaking.

Kurt breaks their interlocked gaze, turns away, feeling strangely lightheaded. Are those actual butterflies in his stomach, like some mooning pre-teen?

What the hell is happening to him?

His eyes land on Haymitch, who lifted his head again during the exchange, and is now staring at Blaine, a curiously haunted expression on his face. He takes periodic swigs from the bottle of wine clutched in his hand, his steady, speculative gaze never leaving Blaine.

After dinner, Haymitch wanders off to his own compartment. Polivia returns the dining car with dignified stiffness, leading the tributes to watch recaps of the reaping from all the districts, pointedly ignoring Kurt.

Kurt just smirks. He finds her obvious hostility towards him simultaneously amusing and relieving, so he does nothing to fix it. In fact, things have worked out rather wonderfully.

His amusement takes a nosedive once the actual recap starts.

There are just so many kids. Name upon name upon name is drawn from each district, child after terrified child is called up, and by the time they get to district 12, Kurt is overwhelmed by the sheer number of kids who are going to die.

If the normal Games are a nightmare, this is hell itself. Worse odds, less hope, more dead kids and ultimately more power to the Capitol.

Kurt wants to punch someone. Kurt wants to cry.
The tributes aren’t faring any better. It is like seeing the magnitude of their competition has finally made it completely sink in. Abbie and Lory look downright terrified, letting out soft whimpers, eyes holding the look of cornered prey. Jac and Coraline are some strange mixture of panicked and determined. Janette has tears in her eyes, and Blaine.

Blaine looks so lost, the light of his presence so dim, so hopeless…

Kurt gives them all a wordless nod and all but runs to his compartment. Runs away from the confusing desire to hold Blaine, to comfort him. The desire to enclose save protect that Blaine brings out in him, which he doesn’t understand and doesn’t want to try to understand because what if –

What if.

This is going to be a long month.
Chapter 4

Kurt startles awake from a disturbed sleep full of dying children, all his senses on high alert for danger.

He sits up, heart thudding, looking for whatever woke him, his hands scrabbling towards his penknife. It takes a few seconds before the roaring in his ears lets up and he registers the loud, off-key singing from the compartment opposite him.

Haymitch’s drunken voice is spectacularly mangling a funeral dirge.

He turns bleary eyes to the digital clock sitting on his bedside table. The red, neon “3:00 a.m.” taunts him while the caterwauling from Haymitch’s compartment hits a particularly deafening peak.

_For Heaven’s sake._

Kurt stalks out to his old mentor’s compartment door and bangs on it, fuming. What the drunken fool is doing wailing like this at three in the morning Kurt doesn’t know. When the knocking has no effect at all, Kurt throws the door open, about to give Haymitch a piece of his mind.

And he freezes at the sight that greets him.

Kurt’s no stranger to Haymitch’s abhorrent drinking spells, where he all but drinks himself to death. He’s seen enough of those over the past two years of being Haymitch’s lone neighbour in their isolated Victor’s Village. But even by those previous incidents, what he sees now is a little extreme.

Three empty wine bottles litter the ground around Haymitch and a fourth is already half-empty. From one side of the room, the nasty putrid smell of alcoholic vomit emanates. Kurt gags on air, bile rising in his throat.

“Prettyboy!” Haymitch yells from where he is lying on the ground, surprisingly coherent considering the amount of alcohol he’s consumed. “Come join us for a nightcap. Maybe we’ll get lucky and actually die from alcohol poisonin’ before we get ta the Capitol. Escape from killin’ another six kids.”

He takes another swig from the bottle in his hand, alcohol sloshing clumsily over his face. His eyes are bloodshot and puffy.

“Not like we can bring any of ‘em home anyway, even if we tried,” Haymitch mutters. “They’re all dead, all dead. Everyone dead.”

Kurt stands still for a minute, stunned. And he feels something in him _snap._

Blood pounds in his ears, white-hot anger fills his brain. In that moment, he’s so furious he feels
blind with it.

He crosses the room in three long strides and bodily lifts Haymitch from the ground before slamming him against a wall.

Kurt isn’t really one for physical strength. He won the Games with brains and stealth, not direct confrontation and fights. But in that moment, fury propels him.

He pushes right up into Haymitch’s face and shakes him, hard. The bottle of wine slips from the old mentor’s drunken grasp and shatters on the floor.

“Listen to me, you filthy drunk,” Kurt spits furiously, shaking him once more till his bleary eyes focus on Kurt. “Despite your best efforts over the years, I know that brain of yours is still sharp enough to cut steel. I don’t care how depressed you are over having to lead six kids to the arena instead of the usual two. I don’t care how much you’d rather numb yourself to face this. You are not giving up on them. You are not leaving me to do this alone and I won’t fucking let you.”

Haymitch’s eyes are clearing, a little of his spit-fire returning. Kurt shakes him again for good measure.

“From tomorrow, you are going to be sober for every damn day till the Quell gets over. You are going to do everything you can to bring at least one of our tributes back. You are going to fucking help me or I swear to God I’ll personally put a knife through your ribs.”

Haymitch glares at him and Kurt glares right back, refusing to step down. He stands nose to nose to his drunken mentor, feeling noxious alcoholic fumes right in his face.

“Get the fuck out,” Haymitch growls after a few more minutes of mutual glaring, raising a hand to punch Kurt in the face.

Kurt dances back with feline agility, Haymitch’s fist missing him by mere centimetres. Haymitch growls again and makes another half-hearted swipe at him and Kurt whisks out of range.

He nods once at his mentor’s scowling, thunderous face and quickly exits the compartment, sliding the door shut behind him. He leans against it, taking a deep breath, staring up at the train ceiling with tired eyes.

He saw the acknowledgement to his words in Haymitch’s eyes before he left, saw the old man pulling himself out of whatever depressed pit the day’s events pushed him into. He knows he can count on Haymitch to be his ally now.

No matter what, he won’t be alone in this.

Once you’re in the Games, you never really get out. And allies mean the difference between surviving and sinking.

*  

“Get up and stand yourselves next to each other in a line facing me,” Haymitch’s gruff voice orders the six tributes just as breakfast winds down.

He looks sharp-eyed and belligerent and not at all like a man who’d sunk partway into an alcohol-induced coma just five hours ago.

Kurt smiles to himself and sips his mug of hot chocolate.
“Well what are you waiting for, a red carpet? Get off your asses!” Haymitch roars when the tributes just sit there staring at him. They scatter like scared chickens, following his orders.

Once they are suitably arranged, Haymitch places down his cup of coffee and stands, walking towards the tributes, gaze sharp and calculating.

“Hmm,” Haymitch says, starting at the farthest left, and circling Jac thoughtfully. “Well you won’t win no beauty contest, but I guess you’ll look presentable enough once the prep team’s done with you. Your size alone can get you sponsors.” Jac smirks his disdainful reply and Haymitch moves on to the next tribute, coming to a stop in front of Coraline.

He stares at her for a second, before grimacing.

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” he says mildly to her face. She scowls back at him, which in no way improves her looks.

“There’s nothing we can do about that,” Haymitch says, gesturing vaguely to her entire self. “But again, you’re built like an ox and look like you can kill things. We can play the surly and dangerous card, the sponsors love those.”

He passes on to Abbie and Lory, growing more expressionless by the minute as he takes them in. The former is neither pretty enough to be remarkable nor big enough to make an impression, while the latter is just too emaciated and starved-looking for anything else about him to be noticeable.

It’ll take a hell of a lot to make either of them someone worth betting on.

After a few more minutes of resigned contemplation, Haymitch grunts in their direction and moves on to the other Seam girl, Janette.

When he comes up to her, she squares her small shoulders and looks right back into his eyes. She is a tiny wisp of a thing, pretty, with the straight black hair and the steel-grey eyes common in Seam folk.

But what makes her stand out is the hint of intelligence and intuition that sparkles defiantly in her eyes.

“We can work with that,” Haymitch says with an approving nod after studying her for a little while. “You are too small to be an actual physical threat, but you’ve got spunk, kid, we just have to play that up.”

With that he moves on to the last tribute.

Blaine.

Kurt straightens slightly in his chair, his full attention focused on them.

Haymitch circles around Blaine with a deep frown, even going so far as to poke and prod him a few times like an animal kept in an exhibit.

Blaine is obviously uncomfortable under the intense scrutiny. But apart from one nervous twitch of his fingers, he stands still. And after a few deep breaths, he manages to actually look relaxed and detached from the proceedings, as though the entire process doesn’t even affect him.

Kurt is impressed.

“Oh the Capitol’s going to fall head over heels for you,” Haymitch says after a few minutes, with
a dry, almost sad chuckle.

Blaine’s brow wrinkles the tiniest degree in confusion but Kurt can see what Haymitch means. Blaine isn’t just good-looking or conventionally handsome.

Blaine is beautiful.

Beguiling honey-gold eyes that sparkle in the sunlight with warm flecks of hazel, framed by black lashes so thick and long Kurt wonders how they don’t get tangled up every time Blaine blinks. He isn’t very tall or broad, but he is compact, with a slight but well-defined musculature that is visible even through the loose white dress shirt he has chosen to wear this morning.

His hair, finally out of the strict, controlled style he always wears it in back home, is a mess of thick curls that tumble about his head. It makes Kurt itch to run his fingers through them, holding Blaine’s head in place and kissing those lush pink lips while running a hand down his sun-warm skin and… what is he doing?

Kurt drops a spoon and ducks under the table, having a silent panic attack.

He’s never had those kinds of thoughts about Blaine before. Heck, he’s never had those kinds of thoughts about any actual person before. On those rare occasions he felt the regular desires of a hormonal teenage boy, it was always someone faceless that he fantasised about while quickly taking care of business. He’s never daydreamed like this about someone before.

And the last person he needs to be thinking about like this is his own tribute who he has to send into an arena to fight to the death and what on earth is he doing?

Haymitch is still speaking and this is so not the time for Kurt to have a confused, hormonal mental breakdown. He takes a few deep breaths, pushing all his thoughts forcibly into a corner of his mind before standing up and settling back into his chair, impassive mask in place.

Well, almost in place. Blaine is looking in his direction with a concerned gaze and Kurt ducks his head, blushing furiously.

Get a grip, Hummel.

“You are going to look phenomenal once Cinna’s done with you,” Haymitch is saying as he circles Blaine once more. Blaine’s eyes flicker back to Haymitch. “The Capitol audience will eat you right up.”

Kurt really does not want to think of the Capitol audience in conjuncture with Blaine right now.

“Yeah, yeah what’s the point of all this,” Jac Soreen calls out obnoxiously, snapping Kurt out of his tumbling thoughts.

Haymitch stops and turns towards him, thinly veiled look of contempt on his face.

“You are going to look phenomenal once Cinna’s done with you,” Haymitch is saying as he circles Blaine once more. Blaine’s eyes flicker back to Haymitch. “The Capitol audience will eat you right up.”

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“Yeah, yeah what’s the point of all this,” Jac Soreen calls out obnoxiously, snapping Kurt out of his tumbling thoughts.

Haymitch stops and turns towards him, thinly veiled look of contempt on his face.

“It’s not like anyone won the Games by just being pretty,” Jac continues, puffing his chest with superior cockiness. “It’s about skill and survival, not how much of a pretty pansy I can be.”

“Never underestimate the amount of favours just being a pretty pansy can get you in the arena,” Haymitch says, looking at Jac like he is something the dog dragged in. “It’s a television show, they want entertainment and they want pretty faces putting it up. It’s how Finnick won a few years ago, and it’s why Kurt didn’t starve in the arena.”

With that, he turns back to Blaine, studying his face once more. Jac snorts at Haymitch’s back and
Kurt bites his cheek, restraining himself from punching Jac in the mouth.

“Although I gotta say,” Haymitch says dryly after a few more minutes. “Cinna’s gonna have a real hard time dealing with those eyebrows.”

Blaine immediately lifts a hand to rub over his rather wild brows, which are now crunched self-consciously.

Kurt buries his face in the mug of hot chocolate to hide his laughter.

And to stop himself from doing something stupid like reassuring Blaine his eyebrows are endearing. Just like everything else about him.
They are about thirty minutes away from the Capitol and Kurt is slumped in his chair, palms pressed to his eyes in frustration. Haymitch breathes loudly next to him, nursing a glass of wine.

Kurt doesn’t even feel like telling him off for it. In fact, he kind of wants to ask for a glass himself, considering how the morning went.

They are in one of the many recreation compartments in the train. The Capitol attendants call this one ‘The Lounge’. It’s where Kurt and Haymitch usually go whenever they need to talk in secret. The room is hung with over a dozen tinkling wind chimes, and when they open all the windows, conversations can be held there undetected by any Capitol bugs.

Kurt and Haymitch set up there after breakfast and sent summons for the tributes to come in one at a time. The plan was to talk with them and get a general read on each tribute’s capabilities, their strengths and weaknesses, so Kurt and Haymitch can work out a gameplan when they reach the Capitol, while the tributes themselves would be busy at the Remake Centre.

Kurt supposes he should have foreseen what a complete disaster it would turn out to be.

Jac was first and he pretty much stated point-blank that he doesn’t need any help from an old decrepit drunk and a 17 year old pansy-boy. Haymitch grew tired of his cocky bullshit within three minutes and kicked him out.

Coraline was no better, surly and suspicious and uncooperative. All they managed to get out of her was that she is good at wrestling and can hold her own in hand-to-hand combat. But then she shut down again and Haymitch had to dismiss her, breathing heavily in frustration.

It was somewhere between Abbie and Lory that Haymitch called for a bottle of wine.

Abbie burst into tears halfway through Haymitch’s questions about her strengths and all Lory cared about was if he would get even more food at the Capitol than what he got here.

Janette’s session went much better compared to the rest. She exhibited intelligence and quick-thinking and mentioned being handy with a slingshot. She also seemed to have a reasonable skill in keeping herself fed. All of which could be of use in the arena. Kurt smiled at her with as much encouragement as he could and instructed her to listen to her stylist, Portia, before dismissing her.

They are now waiting for the Capitol attendant to fetch their last tribute, Blaine. Kurt slumps back even further in his chair and tilts his head back, staring despondently at the ceiling, mind still on Janette.

He tries to be hopeful for her, tries to work out a good plan for her…

But.
She is just so fragile looking, no physical strength at all. And a slingshot can only do so much in an arena full of lethal weapons she doesn’t know how to wield or defend against.

The reason District 12 rarely ever has a Victor and the reason their chances are always so bleak is because they just don’t have anything they could use to their advantage. In literally every other district, children are put to work in the district industry from the minute they can walk. Even five year olds from 4 can catch a dozen fish, children in 7 could butcher anything with an axe before they are even old enough to be reaped.

In District 12, they only start working in the mines at eighteen, and any small titbits of knowledge that may help them survive are only learned after they are already beyond reaping age.

Yet another thing that stacks the odds against them.

A soft double-knock on the compartment door pulls Kurt from his depressing train of thought and he straightens in his chair. “Come in.”

The door slides open and Blaine walks in, looking politely inquisitive, and takes the seat Haymitch gestures him towards.

“Just a strategy meeting,” Haymitch assures him, taking a sip of his wine. “We usually do this the day before your personal interviews, but since there are so many of you, we thought we’d get a headstart.”

Blaine nods, face open and attentive.

“Tell us anything you can think of about yourself, anything that you think might be useful in the arena,” Haymitch says, leaning forward slightly.

“Um,” Blaine looks down, thinks, before glancing back up with a self-deprecating half-smile. “I’m not a bad wrestler, my brother gets me to fight with him all the time and I can usually beat him, even though I’m smaller than him. I’m really fast, you see. I can also box. Cooper made me take it up.”

He looks to them, eyebrows raised and Kurt nods, encouraging him to continue.

“Cooper made me train in a lot of things actually,” Blaine says. “He always… worried. That I’d get reaped.” He pauses, face sad and drawn, no doubt remembering his brother’s screaming and panic at the town square yesterday. Kurt’s heart squeezes with the need to comfort him.

“He used to steal swords and knives,” Blaine continues, shaking himself out of it, “from the old relic room and make me practise those, till we got caught two years ago. And also –”

Blaine pauses and looks around as though searching for something, before turning to Kurt with questioning eyes.

“You can say whatever you want here,” Kurt says, picking up on his dilemma immediately. “The wind chimes drown out our words so Capitol bugs can’t pick them up. What you say here stays here.”

Blaine looks at him for a beat more, then nods slowly.

“We went beyond the fence sometimes,” he says, voice light and casual, as though discussing the weather, as though that isn’t the kind of offence that could get him killed back in District 12.

Kurt startles, mouth dropping open slightly. He was expecting some minor instance of rule-
breaking, not something in this degree of severity. He stares at Blaine – quiet, serious, earnest Blaine – and tries to imagine him slipping through the fence into the forbidden woods. He can’t picture it.

But then Blaine gives him this impish, impudent smile, eyes sparkling with suppressed mischief and –

This is a side of Blaine he has never seen before.

Kurt gapes, heart pitter-pattering, entirely inappropriate to the situation, but God is there any side of this boy that isn’t absolutely fascinating? –

“And what did you do beyond the fence?” Haymitch prompts while Kurt flounders mentally. Blaine’s attention switches back to the old mentor.

“We usually went there to collect plants,” Blaine says. “There is this restricted area in my dad’s office, um, I guess it’s technically breaking the law for me to even know about it.” Kurt blinks. Stares at Blaine’s matter-of-fact expression and blinks some more. “But Coop and I managed to figure out how to break into the security system there,” Jesus Christ, “and it has a lot of... knowledge. Even things from before. Before Panem I mean. Things they don’t let us learn in school or anywhere else. History and medical discoveries and botany and technology and... just, so much. There was even a manual on surviving in the wild, how to make bows and arrows and setting out traps for animals ... There were newer things too, documents and computer files from the Capitol.”

Blaine pauses, staring at his hands.

“I’ve read almost all of it,” Blaine says, speaking to the floor. “And we, me and Cooper. We used to go beyond the fence, to find edible plants, and medicinal herbs. And catch some game, if we could.”

His looks back up again, eyes earnest and wide and passionate; this Blaine is familiar. Kurt’s seen this Blaine every day back in District 12, offering a helping hand to tired women and dropping cookies to little kids who could never afford it themselves.

This Blaine is familiar and every bit as captivating.

“It’s just – we barely get any provisions from the Capitol at all in our district,” Blaine says emphatically. “So many families just starve and I couldn’t bear it. I just wanted to help in any way I could and so did Cooper. And then we had all this knowledge we found.” Blaine pauses, searching for words.

“We made some bows and arrows to hunt with, laid out traps for animals while we scouted for plants. Once we got the hang of it, we managed quite a good haul between us. And it helped so many –”

Blaine is far away now. He’s looking out the window at the world flashing past them, wistful and sad.

“And sometimes we just went exploring,” he says softly. “The world out there is so unrestrained, so – free. We found this lake once and Cooper taught me how to swim. The trees were full of mockingjays and we sang to them all day, listening to them sing back. It was all so warm and wild and beautiful.”

Blaine falls silent, lost in his thoughts. Kurt watches him, unable to look away. He yearns – for what, he doesn’t know. To be able to comfort Blaine now? To have a chance himself to visit this
paradise Blaine’s described? To have a day with Blaine beneath the trees, singing together to the mockingjays?

Kurt doesn’t know how long he sits there, watching and yearning, before Blaine seems to snap out of it.

“Forgive me, I was rambling,” he says with an apologetic smile. The spell breaks. Kurt turns away, blushing slightly.

“Not at all,” Haymitch says, looking strangely pained. “We got quite a lot out of you. You are somewhat handy with swords and knives. You can wrestle and box. You can make your weapon in the arena even if you don’t get one at the Cornucopia. You can hunt and gather. Not bad, kid. Not bad at all. I’d say you are almost a Career.”

Silence descends again while Haymitch sips some more of his wine.

“But that’s not what I want,” Blaine says, voice so quiet Kurt barely catches it.

“What?” Haymitch grunts, looking up from his wine glass. Kurt’s eyes move back to Blaine and he tilts his head, confused.


“I think you misunderstood him, Blaine,” Kurt says placatingly. “He simply means you have as good a chance of making it as a Career, not that you are like one.”

“No but that’s not what I want either,” Blaine says, face unreadable.

“You don’t want to have as much chances of winning as a Career?” Kurt asks, thoroughly confused.

“I can’t kill,” Blaine says abruptly. “In fact, I won’t. I won’t deliberately use what I know to make a weapon to kill someone. I won’t... I can’t do that and live with myself.”

“What?” Kurt asks, thrown.

“I will not kill in the arena,” Blaine enunciates every word, slow and clear, as immutable as a mountain.

Distant panic alarms sound at the back of Kurt’s head but most of him is confused and annoyed.

“None of us particularly wanted to be cold-blooded murderers!” he snaps, harsher than he meant to. He pauses, pulls in a calming breath. He just needs to make Blaine understand, make him see. There’s no need for this choking panic rising in him.

“None of us thought we could kill either,” Kurt bites out. “But we all did what we had to do once they threw us in there, so stop being stupid and start dealing with it!”

It’s just – the thought of Blaine not even fighting, just giving up and dying and being gone forever, and leaving Kurt behind – how dare he?

“But you were ready to fight to kill if it came down to it, weren’t you?” Blaine is asking, sounding thoroughly unreasonable. “Even at the start?”

“Well of course I was! I wasn’t going to make my dad watch me get butchered to bloody pieces
“Well I can’t do that, alright!” Blaine yells back just as loudly; it’s the first time Kurt has ever heard him raise his voice. “If someone is running at me with an axe, I will defend myself but I don’t think I can land a killing blow, alright? I can’t hit another human being, another kid, who is just as desperate and terrified as I am, and intentionally bury a knife in them. I can’t kill someone who has been so brainwashed by the Capitol that they proudly march to their death. Killing a human being, a person, it’s not something I can do! And I am not going to let the Capitol turn me into another piece in their Games. If I’m gonna die, I’d rather just die as me!”

There is a minute of ringing silence, the only sound Blaine’s loud breathing after his outburst.

“Do you think that’s going to be any consolation to your family when they’re watching you get killed?” Kurt asks shakily, fisting his trembling hand. “Do you think the fact that you died as yourself and kept your morals or integrity or whatever is going to be any help at all when they get you back in a coffin?”

Blaine runs a weary hand over his face.

“For once, I just have to do what is right by me and not think of others,” he mumbles into his palms. When his eyes meet Kurt’s, there is something broken and haunted in them. “And I can’t kill someone just for me, Kurt. I can’t – I won’t let them change me like that.”

“So you’re not even going to try to win?” Kurt feels hollowed out, empty. His arteries feel filled with lead.

“Oh no,” Blaine says, shaking his head earnestly. “I’m going to try just as hard as the rest of them, maybe even harder. I want to live, Kurt. I want to see my family again. But if someone runs at me with a mace – well, maybe you should warn the Capitol to bet on the other person.”

He gives Kurt a half-hearted smile which Kurt does not return. Their eyes hold for a few long moments before Kurt breaks it, looking away, willing the tears to recede.

A few more minutes of heavy silence later, Blaine quietly excuses himself and leaves the compartment. When the door slides shut behind him, Haymitch wordlessly pops open another bottle of wine and Kurt doesn’t even think to protest.

Instead he fetches a glass of his own and holds it out to Haymitch for a shot.

“Are you even old enough to drink this stuff,” Haymitch asks with raised eyebrows. “It’s much stronger than my usual.”

“I’ve been old enough to be sent into an arena and fight to the death for over five years now,” Kurt says tonelessly. “A little strong wine shouldn’t be a problem.”

Even Haymitch has nothing to say to that. The glass is filled and Kurt downs the entire thing in one go.

The liquid burns as it goes down his throat. Momentarily dulling the ache in his heart.
PART II – THE TRAINING

“You sure you don’t want to try it with a girl at least once?” a loud voice says behind him and suddenly he is tackled from behind by 120 pounds of wild, feral girl.

“Hello to you too, Johanna,” Kurt says with wary fondness as he extricates himself from her arms and turns to grin at her.

“I’d totally volunteer to be that girl, by the way,” Johanna clarifies. “’Cause look at you, gorgeous.” She looks him up and down, hooting lecherously and Kurt resists the urge to cross his arms in front of his body and shield himself from her view. Not that it will do him any good against her.

“Still not your team, Johanna.”

Johanna mutters something about ‘all the good ones’ (probably offensive, knowing her) but Kurt is distracted by the sight of a tall, bronze-haired man walking towards them, accompanied by a wizened old woman.

“Finnick. Mags.” Kurt calls happily, returning their warm hugs.

Johanna, Finnick and Mags are the only people at the Capitol Kurt actually considers his friends, apart from Cinna and Haymitch.

Johanna Mason from District 7 won the Games two years before him. Finnick and Mags are both District 4 victors, the former as young and beautiful as the latter is shrivelled and old. Kurt remembers being nine years old and watching Finnick Odair on the television, awed and terrified by the stunningly beautiful fourteen year old with the clever hands and brutal skill with a trident.

All three of them were there for him last year when he was mentoring Mercedes, offering him their sympathy, advice and support. It is one of those experiences you just couldn’t go through without trusting someone in the end.

Mags babbles something at Kurt in her toothless, garbled speech and he blinks, turning to Finnick for translation. Finnick somehow always understands her, though all Kurt hears is gibberish.

“All the good ones,” Finnick says with a roguish wink at Kurt.

Unintended, the image of a sweet, curly-haired boy with the prettiest golden eyes rises in Kurt’s brain and to his horror, he feels himself flush furiously.
And of course, every single person in their little group of Victors immediately notices it.

“Oh my god, you actually managed to snag yourself a boy?” Johanna asks with so much astonishment, Kurt would’ve been insulted in any other circumstance, but right now he is still too busy mentally kicking himself and floundering.

“Excellent! Is he cute?” Finnick asks, waggling his eyebrows. Genuine friendly interest wars with lascivious enthusiasm on his face.

“The cutest,” Kurt blurts out before he can stop himself and freezes when all three of them whoop so loudly, other Victors turn around to see the source of the commotion.

“Oh my god, shut up,” Kurt hisses, but the other three pay no mind, grinning widely.

“Details!” Johanna says, dragging Kurt to the balcony behind the Mentors’ Lounge. She pushes him into a private alcove and scoots in next to him, Finnick and Mags settle on his other side. The wind whistles loudly through the open area, drowning out their voices and providing the perfect cover against Capitol bugs and prying ears.

“There’s nothing to say!” Kurt says vehemently, trying to do damage control. They stare back in blatant disbelief.

“I don’t have a boyfriend!” Kurt insists.

Johanna scoffs. “Quit lying and man up, Hummel. Spill the sordid details. Is he good in bed?”

“Johanna!”

“What? It’s important!”


“Who’s Mr Cutest then?” Johanna demands, her threatening glare promising physical damage if he lied. Kurt blushes once again despite himself and ducks his head, avoiding their gaze.

There is a beat of silence and then Johanna bursts into loud, raucous peals of laughter.

“Oh my god, this is golden,” Johanna huffs out and hiccups between all the laughing. “Prettyboy here has a crush. He has a little schoolboy crush on some kid and no clue how to go about it!”

She doubles up in more laughter while Finnick and Mags snicker quietly. Kurt feels his face burn from the amount of blushing he is doing.

“It’s complicated,” Kurt says, tilting his chin up superiorly while she hiccups next to him.

Honesty.

Abruptly, Johanna sits up and grabs his face between her small palms. Before Kurt can so much as blink, she lunges forward, smacking a lewd, wet kiss on his mouth. Kurt is so thoroughly shocked it takes him ten whole seconds before he jerks back, eyes wide.

“What the fuck –?”

“How complicated can that be?” Johanna interrupts him with a sly smirk before bursting into another round of laughter. Mags and Finnick abandon all pretence and join her, howling with mirth.
“When the boy is a tribute you’re mentoring, I’d say plenty complicated.”

That shuts them all up.

“What?” Johanna asks, levity all gone in an instant.

Kurt slumps back in his seat and lets out a loud exhale. “Yeah, I know. I’m screwed.”

“Was it rigged?” she asks, clutching his hand, eyes flashing anger and pain. “Is it like last time with your friend? To punish you more?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Kurt says wearily, rubbing his eyes. “I only realized I felt something for him over the past two days, after he was reaped. I don’t even know what I feel for him. All I know is I can’t handle it if he dies. I just… I can’t face that.”

Finnick raises a hand and squeezes Kurt’s shoulder in support and sympathy. All traces of mirth have vanished from his face, he almost looks haunted.

With a start, Kurt remembers Annie Cresta, the poor mad girl he knows Finnick loves. Annie Cresta, Victor of the 92nd Hunger Games, who Finnick realized he had feelings for while mentoring her. Finnick can understand what Kurt feels right now better than anyone else.

So many lives the Capitol has bonded in their misery.

Kurt sighs and leans back further in his seat, gazing up at the sky. The wind gently ruffles his hair.

Since the reaping, everything about him has felt knocked off-balance. The confusing rush of emotions has left him exhausted and numb.

Mags garbles something at him and Kurt turns his head to Finnick, eyebrows raised.

“She wants to know which one your boy is,” Finnick says.

“The last one to be reaped,” Kurt replies, remembering the hot sun in his eyes, Cooper screaming his head off and the raw strangling panic. “The mayor’s son, Blaine.”

Without a single word, Mags stands up and waddles off.

“Where is she going?” Kurt asks, bemused, but Finnick just shrugs in reply.

Johanna has pulled out her Monitor and is tapping and scrolling through it. It is a portable electronic tablet all mentors are given for the duration of the Games. It gives them easy access to details about their tributes, their scores and popularity among the Capitol crowd. And once the actual Games begin, it also gives live updates on kills, allies, location, sponsors and so on.

“Shit, he’s so pretty,” she says, looking down at something on the screen. “Normally I’d say get it Hummel, but…”

Kurt leans closer for a look and with a jolt, sees that the tribute portraits are already up.

Blaine is dressed in a skin tight, all-black suit that covers him from neck to ankle, ending in shiny, knee-length boots. His curly black hair is glossy and artfully tousled. His beautiful gold eyes have been made up slightly to look smoky and seductive. He blinks at them seriously from beneath a banner that reads ‘District 12: Blaine Anderson’.

He looks fit and strong and beautiful. Everything a tribute should be.
Even as Kurt looks, the little red bars on the right hand corner which indicate public interest go up a few points.

“But they haven’t even really seen him yet,” Johanna says, blinking at the screen.

“He’s beautiful, that’s all they need to get interested,” Finnick says, leaning in to study Blaine, disgust for the Capitol audience evident in his voice. “But at least with looks like that, he’ll definitely rake in the sponsors. He’s already got that advantage.” He glances up at Kurt. “How does he measure on skills?”

“He’ll probably have a fighting chance at winning, if he tries.”

Johanna and Finnick stare at him like he’s crazy.

“What do you mean, if he tries?” Johanna asks, incredulous.

Kurt turns away with a resigned sigh, not looking at them.

“Blaine doesn’t want to kill,” he says hollowly.

“Well, of course he doesn’t, none of us want to!” Johanna snaps. “Except maybe the gorillas from District 2. It’s how it is, you just grit your teeth and hack your way out if you want to live!”

“That’s just it,” Kurt says, staring unseeingly into the distance. “Blaine doesn’t want to live like that, doesn’t want to survive by directly causing the death of someone else. Something about how he’d rather die as himself than turn into a piece in the Capitol’s games. He’s very stubborn on that.”

There are a few minutes of silence as the other two digest that. The wind whistles between them, a disjointed laugh floats out to them from within the Lounge.

“Of course,” Johanna finally bites out, misplaced anger and bitterness colouring her voice. “Fucking figures, Hummel. All the boys who would trip over themselves to have you, but nooo, you have to set your eye on the fucking angel of peace and conscience.”

Kurt laughs, he can’t help it, because life does seem to have a twisted sense of humour where it concerns him, doesn’t it?

They all lapse into silence once again, each lost in their own thoughts, waiting for the opening ceremonies to begin.
The lowest level of the Remake Centre is more or less a gigantic stable, horses and carriages lined up at the ready, tributes and stylists milling about everywhere. Kurt makes his way through it, returning shouts of greeting from fellow mentors with well-practiced, casual grace as he tries to reach his tributes.

Cinna is the first one to see him from the District 12 section. He starts walking towards Kurt, eyes twinkling and lips upturned, and Kurt picks up his own pace, grinning widely. He walks right into Cinna’s open arms and they hug tight for a few moments before Cinna draws back, looking Kurt up and down with an assessing eye.

“You’ve grown again in the three months since I last took your measurements,” Cinna chides, sounding fondly exasperated. “I’m going to have to alter all the clothes I’ve designed for you now.”

“Technically, you don’t have to design for me at all during the Games,” Kurt reminds him with a cheeky grin. “It’s the tributes you should be worrying about.”

“But of course I have to design for you,” Cinna says with a negligent wave. “No one else is even remotely as gratifying to dress up as you.” Kurt preens at the compliment.

“Though I think you may finally have some competition on that front.” Cinna nods slightly towards the District 12 stalls, staring at something approvingly.

Kurt follows Cinna’s gaze and it is ridiculous how instantly his stomach bursts into a thousand butterflies.

Blaine is standing stock still while one of the prep team girls, Venia, flits around him doing some final adjustments. He is dressed much like his tribute portrait, in a full body, skin-tight black suit, with solid knee-length boots that criss-cross and lace up around his calves. A swirling, shimmery red cape hangs from his shoulders, dominating the outfit, and a dramatic headdress with pieces shaped like embers of coal is perched firmly over his artfully tousled curls. Kurt stares, enchanted, by the little frown scrunching Blaine’s eyebrows while he listens to the prep team clucking around him, by the neat slender line of his waist and slim-defined muscles of his arms, by the errant curl that keeps flopping over his forehead that Blaine pushes back with an annoyed little flick of his wrist and the truly remarkable way the suit clings him, to his legs and thighs and shoulders and –

“You are all sharp lines and startling angles,” Cinna muses, shooting Kurt a small smile, startling him back to their conversation. Kurt scrambles, tries to wrench his mind from its dangerous trajectory. “You are – a statuesque beauty shall we say, superior almost, desirable and unattainable. Charmingly dangerous. The perfect combination of ice and fire, such fun to dress.”

Cinna’s attention falls back to Blaine and Kurt follows his gaze, he can’t help himself.

“That boy now, he’s a different kind of fun,” Cinna continues. “He’s all soft warmth and gentle

Hope you enjoy! :)

Chapter Notes
curves, extremely beautiful yet so very approachable. A crowd pleaser in every way.”

“You’d both make an aesthetically captivating duo if you stood next to each other,” Cinna trails off wistfully, still looking Blaine up and down with a critical eye. “A study in perfectly complementing contrasts. It would be wonderful to design co-ordinating outfits for the two of you...”

Kurt is blushing furiously when Cinna turns towards him. He drops his eyes, avoiding Cinna’s gaze, knowing Cinna would be able to read everything from his blotchy-red face.

He feels, rather than sees, when Cinna’s eyes widen in realization and flit quickly between him and Blaine. But when he finally gathers the courage to look up again, Cinna’s face is an impassive mask.

“What do you think of this year’s outfit?” Cinna asks casually, leading Kurt toward their section and Kurt gratefully grabs on to the change in topic. He knows Cinna won’t just drop it the issue. But ten minutes before the opening ceremonies are about to begin in a crowded stable full of enemies and spies, is not the time and place for this conversation.

Kurt shakes himself out of it and turns a critical eye to Cinna’s creations for this year, assessing them thoroughly.

The tributes look amazing, of course. The outfits are amazing, strong and dark and dramatic, a thousand times better than the coal-miner’s outfit District 12 was usually stuck in till Cinna took over for Kurt’s Games.

But –

The outfit this year isn’t as breathtakingly stunning as Cinna’s previous two creations for the opening ceremonies.

During Kurt’s Games, Cinna dressed his tributes in a suit made of fabric that shimmered in different shades of fire when the light caught it, with a cape and headdress lined with orange-shaded glass pieces. When the lights of the stadium had trained on Kurt and his fellow tribute, they literally dazzled with the glow of a muted star, shimmering and sparkling and unforgettable.

Last year, Cinna created a deadly coal-fire suit that, when turned on, resembled the shifting and moving of red-hot coal embers.

Kurt tries to see what could possibly be the selling point for this outfit. The detail that can turn it from amazing to stunningly inspired. But whatever it was evades him, and he turns to see Cinna smiling in amusement, watching him try to figure it out.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Kurt says finally with a defeated grin. “What’s the catch point of this outfit?”

“Fire,” Cinna says, with a slightly maniacal smile of joy.

Kurt raises his eyebrows. Hasn’t fire been the catch point of every outfit Cinna has made so far?

Ten minutes later it becomes apparent exactly what Cinna means.

“You’re going to set my tributes on fire?” Kurt screeches, while six wide-eyed tributes scuttle back from the blowtorch their prep team is brandishing at them.

“Oh, it’s not real fire I assure you,” Cinna says, eyes sparkling with excitement. Kurt gapes at him, he is truly insane.
“Portia and I came up with it. Its synthetic, it won’t burn them. It’s perfectly safe, I promise.”

It looks pretty unsafe to Kurt.

He opens his mouth to protest some more, but a reverberating gong sounds through the stables and there is an increased flurry of activity as the wide doors at the front of the stable slide open.

The District one chariots trundle out.

“We have to light them up now, we’re up soon!” Cinna says, signalling hurriedly and the prep teams move forward. Kurt watches in horror while his tributes shuffle around like scared deer. He looks around for advice or help, but Haymitch is nowhere to be seen.

Instinctively, he walks up to Blaine and slips his hand into his for a reassuring squeeze before drawing it back. Blaine startles slightly at the touch, turning to stare at Kurt, surprise and some unnameable emotion flitting behind his eyes.

He opens his mouth to say something and Kurt waits, heart thrumming a little. But they are interrupted by the sight of Cinna walking down the line of District 12 tributes, setting their headdresses and capes on fire.

Is Cinna actually cackling? Dear god, he has truly cracked.

Blaine stares with a significant amount of wide-eyed terror as Cinna comes closer.

“One word and I’ll tear it off your back, I promise,” Kurt whispers to him and the briefest smile flickers across Blaine’s face before Cinna is upon them.

Deftly, he moves the blowtorch over Blaine’s cape and headdress till the fire catches, quickly spreading. Blaine stands stock-still for a second before he relaxes in palpable relief, obviously unburnt.

Kurt lets out a soft sigh.

“What is this stuff?” Blaine asks, sounding fascinated, putting a finger through the flickering and entirely real-looking flames.

“Synthetic fire, Portia and I made it,” Cinna replies. “Now get in your chariots, it’s almost your turn.”

The six tributes scramble to comply, and Blaine gets into the last one with Janette. This year, as there are six tributes instead of the usual two, three interlocked chariots attached one behind the other have been provided for each district, each carriage carrying one male and one female tribute.

The fire has turned into a billowing inferno by now, tongues of fire licking up and down the tributes’ bodies, turning them into magnificent flaming creatures that couldn’t possibly exist outside of a fantasy.

“What do you think of the outfit now?” Cinna asks with a playful smirk while Kurt stares in awe.

The horses have started trotting towards the entrance and Blaine turns back to Kurt and smiles. His eyes are molten gold and dramatic bursts of fire frame his face. His very skin seems to be glowing.

He looks ethereal. Breathtaking. A creature crafted of fire and light.
“Brilliant,” Kurt whispers, staring after Blaine and the trail of fire he’s left behind. His heart thumps in his chest. “Absolutely brilliant.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I guess I should mention this story is pretty slow burn. I was always planning on a slow-burn, gradual romance, built almost in the background, like THG series. But what works there might not work here! I hope it hasn’t gotten frustrating! (Random moment of self-doubt induced by insomnia, unhealthy amounts of coffee and stress over exams).

What I’m getting at is, I hope you’re all still enjoying the fic! Thanks for reading :)

District 12 is all the Capitol talks about after the opening ceremonies.

Even as the chariots are drawing back into the stables, Kurt sees the interest points for his tributes soar up. There are already a few sponsors lined up for all of them, even Lory. And Blaine’s feed is practically drowning under the positive attention.

Kurt wordlessly turns and hugs Cinna in thanks while the District 12 carriages finally come to a stop in front of them. The fire has started dying down a little and the prep team flutter around the tributes, trying to douse it completely.

A movement in his periphery sets off alarms in his head and Kurt feels himself reacting, whipping around and searching for the threat.

One of the hulking, lethal-looking boys from District 2 is glaring murderously in their direction, obviously angry over being upstaged. Kurt follows the boy’s gaze to see who the brunt of his wrath is focused on and feels his heart sink to somewhere below his gut.

Blaine is smiling sweetly, nose buried in a bouquet of flowers someone in the audience had thrown at him, completely unaware of the death stare trained on him. A few tongues of flame are still flickering around his body.

Before Kurt can do something exceptionally stupid like crouch protectively in front of Blaine and growl a threat, the prep team begins to usher the tributes towards the elevators to take them to their rooms.

The District 2 boy’s eyes follow Blaine till he goes out of sight.

Kurt hangs back with Cinna, waiting for the crowd around the elevators to disperse. When it is their turn, Kurt and Cinna get an elevator to themselves. The ride up to the Training Centre is quiet but Kurt can feel Cinna’s heavy, thoughtful gaze turn on him more than once.

Each district has an entire floor to themselves in the Training Centre and District 12 is at the topmost floor. Each tribute gets their own room, fully appointed with every luxury the Capitol can offer. The District Team – comprising of mentors, stylists, prep teams and escorts – also get similar accommodations in the same floor as their tributes.

When the elevator comes to a halt, Kurt nods wordlessly to Cinna before all but running to the room allotted for him and hiding there till dinner time.
After a luxurious shower in the magnificent Capitol bathroom, he feels much more settled. He pulls on comfortable red pants and a white cotton shirt, knotting his favourite scarf firmly about his throat before taking a deep breath and going out to dinner.

Once again, everyone is already assembled and starting on dinner when Kurt joins them. He takes the only remaining empty seat next to Haymitch and right across from Blaine, and starts on dinner without meeting anyone’s eyes. The only person talking is Polivia, going off on another of her condescending speeches of “encouragement”, which usually just managed to degrade rather than boost the tributes’ morale.

Just as dessert is being brought in, Haymitch speaks up, cutting Polivia off right in the middle of a sentence.

“When you’re in the Games,” Haymitch starts abruptly, ignoring her huff of annoyance, “and you’re starving, or freezing, or dying of dehydration, a few matches, a loaf of bread, or a bottle of water can mean the difference between life and death.”

The tributes have all stopped eating, even Lory, and are listening to him with rapt attention.

“And to get those life-saving things you need sponsors,” Haymitch continues, taking a sip from his wine glass. “Thanks to Cinna and Portia, you all got the Capitol’s attention. Now what you have to do is impress the Gamemakers and get the Capitol to like you.”

“And how do we do that?” Janette asks, her voice wavering slightly.

“Impressing the Gamemakers gets you decent scores,” he says. “And a decent score in your private session with the Gamemakers gets the Capitol to bet on you. You are scored based on how much chance the Gamemakers think you have of surviving. For that you need to pay attention in Training over the next few days.”

Haymitch takes another long pull from his wine glass before setting it on the table.

“Learn everything they teach you,” he instructs. “Avoid what you’re good at, don’t show off your best skills to everyone. Save your strengths for the private session. Learn new weapons and new skills. Learn how to light a fire, how to make a snare. Tie a knot, climb a rope. You’d be surprised how many times it’s the lack of basic survival skills that causes death in the arena. Learn how to recognize edible plants and roots so you don’t starve. Avoid the careers. Allying with them will definitely end with a knife in your back.”

Haymitch pauses, looking each tribute in the eye gravely before turning to Kurt. “Anything to add, Kurt?”

Kurt sets down his knife and fork and looks up to see six pairs of eyes staring at him. Jac has his eyebrow cocked disdainfully.

“Don’t ignore each other in Training,” Kurt says, trying not to react to Jac’s sneer. “Act like you are all friendly with each other. It’ll confuse the other tributes, make them think the six of you have formed an alliance together. It’ll make them less likely to target any of you as easy pickings.”

Blaine, Lory, Abbie and Janette nod their assent, while Jac rolls his eyes and Coraline doesn’t acknowledge Kurt’s words at all, simply going back to her dinner.

There are a few minutes of heavy silence.

“Alright go to bed, kids,” Haymitch says. “You have a long day ahead of you tomorrow and you
need all the sleep you can get.”

Polivia rises to usher the tributes to their rooms and Kurt lets his eyes follow Blaine till he leaves the room.

With a small groan, he pushes his half-eaten plate away and slumps back in his chair, feeling drained. Just yesterday morning, he was still in District 12, safely holed up in his room and with no overwhelming knot of fear in his stomach over the life of a boy he doesn’t even really know.

How did Blaine manage to root himself so deeply in Kurt’s heart in just one day? Is it even possible for someone to become so important to your life, when you have never even had a proper conversation with them? Is it possible to fall in love with someone just because they exist?

Is he in love with Blaine?

“Come to the roof I need some air,” Haymitch says abruptly, interrupting Kurt’s mental wrangling. Before Kurt can respond, Haymitch takes a firm hold of his arm and all but drags him to the roof of the Training Centre.

This is another one of those places Kurt and Haymitch go to whenever they need to talk in private, safe from the Capitol’s bugs. There is a little garden off to the side of the roof that is full of wind chimes, and the brisk wind also provides cover to talk in secret.

“So when exactly were you gonna tell me you are in love with the Anderson boy?” Haymitch asks without preamble when they reach the garden.

Kurt stumbles and nearly falls on his face.


“Mags,” Haymitch replies, looking at him steadily.

“Oh,” Kurt says, avoiding his eyes.

“I just want to know why I wasn’t told how you feel about that boy the second he was reaped,” Haymitch says, obviously angry. “We could’ve started working on a plan right away, I could’ve started getting sponsors for him already, why did you –“

“I didn’t know alright,” Kurt interrupts him tiredly. “I’ve talked to him once in my entire life, I hadn’t even really seen him for two years till the Reaping yesterday, I didn’t know I would feel like this, I don’t know how I feel – why I feel –“

Kurt breaks off, presses his palms against his eyes hard, till he sees stars. When he drops his hands, he finds Haymitch looking at him with an inscrutable expression on his face.

“Start at the beginning, boy,” Haymitch says, his voice brooking no arguments.

“There’s nothing to say,” Kurt replies miserably, turning away to look out over the edge of the roof. A multitude of artificial lights that twinkle around them, drowning out the sky. You can never see the stars here.

Haymitch waits, gaze still unwaveringly fixed on him and after a few moments, Kurt sighs deeply.

“I’ve always known Blaine, of course,” he begins. “Him being the mayor’s son and all, and District 12 isn’t that big to begin with, it’d be hard not to know who he is. And I used to stay back in school sometimes, to listen to him sing. He sings beautifully.”
Kurt’s lips curve in a wistful smile, remembering all those times he would hang around outside the music room when he knew Blaine would be in there singing. There is so little beauty in District 12, Kurt had never been able to resist lingering whenever he heard Blaine’s warm voice bring colour to the world.

Kurt’s mother had loved music when she was alive; his childhood had been full of songs and little performances by the fire. When she died, he had turned inward, turned quiet and closed-off, avoiding anything that reminded him of her. Music had just felt too painful. Till one day when he was ten years old, and he heard Blaine sing for the first time…

He startles slightly.

“Listening to him sing made me want to sing again for the first time after my mother’s death,” he distantly hears himself say, feeling strangely off-balance in the face of this random epiphany. It’s just –

Blaine, however unconsciously, was the catalyst that brought out Kurt’s love for singing again, after losing his mother. Blaine has touched his life in more ways than he previously thought.

“She always loved to sing,” he continues, “and after she died, music made me think of her too much. But I heard Blaine sing one day, and it was so lovely and full of hope and joy, I just – I wanted nothing more than to sing with him.”

He remembers now that he started singing again that evening – just a little lullaby his mother used to sing to him. Kurt will never forget how happy his dad was that day, running to Kurt’s room, crying with joy over seeing his son sing again after two years of silence.

“But we’ve never actually ever been friends or acquaintances or anything,” Kurt says, shaking himself out of the memories. “And I didn’t even know he knew I existed, until about two years ago.”

He pauses, fingering the little mockingjay pin in his pocket before closing his fist around it.

“Blaine came to visit me right after I was reaped,” he says. “And I don’t know why, I never asked him, but it was the only time we ever talked. He gave me this pin, and asked me to wear it as a token from our district.”

Kurt pulls out the pin from his pocket and opens his palm to show it to Haymitch. Haymitch stares at it for a minute with a slight frown before his eyes widen with some realization.

“I knew I recognized that from somewhere when I first saw it,” Haymitch says softly, staring at the pin. “I didn’t really think about it before, but that was Maysie’s.”

“Maysie Donner?” Kurt asks, startled at the mention of Haymitch’s dead mentor. “How did Blaine get Maysie Donner’s pin?”

“Maysie was Blaine’s aunt,” Haymitch says, still staring at the pin, a haunted expression on his face. “His mother’s sister. He has her eyes.”

Kurt closes his hand around the pin and pockets it, overwhelmed. It obviously has even more emotional history attached to it than Kurt previously thought. So why did Blaine give it to him when they barely even known each other –?

“What else?” Haymitch asks, interrupting Kurt’s train of thought.

“There’s nothing else,” Kurt says, coming back to the conversation at hand. “After I won the
Games, I was too messed up at first to go talk to him and then last year happened with Mercedes
and –” Kurt leaves it hanging there, old sorrow rising up to the surface again. He takes a deep
breath.

“It was only when he was reaped that I realized I feel – that I – I don’t know what I feel,
Haymitch.”

“But you want the boy alive,” Haymitch says scrutinizing him. “You are willing to do whatever it
takes to get him back alive.”

“Yes,” Kurt admits with a sigh, closing his eyes. “Even if it means I have to forsake the other
tributes, I’m ready to do it if it’d get Blaine out.

Kurt smiles humourlessly, squeezing his eyes shut tighter to keep the tears from escaping.

“I’m supposed to help these five children, children who all have lives and families waiting for
them to come back. And I’m willing to condemn them to their deaths if it means I’d get Blaine out
alive. How much of a monster does that make me, Haymitch?”

“Not a monster,” Haymitch’s voice says next to him, years of sadness and guilt weighing down
his words. “I do it every year.”

Kurt’s eyes shoot open and he turns to him. “What?”

“I can only get one kid out even if everything works out,” Haymitch says gruffly. “Till you came
along, District 12 wasn’t exactly showered with sponsors. I had to put everything into the one that
I thought had a better chance of living and cut the other loose.”

Kurt stares at him in dull horror.

He always imagined it is the job of mentoring child after child, only to witness their deaths every
year, that reduced Haymitch to seeking oblivion in a bottle. Now he realizes that it is even more
personal. Even after escaping the arena, Haymitch is still forced to choose to end lives every year,
however indirectly; is still made to do the Capitol’s dirty work.

And this is the future that awaits Kurt. Even more blood on his hands, even more deaths on his
conscience, turning his life into a nightmare.

Kurt is starting to realize that when it comes to the Hunger Games, the lucky ones are those who
die in the arena.

“You gonna tell the boy how you feel?” Haymitch asks, breaking the silence.

“No,” Kurt says, shaking his head. “He needs to concentrate on training and surviving right now.
The last thing I want to do is preoccupy him with my confused emotional baggage.”

Haymitch nods. “Once they’re in the arena, I’m handing Blaine over to you. I’ll take over for the
other kids, you concentrate on Blaine. I think that’d be the best for everyone.”

Kurt makes a noise of assent, turning back to stare unseeingly over the Capitol rooftops. With a
comforting pat to his back, Haymitch goes back to his room, leaving Kurt alone with his thoughts.
The next morning, after a serious breakfast where Haymitch barked out last minute strategies to the tributes, Kurt, Haymitch and Polivia spend the day trying to talk up sponsors while the tributes are sent to Training. Kurt takes over the pre-Games sponsor duties for Blaine and Janette, Haymitch tries to talk up Abbie and Lory, and Polivia for Jac and Coraline, trying to cover more ground.

It is an exhausting morning of pandering to the richest of the Capitol, tolerating their invasive interest and slimy personalities. When he returns to the Training Centre with Haymitch, Kurt is tired and drained.

He gets himself a mug of warm milk and sits with Haymitch in the main room, waiting for the tributes to return.

The district 12 tributes are distinctly dispirited – and in the case of Abbie and Lory, downright terrified – when they come back from training. Kurt and Haymitch spend the rest of the evening grilling them about every aspect of their day, together and then individually, till they are all called to dinner.

Kurt toys with his food, looking at each tribute in turn and thinking about everything he’s learned. From what he understands, Jac completely ignored everything Haymitch told him to do and spent the majority of the day showing off his best skills and trying to get into the Career pack. Coraline didn’t outright dismiss their advice, but she didn’t exactly follow it either, instead choosing some personal agenda of her own and only going to the weapons section.

Fine, if they think they will fare better on their own, that’s their decision. Kurt isn’t going to bend over backwards to help them.

The other four listened though. They stuck together as a group, learning basic survival skills. Abbie said she discovered a talent for knots and snares; she is clever with her hands then. Kurt will have to think up some strategy for her using that.

Lory apparently did well at the camouflage stations; that is good. Hiding may be a better option for him than direct confrontation. Despite two days of rich, healthy food, he is still painfully thin and frail.

Janette said she managed to hit every target perfectly with a slingshot. She has a good eye and a steady hand… maybe a bow and arrow?

And Blaine. Blaine reportedly breezed through the plants and roots section and could climb a tree like a squirrel, swift and sure-footed. He apparently also exhibited great dexterity in lighting fires and setting out traps, and wasn’t half bad at camouflage either. Kurt feels a rush of relief knowing those things. Blaine already has basic survival taken care of. What he needs now is –
“Alright,” Kurt says, breaking the silence and everyone looks up.

“So today most of you,” he glares pointedly at Jac and Coraline, “stuck to the program and went to all the survival sections. From what you’ve told me, I’d say all of you are somewhat covered in terms of getting food and shelter. Good job, guys.”

Janette gives him a tentative smile which Kurt returns encouragingly. At least Abbie has stopped sniffling into her napkin.

“Tomorrow,” Kurt continues, “I want you all to finish up on those survival stations you didn’t get to today and then get started on weapons. I want you all to at least learn to defend yourselves.”

He looks around at the group before turning to Janette.

“You have a keen eye,” he tells her. “Slingshots are well and good, but I want you to learn how to shoot with a bow and arrow. Blaine can help you, he knows how.”

The tiny girl nods and Blaine gives her a friendly nudge.

“Abbie,” he says, turning to the timid Merchant girl, “I want you to practise with a knife. Spears and swords all require height and strength but a knife just requires quick and clever hands. You can defend yourself if you need to.”

For the first time since the reaping, some sign of a fight enters her eyes and she nods, lips pursed in determination.

“Lory, I want you to try different weapons. Find one you’re good at and tell me tomorrow,” Kurt says. Lory nods timidly.

“Jac, Coraline,” he holds their eyes steadily. “Arrogance gets you killed in the arena. Stop being conceited pricks and do what you’re told.”

Jac sneers and Coraline, as usual, ignores him.

“Blaine,” he says, steeling himself before turning to look into those warm golden eyes. He still blushes despite himself. Dammit. “I’d like you to work a little with Janette and Abbie at the archery and knives stations tomorrow. Hone your skills with those. But mainly concentrate on direct combat. Sword-fighting, wrestling, swinging an axe. Learn to throw a spear or a net too. Just try to pick up on every weapon that you can.”

Blaine looks like he wants to protest.

“All those weapons are just as useful for defence as offense,” Kurt retorts quickly, picking up rightly on his hesitation. Surprise flickers across Blaine’s face. “And tributes aren’t the only ones you’ll encounter in the arena.”

They all fall silent as they remember some of the more chillingly vicious mutts the Capitol has set loose in the arena over the years.

“I think Kurt covered everything,” Haymitch speaks up. “The original plan stays. Don’t draw attention to yourself, don’t show off your best skill, don’t bond with the Careers and stick together as a group as much as possible. Got it?”

The tributes all nod. Kurt goes back to his own room for some much-needed sleep. He didn’t sleep at all last night.
He is no stranger to nightmares. He regularly wakes at night in terror after dreaming about the Games or Mercedes’s death or nightmares where the Capitol captures his dad.

But last night was a particularly horrid nightmare. The hulking boy tribute from District 2, the one who glared at Blaine during the opening ceremonies, plunged a spear right through Blaine while Kurt watched, bound up and unable to help. And it repeated again and again, Blaine dying a hundred different deaths and crying out for help, and Kurt running after him only for Blaine to vanish just beyond his reach.

He had woken with a soft scream, heart beating out of his chest and bile rising in his throat. And then stayed awake the rest of the night, too afraid to sleep in case the nightmare came again, and trying to erase the images from his mind.

He brushes his teeth now and pulls on soft cotton pants to sleep in before going to the little medicine cabinet in the bathroom. He taps out two pills from one of the bright-coloured bottles, washing it down with some water.

The pills are a less intensive dose of morphling. He normally doesn’t resort to these pills if he can help it. He knows how addictive they can be; has watched more than one victor become dependent on them and wither away, preferring to live in a half-dream haze than to face reality.

But he needs it tonight. There is a luncheon tomorrow at the President’s mansion, a sort-of celebratory gathering to herald another year of the Games. Everyone rich and influential in the Capitol will be there, people who can sponsor every one of his tributes without even batting an eyelash.

People who can help save Blaine.

He’ll need his wits about him tomorrow to impress them. And for that he needs to be well-rested.

Kurt crawls into his bed and happily surrenders to the dreamless oblivion of morphling-induced sleep.

*

He is woken the next morning by his prep team descending on him like a flock of multi-coloured, excitable birds. He manages to understand through his sleepy haze that Cinna sent them to get him ready for the luncheon.

He slips out of bed with a groan, still a little out of it from the after-effects of the morphling. One glance at the clock and he groans again. It’s almost eleven. He’s missed breakfast – and getting to see Blaine before he leaves for training.

Ignoring his squawking prep team, Kurt stumbles into the shower and sets it to a comfortable pressure and temperature, pressing the button for vanilla-scented bubbles on a whim. The soothing, warm spray wakes him all the way up.

When he’s done, he pulls on underwear and ties a towel firmly about his waist before walking out. It’s silly – when it comes to his body, he and his prep team have no secrets. He’s been naked in front of them countless times. But casual nudity is still not something he’s really comfortable with.

He walks straight to his wardrobe to pull on an undershirt, aware of his prep team scrutinizing him the whole time.

“You’d look so good with just a few tiny alterations,” Octavia sighs wistfully when he turns back to them, her eyes roaming up and down his body. Her skin is a pale green this year instead of the
light orange it was before, giving her the appearance of permanent nausea.

“A few tweaks to your nose,” Flavius agrees, fingering his bright orange corkscrew curls thoughtfully. “And a little waxing – and oh! Kitten ears! They are all the rage this season and you would look so adorable with fuzzy cat ears. And maybe even whiskers and a tail too!”

“How perfect!” Octavia trills, her eyes widening maniacally. Kurt blinks in mild horror. “He’d be the most beautiful boy in Panem!”

“He’s already the most beautiful boy in Panem now,” Venia says, hanging up the garment bag before starting to pull out her tools. Venia is probably the least altered among the trio. She only has one set of golden tattoos framing her eyes in an exotic design. “And besides, you heard Cinna when they wanted to change him after the Games. No alterations.”

Octavia and Flavius nod and sigh despondently and Kurt mentally thanks the universe that Cinna is his stylist.

The prep team get down to business, polishing and tweezing and poking him down to Beauty Base Zero, which is what one would look like if they get out of bed with flawless hair and polished skin and perfect nails and no makeup. They inform him that it is an easier job to get him there than most people, since he is naturally rather flawless.

Kurt’s usually latent vanity purrs smugly at that comment.

They are done with him in a little over thirty minutes and Kurt eagerly moves to the garment bag. Cinna’s creations never fail to awe him.

And this time is no different.

Inside is a crisp black suit with little diamonds at the cuffs and a pure-white, satin shirt that looks like liquid air. White ankle boots studded with diamonds and a jaunty black bowtie hung with little silver chains complete the outfit. In this suit, Kurt knows he’ll look dashing and elegant and most importantly, mature. He’ll look older than his seventeen years, and that is important to secure the trust of the sponsors.

“Thank you, Cinna,” Kurt mutters, reverently slipping into the outfit and staring at his reflection in pleasure. He is stunning.

The prep team all coo in appreciation, and flutter about him with little touches here and there, before stepping back in pleased satisfaction.

“Oh I absolutely adore dressing you,” Octavia bursts out, sniffing and pulling out a tissue, overwhelmed. “No one else is ever the same!”

“Except maybe the new kid we have this year,” Venia says mischievously as she packs up everything again. “I was helping Cinna with his outfit for the interviews day after tomorrow. He’s going to look gorgeous!”

“Those dreamy golden eyes,” Octavia agrees with a sigh, placing her right hand over her heart. “You can never quite get that shade in artificial implants.”

“And those curls are completely natural,” Flavius complains enviously, fingering his own orange corkscrews.

Kurt listens to them with some weird mixture of pride, jealousy and possessiveness – which in itself was completely ridiculous. It isn’t like Blaine is his, after all. No matter how much he’s
starting to wish he is…

Polivia’s nasal voice squeals at his door that they are getting late. She almost makes him wish his old escort, Effie Trinket, would come back.

Effie is just as vapid and shallow as the rest of them, but Kurt can tell that somewhere in there she actually cares. Kurt’s stellar success landed her a promotion and she is now in a managerial capacity in the Escort Co-ordination division of the Games. Kurt saw her a couple of times in the Capitol, flitting about in her bright orange wig and shouting about big, big, big days.

He finds Haymitch standing in the corridor, actually sober for once and glaring at everyone morosely. He looks put-together and smart, dressed in what is no doubt one of Cinna’s creations. Kurt stares at him in amazement.

“Cinna and Portia ambushed me,” Haymitch says belligerently as Kurt walks up to him. “Can you believe they actually put me in a fucking bowtie?”

Kurt laughs all the way to the elevators.

*Kurt is no stranger to grand galas and luncheons anymore. Since becoming Victor, he has been to countless Capitol parties and celebrations. His Capitol façade is honed to perfection.

He needs it in full force today to get through this.

He grins his teeth and pastes a smile on his face. Dances with every important man and woman Polivia brings to him, carefully slipping praises for his tributes into conversations while charming the pants off them. He puts up with wandering hands and inappropriate comments and the way the Capitol treats Victors like their own personal toys, like property. He turns a blind eye to the thoughtless cruelty rampant at every turn, in this room full of people that watches children fight to death for entertainment.

Anything to get Blaine that one extra penny that may save his life.

More than one man leers at him, his famous beauty attracting them to him like flies to honey. It makes his flesh crawl and his stomach twist with nausea, makes him want nothing more than to run away.

But Haymitch is never very far and always politely rescues him whenever one of them get particularly handsy.

So Kurt grins his teeth and dances.

He catches glimpses of other Victors in the crowd, but doesn’t really make an effort to go talk to them. They are all here for the same reason as him after all – to get sponsors for their own tributes. Right now, each of them is as much competition to him as their tributes are to Blaine.

He sees Johanna grimacing while dancing with a Gamemaker and sends her a sympathetic grin when their eyes meet. He cranes his head, searching the crowd for Finnick and Mags.

His eyes finally land on Finnick sitting in the middle of a group of grossly made-up women, all of whom are touching him like he is some glorified toy.

Kurt bites his lip viciously, and waits for the dance to end; bows politely to his simpering partner before heading towards the tables laden with food. He needs another drink before he can feel up
to facing the Capitol crowd’s dehumanizing attention again.

He finds Mags chewing little cookies in the dessert section and makes his way to her. Mags grins in greeting and babbles something vigorously with a lot of gestures, that passes right over his head. When he just continues blinking at her, confounded, she simply gives a fond shake of her head and plants a kiss full on his mouth, before patting his cheek and flouncing away.

Kurt stares after her for a second, stunned by the Mags of it all as always, before turning to scoop up one of the less-violently-pink drinks. He takes a few steadying sips and a deep breath before foraying into the crowd again.

It’s late evening before they return to the Training Centre.

Haymitch steps off the elevator and makes his way straight to the dining room and Kurt follows him, feeling moderately optimistic. Some of the wealthiest and most Hunger Games-obsessed patrons showed a lot of interest in him today, which can only mean good things in terms of sponsors for his tributes. And literally every man and woman in the luncheon swooned over Blaine; they could not get enough of the ‘pretty boy with the gold eyes’.

Though their disgusting, lascivious interest makes protective anger surge in him, Kurt is still glad for it. When the time comes, he will have no trouble getting money to help Blaine in the arena.

Kurt enters the dining room in good spirits.

Dessert has just been served and Kurt goes straight to a cup of hot chocolate, topping it with a generous amount of whipped cream. He plops into one of the chairs, licking the cream with his fingers and taking deep draughts of the drink, content and relaxed for the first time in days.

When he looks up, his eyes lock on Blaine, who is staring at him with this strange expression on his face, an expression he’s never really seen on Blaine before. An expression that makes sparks zing up Kurt’s spine.

He straightens abruptly in his chair without meaning to, captivated. By Blaine’s eyes, by Blaine’s invitingly-parted lush mouth and the delicate blush spreading across Blaine’s cheekbones. His eyes stay fixed on Blaine.

And Blaine –doesn’t look away.

Warm dark honey-gold eyes travel slowly from Kurt’s face down his body then back up again and Kurt sees Blaine swallow. That spark in his spine is now full-blown electricity, spreading across his body, thrumming under his skin and he feels hungry –

Haymitch clears his throat loudly next to him and Blaine startles like a colt and ducks his head. Kurt continues staring at him, at the blush still high on Blaine’s cheeks, those long eyelashes casting shadows when they blink and… shit.

Kurt looks around at the tributes and finds everyone busy at their dinner except Janette, whose eyes are flickering from him to Blaine with a strangely exultant smirk. When she catches his eye, she grins impudently. Kurt glares back at her, lifting his chin superiorly. His face is probably an unattractive blotchy red but that’s alright. It’s all about the attitude.

And the last thing he needs right now is a miniature Johanna hanging off his back.

Haymitch clears his throat again, points a glare at Kurt that promises an uncomfortable conversation later, before turning to the tributes and asking about their day.
Kurt silently listens as Haymitch discusses tactics and ideas to impress the Gamemakers at the tributes’ private sessions tomorrow. Haymitch gives a few individual instructions to each tribute and then dismisses them. They all trapse out in various states of anxiety.

Blaine is the last to leave.

He lingers at the door, wavering, turning back to look at Kurt as though to say something. Kurt raises an inquisitive eyebrow and Blaine opens his mouth.

“Hurry up!” Polivia’s shrill voice cuts through the silence between them.

Blaine starts and turns back to Kurt, mouthing wordlessly. But then with a blink and a shake of his head, he walks out, leaving Kurt to stare after him.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Warning for mentions of prostitution, non-con themes (no actual scenes) and so on. I don’t know if there is anything else here I should warn for, warning for general THG world and all the dark themes it entails, pretty much. I was originally going to post this as two chapters, but ah, screw that. Here’s another 5k~ words! Hope you enjoy! ;)

They are gathered in front of the television in the main room, Kurt biting his nails where he sits between Haymitch and Cinna.

The tension in the room is stifling. In a few minutes, they will start announcing the tributes’ scores from their private sessions, and it is the first important step towards getting solid sponsors.

The previous TV segment is still playing while they all wait in anxious silence. Three alarmingly-dressed women giggle on the television screen, their sounds discordant with the mood in the room. From what Kurt gathers, they are pulling up pictures of the most desirable tributes this year, and gossiping about them. There is a live audience in the studio, roaring its approval.

Kurt feels his blood simmer with a dull, ever-present hatred.

As if it isn’t bad enough that they are treating humans like toys, sending children to their deaths for amusement. Do they have to prey on them like this too?

He listens to them gush at the tribute portrait of a stunningly attractive, dark-haired girl from District 7 and turns to glare at the clock. There are still three more minutes left before the scores are due. Kurt wants to hurl the television across the room.

And then they pull up a picture of Blaine.

Kurt just freezes – freezes into stillness and watches – while the three women simper at the camera.

Never take your eyes off your enemy, it gets you killed.

“I don’t know where District 12’s been hiding them all these years,” the violently-purple one is saying in her ridiculous Capitol accent, batting her lashes at camera. “I thought we saw it all with Kurt Hummel, but now we have this pretty thing.”

“Isn’t he absolutely delicious?” the second woman asks the audience with a lecherous wink; she has rhinestones embedded in her skin. They roar back their approval. “Oh the money I’d pay to take him home. I could show him a gooood time.”

She winks again while the audience laughs and catcalls.

“I might even give up my one-of-a-kind diamond necklace,” the third one screeches, holding up an ugly choker. “He’d be worth it.”
Kurt bites his lip so hard he tastes blood.

He sits still, doesn’t take his eyes off them till they bring the segment to an end, expressing squeals of excitement for the Fifth Quell. When the women are finally waving their goodbye and the Capitol anthem starts playing, Kurt takes a deep breath and lets himself look at Blaine.

Blaine is curled in on himself staring at the floor, looking thoroughly horrified, making himself as small as possible.

“They do that every year,” Cinna says in a steady, soothing voice, patting Blaine’s shoulder. “There are some people here who would probably pay more attention to that than your actual Gamemaker score. I know it’s horrible. I’m sorry.”

Blaine nods at the carpet slowly, folding in on himself even more.

“It’s just,” Blaine starts and then pauses, licks his lips. “I didn’t expect… that. I was prepared for them to look at me and size me up as a… a killer, a piece of killing machine in their Games. But I wasn’t prepared to be looked at like… like that.”

Kurt wants to reach out and hold him, but Cinna beats him to it. He shuffles closer to Blaine and encloses him in a one-armed hug. Blaine unfurls from his rigid posture, loosens. It seems to comfort Blaine; the brotherly embrace must remind him of Cooper. Something wordless passes between them.

Kurt forgot Cinna is as much Blaine’s stylist as his. Blaine and Cinna seem to have bonded too. Blaine nods at Cinna, takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders, just as the anthem blares from the television again, signalling the beginning of the Gamemaker scores.

The Careers all get predictably high scores. The boy from District 2 who was glaring at Blaine (His name is Cato, Kurt learns), gets an eleven – the highest score you can get. They never award a perfect twelve.

Kurt’s heart sinks as he stares at the double-digit score below the boy’s smirking portrait.

Everyone else gets moderate to low scores. A few are memorable.

Like a stunningly beautiful dark-haired girl from District 7, who gets a nine. Santana Lopez, her tribute sheet says. She is one of the tributes the vile Capitol women were discussing in the previous segment. Good looks and a high score then – a double threat. And there’s one of the boys from District 11 (Thresh) who is so big, he could probably break bones just shaking someone’s hand. He gets a ten.

There are others who stand out, for more heart-breaking reasons. Like the emaciated, club-footed kid from 8, who gets the lowest score of one. And a girl who barely looks old enough to be reaped, a tiny wisp of a thing from District 11, who scrapes a score of seven.

Kurt doesn’t let himself learn their names.

And then its time for District 12. Everyone in the room tenses, leaning forward in their chairs.

Abbie scrapes a six, Coraline gets eight and Janette scores seven. There are whoops and reassurances thrown around as each score is awarded – all are decent, workable scores.

Jac gets a nine and he preens, snotty bastard that he is. Lory gets the lowest of them all – a four. Portia leans forward to give him a pep talk; the poor boy is shaking, looking pale and scared. Kurt would normally join her.
But the next score up is Blaine’s.

His gaze stays fixed forward, he is practically vibrating with tension. He distantly feels Haymitch place a hand on his shoulder.

Blaine’s tribute portrait comes up on screen and the announcer reads out his name, his district, offers a few comments. And then his score flashes beneath his portrait.

Eleven.

Eleven.

There is a minute of absolute silence. And then the room erupts.

Portia and Janette are cheering, Abbie and Lory clap for Blaine and Polivia is hysterical with joy.

“But I didn’t even do anything that special,” a stunned Blaine says, before disappearing under Polivia’s exultant hugs. Clearly she thinks Blaine is her best bet of getting promoted back to District 2.

Kurt can feel his heart soaring. The best score. Blaine is tied at the top for the best score. Everything is lined up to help him win.

Which is why when he turns to look at Haymitch and Cinna, and finds them both looking thoughtful and grim, his heart plummets and settles somewhere around his navel.

“What is it?” he asks tersely, moving closer to them. Polivia’s excited voice and the general chatter provides them cover.

“I’m sure Blaine’s good,” Haymitch says, frowning. “But a score like that is a little too good for what Blaine said he showed them today.”

“Which makes me think,” Cinna says, face troubled. “At least a few of the Gamemakers want him to come back as Victor.”

“But that’s a good thing!” Kurt says, puzzled. “If some of the Gamemakers are on Blaine’s side – why is that a problem?”

Cinna looks like he wants to say something more but he and Haymitch share a look and he just shakes his head. “I’m sure I’m just being paranoid,” Cinna says mildly. “From what I’ve learned of Blaine, he probably really is that good. The boy is kind of amazing.”

Cinna gives Kurt a sincere smile. Kurt narrows his eyes.

He doesn’t buy it one bit.

But before he can start drilling them more, Polivia claps her hands and shrills that they all need to get a good night’s sleep so they can prepare properly for the interviews tomorrow. Haymitch and Cinna clap him on the back and scurry before Kurt can so much as turn around.

Oh, there is definitely something they are keeping from him.

But he will wrestle it out of them later. Right now, he is happy and relieved, watching Blaine blush his way through Polivia’s over-enthusiastic praise.

Polivia starts to usher everyone out and in the bustle, Kurt walks up to Blaine and gives him a hug
before he can start second-guessing himself. Blaine freezes against him, but before Kurt can panic and pull back, Blaine’s arms come up. Settle firm around him, fingers clutching the back of Kurt’s shirt warmly, securely.

He doesn’t pull away.

And Kurt lets himself revel in the closeness, the warmth, the scent. Lets himself revel in *Blaine*. Blaine feels perfect enclosed in his arms like this and it is with reluctance that Kurt breaks their embrace after a few endless moments.

“Congratulations,” Kurt tells him, his voice comes out breathless.

“Thank you,” Blaine’s eyes stay on his, warm and steady, flickering briefly to Kurt’s mouth before they snap back up. Kurt can see his mind going down a stupid, stupid path it really shouldn’t.

He stammers out a hurried goodnight and flees.

Blaine’s smile stays with him as he walks out, warming him down to his toes.

Maybe he’ll actually have a good night’s sleep tonight. One without nightmares.

*

He is startled awake halfway through the night by someone looming over him with a pillow.

He scrambles back with a wordless scream, scrabbling for his pen knife. But when his panicked eyes adjust to the darkness, all he sees is – Johanna.

“Johanna, what the fuck?” Kurt hisses. At least, that’s what he meant to hiss. But Johanna shoved the pillow over his face when he opened his mouth and all that comes out is muffled grunting.

She silently lowers the pillow after a few minutes, making vehement shushing motions at him and glaring till he nods his understanding. With no explanation whatsoever, Johanna unceremoniously yanks him out of bed and gives him a “follow me quietly” glare, before tip-toeing out of his room.

So much for a good night’s relaxing sleep.

With a soft sigh, Kurt steals out after her, following her down the corridor to Haymitch’s room. Johanna silently opens the door and slips in, sticking her head back out with a frown when he doesn’t follow immediately.

Kurt rolls his eyes and heaves another put-upon sigh before following her through the door, closing it softly behind him.

He turns to find six people looking up at him, expressions sombre. The bearers of bad news.

His blood runs cold.

“Is it Dad?” he asks shakily, leaning against the door for support, heart pounding. “Is something wrong with my dad –?”

Haymitch is already shaking his head. “Kurt, no. Your father is *fine*, boy, take a breath.”

Kurt nods, taking rapid breaths of air, transient relief flooding him. It’s not his dad. So long as it’s not his dad, he can handle whatever they are about to tell him.
“Then what is it?” he asks, straightening slightly, taking in the silent room.

Beetee, an extraordinarily intelligent Victor from District 3, is sitting on the bed, fiddling with the antenna of something that looks like a small radio. Mags sits next to him, holding up a wire for him – even she doesn’t have a smile for Kurt right now. Haymitch is taking large swigs of wine directly from a bottle, avoiding Kurt’s gaze. Johanna is curled up on the couch next to a pale and shaky Finnick.

A pale and shaky Finnick, who looks absolutely devastated.

Kurt’s heart sinks.

“Finnick,” he asks, the dread in his stomach intensifying. “Finnick did something happen – is it something to do with Annie?”

Kurt realizes what he said a second later and claps a hand over his mouth, horrified.

The Capitol isn’t supposed to know about Finnick’s feelings for Annie. Kurt knows that the reason Finnick is so exuberant in his affections for the Capitol women is to protect her, turn Snow’s attention away from looking too closely at what she means to him. And now here Kurt is, ruining it all by mentioning her in a room that is sure to be bugged. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Don’t worry,” Beetee pipes up from the bed, still immersed in the little device he’s fiddling with. “This little transmitter here sends out waves that will trip all the bugs, re-encode their signals to pre-recorded sound bits. As long as it’s here, the bugs will only transmit sounds of Haymitch sleeping. I invented it last summer.”

Kurt lowers his hand, relieved.

“Handy,” he compliments Beetee, before turning back to Finnick. “But I’m sorry for the slip anyway, Finnick.”

“It’s not like it matters,” Finnick replies with a quiet, bitter laugh. “Snow’s known about how I feel for Annie longer than I have.”

Kurt blinks.

“But,” he stumbles, taken aback. “All those Capitol women you cavort with, you always said you do it to protect her, you said –“

“It all is to protect her,” Finnick says, running a shaking hand through his hair. “Because if I don’t do what Snow says, he’ll kill her.” His eyes are vacant, haunted. Kurt’s never seen him like this before.

None of this makes sense.

“And he threatens you into, what?” Kurt asks incredulously. “Charming his citizens? Flirting with every man and woman in the city? What could he possibly gain from –?”

Finnick looks up at him, tired and wan, impossibly beautiful even so beaten down and broken.

The realization hits Kurt like a freight train.

He collapses against the door, staring at Finnick with wide eyes. Feels thrown so far out of the loop, so far from the world he thought he lived in, so far away from everything he believed to be true. He is a lost and frightened child.
“Finnick,” his voice comes out in a croak. He wets his dry lips. “Finnick, please tell me the people you are with don’t – don’t pay Snow for your time.”

Finnick lets out a humourless chuckle. “I’m the most expensive toy they’ll ever buy,” he says with a grand flourish, giving Kurt that seductive grin which makes the masses faint.

Kurt feels sick.

“Snow – Snow rents you out like, like that –? And the people here don’t feel how horrible –?”

“It’s part of the whole charade,” Finnick says, looking at the carpet. “He threatens the people we hold dear, we do whatever he says and look like we want to, and the audience clings happily to our deceptions. Just like in the Games, where we make it look like we are competing for the glory, as though being here is an honour.”

He lets out a humourless chuckle, looks up and meets Kurt’s eyes.

“It’s all one big performance, always has been,” he continues. “Except now, I perform for a much smaller audience.”

He smiles; a small, tired smile. Kurt can’t bring himself to return it.

“When,” Kurt starts, clears his cracked throat. “When did Snow – when did you first –“

Finnick has stiffened again, all traces of his temporary attempts at humour disappearing.

“I was seventeen,” Finnick says softly. “That’s when Snow likes to start out usually. I’m – I’m not the only one. Victors… we are the ultimate prize in the Capitol. The ultimate thing money can buy. Snow made it so. Not all Victors are roped in. Only those the Capitol desires the most, the ones who get the most interest, the highest offer. Snow maintains a standard for his… collection. Many Victors go free without ever knowing. But the ones who do get chosen though –”

Finnick is shaking again now. Johanna clutches his hand, eyes feral and wild. Something dark and creeping niggles at the back of Kurt’s consciousness, a vague darkness closing in on him, but he brushes it off, too focused on Finnick.

“I was one of the unlucky ones,” Finnick continues. “So was Johanna when she won. I agreed when he threatened Annie, but Johanna… didn’t.”

“My entire family burned to death while I was on my Victory tour,” Johanna says. Kurt feels the breath punch out of him.

“Snow made a mistake though,” her grin is vicious, angry. “Now he’s got no one to hold over me. I can do whatever the fuck I want, and he has no leash to pull me with.”

Kurt gapes at his two old friends; he never knew. Never knew this horror, they never told him…

“We never thought it’d come to –” Finnick babbles, looking at his clenched fists. “Snow never uses someone who is permanently damaged in the Games, and with your artificial foot, we thought you – we never thought we’d need to burden you with this knowledge, we never –“

Finnick meets Kurt’s eyes. Everything about him screams apology.

“We thought we could shield you from all this. But tonight I heard –“

Kurt’s body understands before his mind does. He feels his knees give out, feels himself slide
down against the door and collapse in a crumpled heap on the floor. Feels Mags rush to his side, holding him like Johanna holds Finnick. Feels it all, but he can’t think, because, because…

“I was out there tonight,” Finnick says, his eyes never leaving Kurt’s. “On an – assignment. And I always hear things – secrets I’m not supposed to know. And tonight,” Finnick’s face twists, “I heard them talking about you.”

“No,” Kurt whispers, shaking his head. He feels made of lead.

“You already have a very high bid,” Finnick continues. “It’s expected to go even higher. Snow will summon you to his office once the Games are done and give you the ultimatum.”

“No.” His whole body is shaking in refusal, in terror. This can’t, he can’t – He won’t.

“I’m sorry, Kurt,” Finnick says, eyes closing in defeat. “If there is any way to stop this I would do it, any way at all –“

And Kurt knows what he has to do.

“I have to die,” Kurt says. Finnick’s eyes snap open.

“What?”

“I have to die,” Kurt whispers. He stiffens his spine and lifts his chin. Wraps his trembling arms around himself, holding himself whole.

He can shake apart later.

“One of you has to kill me or I have to kill myself,” Kurt says, shaky voice growing louder with each word, ringing with conviction. “I have to die, it’s the only way. I have to, I must –“

He was always living on borrowed time, ever since his Games. It was always coming to this. And he refuses to let his actions harm his dad, refuses to stand in another funeral that was his fault, refuses to let Snow use him like this. So he just has to die, he just has to…

“That is not the only way,” Haymitch says gruffly from where he’s sipping wine in the corner.

“Of course it is,” Kurt is practically screaming now. “I refuse to let Snow sell me, I will not let him, I will kill myself before he knows I know, I will not let him threaten Dad again –“

Some part of his brain tells him he’s starting to sound hysterical, but most of him is lost in sheer, all-consuming panic. The room blurs into a whirl of colours and noise; he can’t stop shaking. He tries to rise to his feet. He needs to move, needs to plan…

“And Snow will just replace you with Anderson,” Haymitch snaps.

Kurt stumbles to a halt; his whirring brain stops. Everything stops and the world crystallizes to a single point. “Blaine?”

“Tell him,” Haymitch orders Finnick.

“All that interest in Blaine,” Finnick says to his knees. “All those sponsors. They all want him to win so they can bid on him. If he wins the Games, he’ll be the Capitol’s most sought after new toy.”
Kurt flops back on the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. Mags is gabbing something next to him but Kurt can’t hear her over the roaring in his ears.

“We have to kill him too,” Kurt chokes out, lifting trembling fingers to his brow. He can’t do this anymore, he can’t. “I know him, Haymitch, if that happened he – it would destroy him. He will do it to protect his family but it’ll destroy everything he is, we have to tell him, and we can’t let them have Blaine –“

Bile rises in his throat. He stares up at the room, mouthing wordlessly; doesn’t know how to cope.

“Well you’re useless I see,” Haymitch’s loud voice interrupts Kurt’s numb thoughts. He looks up to see Haymitch striding towards him.

“I was hoping you’d not have a neurotic breakdown and come up with something sensible, but since you obviously can’t,” he shoots Kurt a derisive sneer, “we’ll just have to try out my plan.”

“What plan?” Johanna asks with a sharp glare.

“The plan to make Blaine and Kurt the biggest love story since Cece and Doran. Even bigger, if we can manage it.”

The room falls completely silent.

Kurt knows of Cece and Doran. They are Victors from District 9 who fell in love while mentoring together and married each other, a decade or so ago. The Capitol goes crazy whenever they come up for the Games. Even when the Games aren’t going on, even during the Games they aren’t mentoring, there is always some feature or the other about their lives. They are the Capitol’s favourite celebrity couple.

And Haymitch wants to turn him and Blaine into them?

He stares at Haymitch, a dull blush working its way up his cheeks despite the terror still pulsing through him and he just doesn’t understand.

“I don’t understand,” Johanna says, frowning. Kurt mentally thanks her. “How is turning them into nauseating lovebirds gonna help anything?”

“It’s gonna help,” Haymitch explains condescendingly, “because then the Capitol audience themselves will protect Snow from touching them.”

Everyone looks at him in blank bewilderment, except for Beetee, who is lost in thought. Haymitch heaves a put-upon sigh.

“It’s like Finnick said,” Haymitch explains. “It’s all one big charade. So you use the charade against Snow. You sell Kurt and Blaine as a package deal and make the Capitol fall in love with the package deal, and nothing can touch them. If Snow tries to split them up, there will be riots. The Capitol loves its toys. The Capitol citizens are protective of their toys. And we make Kurt and Blaine’s romance their new favourite toy.”

There is silence while everyone digests that. Kurt tries to think it through objectively, but his neurons still feel clogged and numb, barely sputtering to life.

“But if Blaine dies in the arena,” Finnick asks, frowning thoughtfully. “Kurt will be left just as unprotected as before.”

“Yes,” Haymitch admits. “But it still buys us time. It buys Kurt at least another year. Snow can’t
have him working the Capitol streets when he is supposedly devastated over the death of the love of his life. So even if the Anderson kid dies, Kurt’ll be no worse off than before and it may put things off by a year. And a lot can happen in a year.”

“But what if the kid dies and Snow –“ Johanna starts, but Kurt’s had enough.

“Can we all please stop talking about Blaine dying,” he interrupts weakly, rubbing a shaking hand over his face. A dull headache pounds at the back of his skull and Kurt just wants to lie down and never wake up.

The night has been entirely too much.

There is a pregnant pause.

“What about Blaine in all of this?” Beetee speaks up, his low, measured voice breaking the silence. “He would have to agree to this charade first.”

“Oh he will,” Haymitch says with a confidence Kurt doesn’t understand.

“And what of the consequences for him?” Beetee continues gravely, training a piercing gaze at Haymitch over the top of his glasses. “If Snow catches on to the plot and takes preemptive measures before the audience can get emotionally involved, Blaine does not even get a chance. Snow might very well ensure his death. That is a high risk that comes with agreeing to your plan.”

“And *taking* that risk is entirely up to Blaine,” Haymitch replies, meeting Beetee’s gaze steadily. “He will be informed of every event that has led to this, as well as every ramification of agreeing to this plan. But the final say is his. He will have a fully-informed choice, Beetee.”

“And will he also be informed of the long-term impact if you pull this off?” Beetee asks, eyes flickering to Kurt before returning to Haymitch. “Will you prepare them both for that eventuality too?”

Haymitch does not reply, his face inscrutable.

Kurt’s tired, drained brain tries to keep up with them (What “long-term” eventuality?) but the night has just been too much. His head feels filled with wet cotton. He just wants to burrow into a warm bed and forget it all, even if just for a few hours.

Mags must’ve picked up on it because she rubs a soothing hand over Kurt’s back and garbles something at Haymitch.

“Yes fine take him away,” Haymitch tells her distractedly, mind obviously on other things. “He knows the important things anyway, I’ll hammer out the rest without him.”

Kurt feels Mags pull him up by his arm, feels himself being dragged back to his own room. He follows her with detached acquiescence

Mags shuffles him into bed and drops a warm kiss to his forehead, carding her fingers gently through his hair for a few minutes before leaving on quiet feet.

Kurt lies in the dark, blinking up at the ceiling.

He supposes his mind should be racing right now with a million scenarios, creating plans, imagining fresh horrors. But instead his thoughts stay quiet, locked within him in some white-noised vacuum.
… He is just so *tired*.

He closes his eyes and he sleeps.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This is the part that lead me to writing this fic, the scene that I first thought up. I've been working on it mentally for the longest time and I hope I've done it justice. Hope you all enjoy this chapter! :)

Kurt tries to pay attention but his eyes keep straying to the clock.

He just can’t concentrate on Janette’s charming monologue about her family when he knows, two doors down, Haymitch is talking to Blaine about everything right now.

He woke up late this morning, crusty-eyed and numb, to Haymitch banging about his room, throwing orders at him in a low monotone before striding out. Kurt had already missed breakfast and by the time he scrambled into his clothes, Polivia was at his door to hurry him into one of the sitting rooms, where he found Abbie waiting for him.

He then proceeded to attempt to help prepare Abbie for her interview, his tired brain whirring desperately to find an angle for her. They finally settled on “sweet but mysterious”, which she managed passably, and after a few encouraging words, Kurt dismissed her. Lory walked in next and the same process repeated.

And now there’s Janette sitting opposite him. They don’t really need an angle for her, she is effortlessly winsome. Kurt gave her some generic questions and she has been answering them for the past half hour. It would all be perfectly smooth and neat, if he could just make himself concentrate.

“I’m boring you,” he hears and abruptly comes back to the present from his fretting.

His eyes snap back to Janette. “What? No, no you are not boring me.”

“But you keep looking at the clock like you can’t wait to get out of here,” she bites her lip, hands wringing in her lap. “So I’m boring you. I’m going to completely tank the interviews.”

Kurt feels horrible.

“No,” he says with a deep breath, leaning forward and meeting her eyes. “No. I promise it’s not you. You are very charming actually. It’s me, I just have… a lot on my mind right now. I’m sorry. I should be helping you, not letting my crap get in the way of our session.”

He slides back in the chair, exhaling loudly and grimacing.

“I don’t know how you did it,” she says, apropos of nothing, eyes flitting away. The cheerful smile with which she has been talking for the past thirty minutes slides off her face. She looks miserable.

“Did what? Win the Games?” Kurt tilts his head, frowning slightly, studying her.

“How you watched your best friend go into the Games.”
Kurt feels like someone threw a bucket of freezing water in his face.

“What?”

“I’ve known Blaine since I was little. I’ve always thought of him as my best friend even if I’m not really his. I would have starved to death many times over if it wasn’t for him and his brother. My entire family would have.” Her eyes fill with tears. “We owe a debt to the Andersons we can never repay.”

Kurt wordlessly passes her a tissue.

“I even had a crush on him for a while,” she says with a miserable half-giggle, dabbing at her eyes. “It was mortifying when I realized he was gay. He was very sweet about it though. Because that’s who he is.” She looks up, meets his eyes. “And after all those times his family helped mine, I just wish there is some way I can help him now.”

Kurt stares at her; her face is earnest, determined.

The beginnings of an idea form in his mind.

“Tell me more about your family,” he tells her, voice deliberately casual. This room is sure to have bugs. He motions at her to comply, searching frantically for a piece of paper and starting to scribble on it.

Thankfully, she catches on, and reverts to her cheerful tone, prattling about her parents, albeit with a puzzled look.

Kurt passes her the piece of paper and gestures to keep talking. Her voice wavers in the middle as she reads the contents but when she looks up, she’s nodding.

Kurt feels his breath whoosh out of him. There’s one more well-placed act in the drama that shall unfold tonight.

“Are you sure it’ll help though,” Janette asks him cryptically, eyes intent.

Kurt holds her gaze and promises, “More that you can possibly imagine.”

* 

“Will you please stop goddamn fidgeting?” Haymitch growls next to him, sounding thoroughly annoyed.

“I’m nervous, so stab me,” Kurt snaps back, feet tapping an irregular rhythm on the floor, hands clenching and unclenching on the armrests.

“Oh don’t tempt me,” Haymitch grumbles, raising his hand to hail a glass of wine from one of the attendants scattered around the amphitheatre.

They are sitting in one of the front row seats allotted for mentors by the Capitol, waiting for Caesar Flickerman to come out and start the interviews – and Kurt hasn’t talked to Blaine once since this whole crazy affair began.

He may be completely freaking out.

By the time he finished up with Janette that morning and rushed to Haymitch’s room, Blaine had already been whisked off by Polivia for posture and manners instruction. And after that, all Kurt
got was a glimpse before Blaine was shuttled off to his room by the prep team.

Haymitch spent the day reassuring him Blaine was informed of every aspect and every possible outcome to his agreeing to the plan. Kurt doesn’t feel the least bit reassured.

It’s just.

He should’ve been there while Haymitch was telling Blaine. He should’ve been there so he could’ve seen for himself that Blaine really did understand what he was getting himself into and this wasn’t another incidence of Blaine’s rampant hero complex kicking in.

From what Kurt has come to know of him, Blaine has a tendency for throwing himself in the way of missiles meant for others.

And Kurt will be damned before he lets Blaine die because of a missile aimed at him.

“Just saw your boy backstage,” Johanna says, sliding into the empty seat on Kurt’s right, Finnick and Mags following her. “He’s bouncing on the spot and doing breathing exercises while wind-milling his arms. It’d almost be cute if he didn’t look like a complete nutjob.”

“Stop insulting him,” Kurt snaps, moving on to his forefinger; his thumb nail is already bitten raw.

“Already defending your future wife? Aw, we have nothing to worry about I see.”

Before Kurt can turn and wring her neck like he wants to, trumpets blare around them and the stage lights up in a dazzling array of lights. Caeser Flickerman waltzes in, maniacal grin in place while the audience roars in excitement.

“Welcome, welcome, to the One-Hundredth Hunger Games!!” He is bright purple this year, his resonant voice booms around the amphitheatre. “One Hundred! The Fourth Quarter Quell. A Games like no other! Are we all excited?”

The audience enthusiasm is deafening. Kurt thinks he might throw up. His stomach is doing somersaults, squeezing in on itself from nerves.

“As well we should be!” Caeser beams. “Seventy-two tributes fighting for the ultimate prize this year! Seventy-two! Oh, this is going to be magnificent, can’t you feel it yes? Yes?” Caeser mimes holding behind his ear to hear them better; people a mile away could probably hear the audience roar as one.

“Well!” Caeser exclaims. “Without further ado, let’s welcome our… tribuuutes!”

The tributes all file out in a line in the order of their districts, waving and grinning at the audience, some more confident than others. The camera does a quick focus to each tribute as they walk onstage, the audience volume increasing or decreasing in response. Blaine is the last one in the line.

Cinna outdid himself.

Everything about Blaine is glowing. He is dressed in a shiny pale-gold tux, hair neatly swept back and interspersed with gold streaks. Black-and-gold liner frames his eyes, bringing out their rich molten-honey colour. His skin is artfully dusted with shimmery gold powder, lips painted an inviting gold-dusted pink.

He looks like candlelight made human. Kurt couldn’t have looked away even if the world was burning around him.
Even the cameras linger a fraction longer on Blaine, compared to the other tributes. Blaine is *perfect*, his expression the perfect mixture of shy and nervous; excitement and steely determination. Nobody would suspect of any ulterior motive looking at him.

Cinna places a hand on Kurt’s shoulder from the row behind and Kurt raises his own to squeeze back his gratitude.

The audience roaring dies down and Caeser begins the interviews.

* It takes about thirty minutes for the audience to grow restless.

Their usual rapt attention begins fracturing as more and more children scuttle on stage, blurring together in one colourful deluge of breathlessness, fake confidence and enthusiasm, playing their role for all they are worth.

Caeser genuinely tries to make each tribute come across as interesting and unique; he alternates between a girl and a boy within each District, gives them funny anecdotes to build on, asks just the right questions.

But despite his best efforts, there are just too *many* tributes this year.

The truly interesting ones do manage to make an impression, but most of the rest just slide into insignificance, their one chance of gaining the sponsors’ attention gone futile and forgettable.

By the time they get to District 8, Kurt’s nerves are at breaking point. On top of everything else, he now has the added worry of the audience not even paying attention by the time they roll around to District 12.

And how is he supposed to sell the Grand Starcrossed Romance story if no one is even *listening*?

Two of his nails are already bitten to the nub and he is starting on the third when District 11 finally finishes. The tiny wisp of a girl, who barely looks eleven years old (whose name Kurt refuses to let his brain register) is shaking Caeser’s hand. The top of her head doesn’t even reach his midriff.

Kurt tries to not let it get to him, but he can’t stop himself from following her tiny form in her poofy little-girl’s dress, so at odds with the ridiculous adult heels. He can’t stop his heart panging at the angel wings sprouting from the back of her frock, the delicate tiara.

Abbie is first, followed by Lory. They both do what Kurt asked them to do well enough, but the slightly-bored audience barely responds to them. Kurt feels his stomach knotting even further in worry, but when they glance his way, he feigns an enthusiastic nod of approval.

It is the eve of the Games, there is nothing they can change anymore. No need to bring them down.

Coraline induces marginally higher interest by just being her surly, vaguely dangerous–looking self and Jac, with his cocky confidence and proclamation that he’s going to win *and* have the highest number of kills, gets the audience cheering and clapping again. By the time Jac goes back to his seat and Janette steps forward, the audience enthusiasm is moderately renewed and they are eager and receptive to bring in the last two tributes with a flourish and proceed to the Pre-Games midnight celebrations.

At least that’s one thing Jac’s existence has been useful for.
Just before she takes her seat opposite Caeser, Janette’s eyes flit to Kurt in the front row. Kurt gives her one sharp nod and she nods subtly back at him, face smoothing into a charming smile when she turns back to Caeser.

“My, aren’t you a pretty thing!” Caeser exclaims, exaggeratedly taking her right hand in his to plant a kiss on the back.

“If you’re flirting with me Caeser, you’re going to have to wait your turn in line,” Janette quips, shooting a cheeky grin and a saucy wink at the cameras. The audience laughs and hoots.

Caeser mimes having his hopes dashed and laughs boisterously. “I’m sure, I’m sure. Got a boyfriend at home then?”

“Sadly, no,” Janette pouts. “The one boy I really had a crush on turned out to be gay.”

She turns to the audience with an exaggerated look of suffering and they laugh even louder, clapping and catcalling. That is probably something most of the Capitol people can relate to.

“You have to tell us more! The whole story!”

“Oh no I couldn’t,” Janette is blushing now, looking equal parts mischievous and embarrassed. “I wouldn’t wanna embarrass him.”

“A little embarrassment back at 12 would do the boy good!” Caeser wheedles.

“Except he’s not in 12,” Janette stage-whispers, miming sharing a secret with Caeser. “He’s sitting right there behind us and I’ll have to see him at dinner.”

There is a moment of silence as the audience realizes what that means and they yell as one, cheering and laughing. The cameras all snap to Blaine looking flushed and embarrassed and adorable, and Kurt takes a deep, steadying breath.

So far so good. Everything is going according to plan. Now there’s no way Caeser won’t ask Blaine about his own romantic life. And there’s the added bonus of the audience actually remembering Janette now too.

“Did you arrange this?” Haymitch hisses next to him and Kurt startles.

Oh yeah, he never told Haymitch about his session with Janette. Just like Haymitch never shared the exact details about what exactly he cooked up with Blaine. Oops.

“Yes I did,” Kurt whispers back tersely under the cover of Caeser starting up a chant for Janette to tell the whole story. “I thought it would be a good lead-in.”

“It is,” Haymitch admits, grudgingly. “But a warning would’ve been nice.”

Kurt starts reply to that with an acerbic lashing, but Janette is talking again and he falls silent to listen.

Janette launches into a hilarious (possibly heavily exaggerated) account of the time she kissed Blaine to inform him of her feelings and he stuttered out that he liked boys in reply. The audience is in stitches by the time she’s done and Caeser just has enough time to squeeze in a few questions about her family before the buzzer goes off to signal the end of her turn.

And then it's Blaine’s.
Blaine hits it off with Caeser right away. He is charming and funny and witty, playing off Caeser perfectly. He shares funny stories about the prep team’s first encounter with his eyebrows and curls, pokes fun at Caeser’s violently purple shade for the year. He has the audience wrapped around his finger in seconds.

“So Blaine,” Caeser finally starts, when the audience laughter dies down a little. “Quite a story we got from that young lady there. I guess I’ll have to alter my initial question.” Caeser winks. “Any special boy waiting for you back home?”

Blaine startles believably and blushes, before letting out an entirely unconvincing “No” with a shake of his head. Caeser and the audience catch on to it immediately.

“I smell a story there, I can smell it!” Caeser exclaims. “Come on, what’s his name? We all want to know, yes? Yes?” The audience roars in agreement.

“Well,” Blaine starts, ducking his head with an embarrassed grin. “There’s this one boy. I’ve had a crush on him since we were kids. But… I don’t think he ever really noticed me.”

‘It’s not true, it’s not true, he’s just playing the role,’ Kurt chants to himself. Blaine’s stuttering confession is entirely too believable.

The audience and Caeser make noises of sympathy. Unrequited love is obviously something they feel for.

“Why, he got another fellow?” Caeser’s tone is something equivalent to hushed queries at someone’s deathbed. Kurt feels a hysterical giggle build in him. Get a grip, Hummel.

“I don’t know,” Blaine sighs. “Plenty of boys like him though.”

“Well, I can’t imagine any boy not noticing you,” Caeser states, turning to the crowd. “Look at him, isn’t he beautiful?” The roar is deafening.

“So is he,” Blaine says, with a shy sweet smile. “He’s the most beautiful, passionate and fierce person I’ve ever seen.”

The crowd sighs in unison, rooting for Blaine already. They are already drawn into the story unfolding on the stage.

Kurt doesn’t know how he feels at all – there is a rushing in his ears, his heart beating a drumbeat rhythm. His stomach is in free fall. ‘Not real, Kurt. Not real.’

“Tell you what,” Caeser leans towards Blaine conspiratorially. “I have a plan. You go out there, you win the Quell, and then you ask your boy out as one of the most popular Victors in Panem. He’ll be so impressed, he’ll have to go out with you.”

“Oh there’s one problem with your plan though Caeser,” Blaine jokes, leaning in playfully. “He’s already one of the most popular Victors in Panem.”

There is a split-second of silence as that statement sinks in.

Blaine snaps straight, eyes widening as though he just realized what slipped out. It’s so convincing, so neatly executed that even knowing it was coming, Kurt is half-convinced himself, blood pounding in his veins.

Whispers ripple out across the amphitheatre, the kind of loaded hush that rumbles while the audience put two and two together. A low roar spreads across the crowd as they realize exactly
who Blaine must mean, building and building to a deafening crescendo as every camera in the
building turns to focus between Kurt and Blaine.

As Kurt lifts a blushing, overwhelmed face and meets Blaine’s gaze across the screaming,
cheering theatre, he knows this moment will be the most replayed tonight in all of Panem.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting, real life happened and I didn't want to post until I was sure I had done this part justice! (I think I have). I am looking forward to the response to this :D Hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Caesar has barely closed the segment before every camera in the theatre descends on Kurt. He is surrounded, cameras recording his every breath, questions being flung at him from every direction. How does he feel about Blaine? Has he ever noticed Blaine before? Did he know how Blaine felt about him before tonight? What is he going to do now that he knows?

And then there’s the audience, surrounding him everywhere, cheering and invasive, yelling his name and Blaine’s.

Kurt doesn’t even have to pretend to be thoroughly lost and overwhelmed.

Haymitch and Finnick manage to elbow their way in through the throng surrounding Kurt after fifteen minutes of chaos. It takes another thirty minutes to extricate him from the grabbing, demanding crowd. By the time they make it to the Training Centre, over an hour has passed since the interviews and Kurt feels like he just fought his way out of the Cornucopia all over again. Actually, this may have been worse.

“Fucking hell,” Haymitch mutters, nursing his ribs where someone had punched him. “When you two get hitched, I’m leaving you to deal with the crowds.”

Kurt hears high-pitched, hysterical giggling and it takes a few seconds before he realizes it’s his own. That makes him laugh harder. Strange.

Haymitch and Finnick are staring at him, worry about his mental faculties obvious in their expressions. Somehow, that makes everything even funnier.

“Kurt, buddy,” Haymitch says slowly, placing a cautious hand on his shoulder. Kurt hiccups himself to silence. “Why don’t you go to your room with Finnick and clean up a little and then come out to the dining room for some warm milk?”

Kurt nods and walks to his room on autopilot, vaguely puzzled by how Haymitch knew about the comfort offering of warm milk. Oh yes, he and Burt have become friends over the past two years, bonded over their mutual protectiveness of Kurt. He forgets that sometimes.

Finnick helps him out of his grand interview-day suit. Kurt splashes some water on his face, scrambles into comfortable cotton pants. When he turns around, Finnick is still there, expression sombre. Wordlessly, he holds out his arms.

Kurt walks straight into them.

Finnick’s brotherly embrace is comforting – warm and solid and there. Kurt breathes, settling into himself after the upheaval of the past two days. With one final pat, Finnick leaves for his own
floor in the Training Centre and Kurt makes his way to the dining room.

When he gets there, Haymitch holds out a glass of warm milk (spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg and a dash of honey, just how Kurt likes it) and says abruptly, “You should go up to the roof for some fresh air.”

Kurt blinks in confusion and Haymitch raises an eyebrow in reply.

Oh.

Kurt takes the glass with slightly shaking hands and downs it in one deep gulp. The milk sits warm and fiery in his stomach as he walks up to the roof.

At first glance, he doesn’t see anyone there. He thinks he got the message wrong.

And then he sees him.

Blaine is standing in the little roof garden, crouched low, smelling one of the many rose blossoms there. He startles into attention when he hears the footsteps, relaxing slightly when he sees who it is.

Kurt walks up to him, heart pounding.

“Hey,” Blaine says tentatively, obviously nervous. He gestures at the rooftop around them. “Can’t believe they let us up here. I’d think they’d be worried someone might just jump off from here. Easy way out.”

“There’s a force-field around,” Kurt says. “It just chucks people who try back onto the roof. They wouldn’t want to waste time having to choose tributes again. Too much work.”

“There’s that plan dashed,” comes the dark-humoured reply, paired with a grin. “Dang.”

Kurt hears himself let out a high-pitched giggle and shuts up quickly. They blink at each other, awkward silence loaded with unsaid words descending between them, broken only by the tinkling wind chimes and the distant sounds of the Capitol crowd cheering somewhere below.

A particularly loud cheer startles them both out of their reverie and they turn as one to contemplate the colourful, churning mass on the streets surrounding the Training centre.

“I can never understand how they can be so excited for this,” Blaine says, staring at the unbridled celebrations. “How can they not realize they are celebrating sending children to die?”

“When you tell someone a lie often enough, they start believing it,” Kurt replies, flashing to all the Capitol propaganda they’ve had thrust on them for years. “We at the Districts see the truth around us everywhere; see the horror around us everywhere. But at the Capitol where they never suffer, they are willing believe anything told to them.”

He thinks of his affectionate, brainless prep team – such innocents still. “Most of them just don’t know any better. But there are others who don’t care. Who enjoy it, knowing what it is. People like the Gamemakers –” He breaks off, gulps, thinking off all the people who plan to bid on him, on Blaine, the people who are the reason he and Blaine are here dodging around talking about a charade they are putting up together. “And the ones like those with Finnick, paying for the Victors… they are the true monsters.”

Blaine is looking at him, compassion transparent in his eyes.
Kurt wonders if tonight will be the last he will ever see them in person. He can’t meet them without wanting to cry. He casts around for something to say that isn’t burdened with too many emotions to voice and alights on the garden around them.

“Do you like flowers?” he asks, bending slightly to smell a fragrant blossom, avoiding looking at Blaine. “I’ve seen you back home, tending to the little garden behind your house.”

“I do,” Blaine says, crouching warm next to him. His arm brushes Kurt’s as he reaches out to stroke a petal, sending warmth skittering up his spine. “There is little enough of beauty back in District 12.”

Kurt turns despite himself on hearing a sentiment he himself has thought often; their eyes meet. They are so close now, Blaine filling up his entire field of vision, their breaths mingling. That low thrum of electricity that seems ever-present between them rises to the surface again, Kurt feels his eyes flickering to Blaine’s mouth. He finds himself shifting ever so closer, the air thickening with a million unsaid possibilities and Blaine is moving closer too, their gazes holding –

And Blaine breaks it, turning away abruptly, huffing out a deep breath. Kurt freezes where he is, heart skipping a beat.

“Did you know,” Blaine starts, apropos of nothing, gesturing jerkily at the rose bushes before them. Rambling. Nervous. “That long before Panem, flowers were given different meanings, to convey different messages? There was a book, Language of Flowers or something, in the room at the Justice Building I told you about? It was fascinating! Lilies symbolised purity, and nightshade was to convey secrets and rhododendron was danger and roses! Roses had a whole slew of meanings based on colour. And depending on the combination of different colours and the number, people used to convey whole messages they aren’t able to say to someone with just roses, usually a lover or a friend and –”

“What would you pick for me?” Kurt interrupts, heart fluttering in his throat.

Blaine breaks off abruptly, lifting startled eyes to him. “What?”

“If you wanted to give me a message,” Kurt elaborates slowly, not breaking their gaze, trying to ask Blaine everything he wants to without saying the actual words. He takes the leap, hopes Blaine will catch him. “If I asked you to tell me the truth about how you really feel for me, about everything that’s happened today, using just those roses. What would you pick for me?”

Blaine stares at him, looks knocked off-balance, flustered – mouth slightly open and a dull blush creeping across his cheekbones.

Kurt waits, blood rushing in his veins.

Blaine stares at him a second more, breath leaving him in a whoosh, before moving swiftly around the little garden, picking a rose here and snipping another there. When he finally turns to Kurt, blushing and skittery, he is holding out five varicoloured blossoms.

Kurt stares at them, heart in his throat.

“And what do each of these mean?” he asks, voice wavering.

Blaine closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. When they open again, they are clear of all lingering worries. Resolved. Kurt waits.

“The yellow rose,” Blaine says, holding the blossom out, heart in his eyes. “For friendship. And to also say that I care about you and that I hope you will always remember me.”
Kurt takes it wordlessly, stares at the other flowers, waits.

“The pink rose,” Blaine continues, voice rough with nerves or emotion, Kurt can’t tell. “For admiration. Appreciation. And to thank you for taking this gamble with everything that happened tonight. For trusting me with this, for going through this to protect me too. To thank you for being... you.”

Kurt takes that too, waits.

“The lavender one,” Blaine drops his eyes, strokes a soft petal with his thumb. “It says I find you... enchanting. That I think you are beautiful. It also indicates,” his voice breaks slightly. He clears his throat, ducking his head and continues, “Its also given to indicate love at first sight.” He holds it out to Kurt, doesn’t meet his eyes. Their fingers brush, points of zipping electricity.

“The orange rose,” Blaine rushes on like he can’t stop now that he’s started, “is for passion and desire. To say I wish for friendship to turn into something... more.”

Blaine pauses, looks at the last rose in his hands. Takes a deep, fortifying breath.

Kurt isn’t breathing at all.

“The red rose,” Blaine begins, looking up straight into Kurt’s eyes. “The red rose symbolises true love. A promise of everlasting love. A single thornless rose especially,” he picks off the thorns on the flower’s stem, “is offered as a confession of love to someone.”

And he holds out the deep red flower to Kurt.

Kurt reaches a trembling hand, fingers clasping around the thornless stem. Blaine’s other hand comes up to enclose his, warm and firm and he moves a step closer.

“Kurt,” a pause, a deep shaking breath, “there is a moment – when you see someone and you realize, ‘Oh there you are. I’ve been looking for you forever.’” The warm fingers wrapped around Kurt’s squeeze gently, earnest golden eyes full of emotion. “We were young, barely ten years old then. One day, I was walking past the music room and I heard you sing. And that... I was gone.”

One step closer.

“Watching you sing that day, I had that moment... about you. And I just – you move me, Kurt.” Impossible searing hope, Kurt’s heart flips and jumps. “And though I wish I was telling you this when we are both safe and not here like this... A part of me, a stupid part,” he giggles out a breath, “is happy – just because I got to spend time with you.” He lets go of Kurt’s hands, blinking at the ground bashfully.

Kurt clutches the flowers to his chest, tries to gather words through the buzzing in his brain.

“So everything you said in the interviews,” Kurt starts, wets his lips. “Everything you said, about liking me forever. And always wanting to be with me. The story we told them today. Everything... is real?”

Blaine looks up, meets his gaze and nods. “Real.”

Kurt breathes. And breathes. A gentle breeze ruffles their hair, wind chimes tinkling, the Capitol crowd cheering. The air is rich with the scent of flowers. The silence stretches between them.

Blaine breaks first, his gaze flits away nervously. He twitches, agitated. “This was all wrong. I
shouldn’t have said anything, I’m sorry. I should have just said I was doing what we signed up for. I shouldn’t have pushed this on you now, with the Games tomorrow and –”

“Blaine,” Kurt interrupts again, voice hoarse. Blaine cuts off, stares at him in apprehension. His eyebrows are scrunched in distress, as though expecting rejection.

As though he actually believes in a world where Kurt would reject him. As though there is ever a possibility Kurt could say no to him.

Kurt turns, carefully places those precious, precious flowers in an alcove nearby and does the only obvious thing he could to erase that expression.

He takes two quick steps forward and presses his mouth to Blaine’s.

Later he’ll remember how Blaine startled slightly, eyes widening at the press of Kurt’s mouth against his, before they slipped closed and he moved forward to reciprocate. Later he’ll categorize how Blaine’s mouth tasted – like chocolate and raspberries, the sensation of Blaine’s warm soft wet mouth against his, the scent of flowers a tangible cloud wrapped around them. Later he’ll remember the feeling of strong, steady arms settling around his waist, the feeling of Blaine’s jaw cupped in his palm. Later he’ll shiver over remembering long eyelashes brushing against his cheeks as Blaine kissed him back, smiling into the last few kisses, so warm and alive and his.

He’ll remember all that later, will commit each touch, each breath carefully to memory later, treasure them like the precious gems they are.

But right now he is swept away, barely holding on while Blaine kisses him back in earnest and all Kurt can think when they finally, finally break apart for air is how this is all he wants for the rest of his life. All he wants is this boy before him.

The boy who holds a lifetime of happiness, who could be dead by this time tomorrow.

“Promise me,” Kurt breathes into Blaine’s lips, pecking them once, twice – swift, hard kisses. “Promise you will fight.”

“Kurt,” Blaine starts, his voice already holds a note of apology.

“No,” Kurt says emphatically, his other hand moving up to take Blaine’s face in his palms. How can he not understand? “Promise me! You said you won’t fight just to save yourself. Well, save me. Fight for me. I love you and I want you back. Promise you will come back. I love you.”

“Kurt,” he is conflicted, heartbroken. “I can only promise to try. That’s all I can promise you. And I feel the same way about you too, I lo –“

“Don’t,” Kurt whispers, silencing him with another too-feeling kiss. “Don’t say it now. Say it to me when you get back as Victor. Say it to me then, when you can be with me.”

“I want to,” comes the throaty reply. “All I want is to spend my life with you.”

Kurt pulls Blaine to him, wraps himself around him as close as he can. They stand like that for endless moments, Blaine’s face tucked in the curve of Kurt’s neck, Kurt breathing in the scent of Blaine’s sun-warmed skin. If he could pause his life right here, right in that moment and never have to leave, Kurt would be content.

Another loud cheer sounds from the distant crowds, jolting them back to reality. They break apart, glance around. The world around them is still the same. It feels like it shouldn’t be, like it should have changed in the face of what just happened.
Blaine gathers the flowers from where Kurt set them down. Kurt gives him a quick kiss in thanks, hoarding each brush of their lips like a glutton.

They walk back together, arms brushing lightly, happiness and melancholy in equal parts turning the air bittersweet. Kurt holds onto his flowers tightly, stroking a thumb over their soft petals; as soft as the kiss of their giver.

When they reach Kurt’s room, Blaine stops, looks like he is going to say goodbye. Kurt doesn’t think he can bear it.

“Stay with me,” he says, pulling at Blaine’s sleeve like a child. “Not for anything like… I just want. Just stay with me.” Blaine blinks at him, searching his face before nodding.

When the door closes behind them, Kurt makes his way straight to his little closet, searching through it before his fingers close around cold metal. He turns around, takes Blaine’s hand.

“I hope you will wear this as your token,” Kurt says, slipping the little mockingjay pin into Blaine’s palm. “You gave it to me to protect me. I want it to be with you now, to protect you. And to have a little piece of me in there with you. If you’d like to.”

“I would love to,” Blaine’s mouth curves in a smile, soft and warm. “Thank you.”

They settle for the night in Kurt’s bed, fully-dressed and facing each other, legs entwined and knees knocking together. Little points of contact – Kurt’s hand on Blaine’s solid shoulder, Blaine’s thumb brushing the knob of Kurt’s wrist. Cold noses brushing against each other, warming quickly in the shared heat of their breaths. Kurt lunges for one more kiss. He refuses to think how each may be one of the last.

“Stay alive,” he whispers against Blaine’s mouth, tries to put all his will into those two simple words.

“I’ll try Kurt,” Blaine replies, resting his forehead against Kurt’s, eyes closed. “I will really, really try.”

Kurt wishes that felt like enough.

Chapter End Notes

The flower meanings are mostly what I read up on the internet. I hope they are accurate, but if there are inaccuracies, apologies for that :D
He wakes the next morning to Cinna gently but hurriedly shaking them awake.

Kurt doesn’t remember falling asleep. He had wanted to spend every last second of the night keeping himself awake, committing Blaine’s every breath to memory. But somewhere between the gentle kisses and the comfort of Blaine wrapped around him (fitting so perfectly, like he is made for Kurt), Kurt must have dozed off, lulled into a false sense of peace and security by the warm weight of Blaine safe in his arms.

And now it’s too late.

“Blaine, you have to hurry or we’ll be late,” Cinna whispers urgently while they both sit up disoriented from sleep and untangle themselves from each other.

Time seems to speed up. Kurt has barely registered the hurried brush of lips, gentle fingertips warm points of contact on his left cheek, breathless promises murmured against his lips, before suddenly he is watching the door close after Blaine, still wrapped in blankets that haven’t lost Blaine’s warmth.

The last whispered “I love you” falls into the quiet around him, settling like dewdrops on fresh-bloomed flowers and Kurt just wants him back. Wants him back so there will be more hushed mornings with swift kisses, Blaine’s hair flat on one end, bodies warm and pliant with sleep, Kurt kissing the pillow creases from his face. Mornings where they have all the time in the world. Mornings where Kurt won’t have to wonder if Blaine will still be alive at nightfall.

“Kurt,” he hears and snaps out of his head to find Haymitch striding up to him, focused and battle-ready. He scrambles out of bed, trying not to clutch to the pillows that smell so wonderfully painfully like Blaine, and stumbles into the bathroom.

“A passing scout-camera caught you and Blaine on the roof last night,” Haymitch speaks through the door while Kurt hops into the shower. “Grainy, low quality video, but it’s pretty clear you both are kissing. Splashed across every form of media this morning.”

Kurt’s heart rebels at the thought of those kisses, those precious private moments, out in the world for the greedy consumption of a depraved audience. But his mind is calculating; he can see the advantage. He won’t have to try to convince the audience he loves Blaine anymore, those pictures would’ve done the job. Now he’ll just have to keep their interest.

“You’ve been scheduled for four different interviews while the Gamemakers get the tributes transported,” Haymitch continues through the door, voice growing fainter as though he’s moving away. “You know what to do.”
Kurt does know what to do. Playing the crowd is second-nature to him now. This is a battle he knows he will win.

He dresses in all-white today – white pants, white shirt, white vest. Armour, all of it. It will bring out the blush in his fair skin. His hair isn’t the usual disdainful high coif; he styles it to fall gentler, softer. Innocent. The red rose from last night goes on his lapel, adding a splash of colour – a token of love, of strength.

Kurt meets his own eyes in the mirror – bluer than the skies today – and nods. He is ready.

The interview crews are set up in one of the spare rooms on their floor. Kurt barely has time to squeeze in a slice of toast and some milk before he is thrust in front of the cameras for his first interview.

He talks about kisses in a roof-garden, surrounded by the scent of flowers. He talks about budding feelings realized over the course of a train ride. He talks about a mockingjay pin given long ago, a pin that became a talisman of comfort and steadiness. He even talks about a grieving child who found his voice again after listening to the sweet warmth of another’s.

It is all even more compelling because it is true. When Kurt is done, he feels hollowed out, like he carved out pieces of himself to lay them bare in the eyes of millions. But he will do it a thousand times over if it would help save Blaine. And he can see that he has accomplished what he set out to do.

There is not a single pair of dry eyes in the room. The interviewer herself is sniffling into a delicate piece of velvet, throatily exclaiming about how beautiful all of it is.

Next is a quick photoshoot, with him recording quips for them to overlay with pictures and videos of him. Someone asks him about the red rose pinned to the front of his vest. He says Blaine gave it to him the night before, as a symbol of their love.

The whole room sighs.

After about two hours, Haymitch moves in and rescues him. Kurt gives one last blushing smile to the cameras, subtly drops sentences about how the Capitol audience could help him get Blaine back and then follows his mentor out. The tightly coiled knot in his guts finally loosens a little when the elevator doors close, shielding him from everyone.

He slumps, leaning his forehead against the one of the walls, breathing deeply.

“The Games are due to start in thirty minutes,” Haymitch informs him gruffly. “I got a car waiting to take us out to the Gamemaker Tower. There’s a lot of paparazzi out there for you.” There’s a pause. “You doin’ okay?”

Kurt nods, rolling his forehead slightly against the elevator walls. The cool metal feels soothing on his overheated skin.

They fight another battle out through the throng of screaming gossip-mongers to get to the car. Kurt catches glimpses of today’s news holograms, static pixelated images of him and Blaine kissing passionately splashed with across the main pages with loud blaring titles.

The ride to the Tower is silent. Kurt stares unseeing at the Capitol streets flashing past them.

The Gamemaker Tower is a massive complex of fifty floors, solely dedicated to the planning and orchestration of the Hunger Games. During the Games, floors one to thirteen are given over to the
mentors; the rest is off-limits to everyone but the Gamemakers. Though mentors have their own lodgings in respective floors, most just stay in the Thirteenth level, which is a vast interlocked grid of individual offices, equipped with everything necessary to mentor the Games.

Kurt has heard whispers of the happenings in the Tower, like hushed recounting of horrible nightmares. Whispers of how the floors get more and more vicious as they ascend, with cloning of mutts and experimentation on avoxes carried out in the higher levels. He knows that the topmost floor is where the Gamemakers reside during the Games, pulling strings like the cruel puppeteers they are.

They arrive at the complex and subject themselves to checking by Capitol Peacekeepers before heading up to the Thirteenth floor. Kurt can feel a shiver building in his spine, clenches his jaw to prevent his teeth from chattering.

In an hour, Blaine may be dead. And that’s a fact, isn’t it? In an hour, he really truly may be dead. Gone forever, even before the flowers he gave Kurt have wilted, even before his scent has left Kurt’s sheets.

He can feel his throat clogging up.

Now isn’t the time, he hasn’t got time for this, he has work to do. Going into a room of Victors is deadly in its own way, a tank full of piranhas who will pounce at the slightest sign of weakness. He can’t appear weak, he can’t protect Blaine if he can’t protect himself. He has to get himself together.

But he can’t seem to stop it, that awful wretched burning in his throat tearing his breaths, fear turning blood cold in his veins and twisting his gut in unbearable roils and –

“He isn’t an idiot,” Haymitch cuts in sharply, a hand coming up to punch Kurt’s shoulder rather painfully. Kurt jolts back to reality. “He isn’t going to get himself killed at the Cornucopia, he’s better than that. You know he’s better than that. He isn’t an idiot, sweetheart, and now would be a good time for you to stop being one so you can help him.”

The elevator doors ping open and Kurt pushes the fear forcefully back with everything in him, banishes it to a far corner of his brain and squares his shoulders. He is Kurt Hummel. He can do this.

He settles into himself, chin up, arms loose and strides in tall and confident across the common area, still dressed in all-white, Blaine’s rose still pinned to his chest. He registers the stares that follow him (some venomous, some scornful, most a mixture of sadness and pity) but doesn’t acknowledge any of them, heading straight for the District 12 control room.

The control rooms are all identical. Each district’s room has six different large-screen television sets, at least two displaying their own tributes at any point. There are controllers that let you flip to different cameras all over the arena, buttons that you can press to send in anything at all to the tributes in parachutes, and a display board that continuously feeds in statistics and sponsor details. There is also a small side-room with a bed where mentors can choose to rest if they don’t want to go back to their floors.

Kurt settles into the plush leather chair in front of the central mass of buttons and stares blankly at the huge television in front of him. There are numbers flashing across the dark screen, counting down the minutes to the official start of the Games.

10:38:02
Blaine would be in the launching room right now, getting dressed in the Gamemaker-issued clothing, bouncing around a little and stretching like he does when he’s nervous…

09:15:06

Cinna would be there with him, helping him get ready. He hopes Cinna gets Blaine to eat and drink something. God knows when he would be able to get anything in the arena. Blaine should store up all the energy he could before entering…

07:47:01

Kurt vaguely remembers Cinna picking up the little mockingjay pin from Kurt’s bedside table this morning. He’s thankful. He and Blaine were both too distracted to remember it then; he’s glad Cinna was there to do it. Now at least Blaine would surely have a piece of Kurt with him in there, no matter what…

06:32:09

To protect him, Blaine had said when he gave him that pin two years ago. Kurt hopes it’ll protect Blaine too…

05:17:00

He wishes he could be there protecting Blaine…

04:49:03

Haymitch settles in on Kurt’s right, clapping a hand on his shoulder. Murmurs something about taking over mentoring the other kids. Kurt should feel bad about it, should pay attention…

He barely even registers it.

03:21:05

The Capitol anthem is playing across one of the televisions. The one that displays the footage broadcast live to the general populace. It shows flashes of excited Capitol audience throwing glitter and cheering.

He feels sick.

02:01:04

Blaine would be on the launch pad now, straightening his spine and making himself look cold and strong for that first glimpse from the cameras. He hopes Blaine will be cold and strong when the need arises. He wants Blaine to win. He wants Blaine to come back.

00:32:07

…He just wants Blaine.

00:00:00

The screen flashes white and Caeser Flickerman’s voice blares through the speakers.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, let the Hundredth Hunger Games begin!”
Part III - The Quell

When the cameras pan in dramatically to reveal the arena, for a second – for just one second – Kurt forgets everything, simply staring in stunned wonder.

He was expecting a place of horrors. A parched sandy desert, perhaps, with brutal searing heat, bones of wildlife scattered in the dunes and tributes fighting like animals over a mouthful of water. Or a dark, never-ending twilight of icy wind viciously tearing through any piece of fabric, freezing the blood in tributes’ veins. Or even just a bland forest with a few scattered wild animals, offering plenty of opportunities for sneak attacks and tribute-hunting.

But this – he didn’t expect the arena to look like this.

It is the most breathtaking place he has ever seen.

Kurt stares as all the television screens in the control room fill up with images from different parts of the arena.

The golden Cornucopia sits in the middle of a beautiful green meadow rippling in a gentle breeze, flowers dancing in their stalks. The sky is a serene blue with floating wisps of clouds and an early-spring sun shines bright and pleasant. A colourful group of butterflies flutter past in one of the screens; squirrels hide nuts in another. The meadow seems to stretch for miles. An aerial shot shows a river snaking through it, clear and sparkling in the morning light, draining into dense woods far in the distance in one direction. In the other direction, there is a snow-capped mountain, with another stretch of woods at its summit, framing a clear, lovely lake.

Those childhood hymns he used to learn in school about god’s own land – if paradise existed, this is what it must look like…

Kurt snaps out of it, cursing himself for the momentary thrall and turns his attention to finding Blaine, eyes searching the screens swiftly. The tributes seem as disoriented by the beauty as he was; many of them are blinking as though in a dream.

He finally finds Blaine near the tail-end of the Cornucopia, taking deep, luxurious breaths, his eyes fluttering closed and lips curving in a smile.

The arena must smell as fantastic as it looks, then. Which is all well and good but Kurt would really like Blaine to not stand smiling dreamily in the middle of an arena for the Hunger Games.

If he could be there right now, he’d gladly throttle Blaine himself for being a complete and utter idiot.

He lifts a shaking hand to his mouth, biting his thumbnail viciously.
Maybe the arena is dispersed with mood-altering aerosols which spread a false sense of contentment, maybe there are pollens which settle into your hair and attach to your scalp and turn your brain into a moronic mess, which surely has to be the reason –

But about fifteen seconds before the gong, before Kurt can actually worry himself to death, Blaine’s eyes snap open. In a split second, his entire stance shifts, eyes going hard and intelligent, shoulders tensing and braced for action. Gone is the dreamy appreciation and content smile – he is ready for battle. Kurt lets out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

Ten seconds before the gong. He lets his eyes roam over Blaine’s location – he is at the far-end of the Cornucopia, with the vast meadow and the far woods stretching behind him. Not good for someone wanting to try their chances at pilfering the Cornucopia, but the best place to make a quick dash without being hurt by the bloodbath, which is what Blaine had been instructed to do.

Truly, Kurt couldn’t have wished for a more ideal location for Blaine to come out at; Blaine is easily going to make a safe getaway.

Which is why, when the gong goes off and Blaine runs towards the Cornucopia instead, all Kurt can do for a moment is blink in stunned confusion.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Haymitch growls next to him and Kurt clenches his fists in horror, nails digging into the soft flesh of his palm. His heart is thudding in his chest, pulse erratic at the base of his throat as he watches Blaine run swiftly across the field, dodging a badly aimed stone thrown in his direction.

It takes his terrified brain a second to realize that Blaine isn’t making his way to the Cornucopia; his route is slightly deviated for that. Three seconds later it becomes clear where Blaine was aiming for – Kurt watches as Blaine heads straight for a large sturdy backpack, about a dozen yards from his plate.

A girl from District 2 throws a knife at him. Kurt’s strangled yell chokes off as he watches the knife sail above Blaine’s left ear, missing him by mere inches, before sinking with a sickening wet thud into the chest of a boy tribute running behind him.

Blaine lunges. In one smooth drop and roll he is on his feet again, backpack slung across his left shoulder and already turning tail and heading towards the woods. He bends briefly as he runs past the boy killed by the knife meant for him, grimly yanking the blade out of the dead tribute’s chest with without even breaking stride.

The enraged District 2 girl throws another knife aimed right at his head but Blaine manages to lift his backpack – barely in time for the knife to bury itself in the fabric and not his skull. He keeps running for the woods. The girl with the knives starts to follow Blaine but one of the boys from District 11 runs at her with a mace and she gets distracted, turning back to the melee.

Kurt’s breath whooshes out of him in a half-sob as Blaine makes it safely out of range of the bloodbath and he sinks back into his chair, shaking from fear and adrenaline. It hasn’t even been three minutes since the Games began and already he feels as though a lifetime has passed.

How is he going to do this?

He hears an exasperated tut from Haymitch next to him and blinks when he feels strong, weathered hands opening his clenched fists, running a soothing tissue over his palms.

Oh, he clenched his hands too hard; his nails have bitten into the soft skin and little crescent wells of blood dot his palms. Haymitch wordlessly spreads a medi-band over them and Kurt flexes his
Blaine has settled into a steady jog now. He has slung the backpack properly across his shoulders and the two knives he managed to gain are stashed safely in his belt. The Gamemakers have dressed the tributes in sturdy brown pants and a black t-shirt this year, with a single black jacket for preserving body heat. Kurt spots the little mockingjay pin glinting on the collar of Blaine’s jacket.

He watches Blaine run for a few more minutes and checks the statistics board for any threats. There are others running towards the woods too, but they are all scattered far enough away that there is no reason for alarm yet.

Kurt sighs, and turns to check on his other tributes with a guilty twinge. He didn’t even spare a thought for them till now.

He is relieved to find Janette running along in the general direction of the woods too, uninjured except for a nasty cut on her forehead. He spots Lory tripping towards the snowy mountain, diving for cover behind tall grasses whenever another tribute comes close.

His heart turns over when he finds Abbie. She is limping towards the lake, breathing laboriously, a horrible gash running the length of her left leg all the way to her hip. Her clothes are already entirely soaked in blood.

There’s no coming back from a wound like that; there’s no medicine he can send her that could patch her up now. She would be lucky to live another half-hour.

Kurt bites his lip, wills the horrible lump in his throat to recede. He tells himself he can’t get all of them out. If he can even hope to get Blaine back, this needs to happen anyway. He tells himself one tribute less is a good thing.

He doesn’t even come close to convincing himself.

He switches his attention from where Abbie has given up and buckled to the ground, barely conscious now with blood pooling in the grass around her, and tries to find Jac and Coraline.

“They’re dead,” Haymitch says brusquely, toggling a button till one screen focuses back to the bloodbath around the Cornucopia.

Jac is spread-eagled right in the middle of it, an axe sticking out of his skull like some grotesque bloody ornament, a spear still clutched in his nerveless fingers. Coraline is face-down on the other side of the field, impaled on a sword run right through her, obviously stabbed from behind while trying to make a run for it.

Kurt feels bile rising in his throat.

He darts for the bathroom, barely making it to the sink before he is retching. His pitiful breakfast makes a reappearance and he washes his mouth out with shaking fingers, splashing cool, clear water on his overheated face.

He detested Jac for most of his life. There were times when he wanted nothing more than to hurt him, to make him feel half the pain he inflicted on Kurt. But this… he never, ever wanted this. He thinks of Coraline, so still and unmoving on the serene grass, Abbie collapsed on the grass taking her last breaths. None of them deserve this.

Mags is perched on one of the chairs like a wise, shrivelled bird when he finally gets back to the control room. She hops up when she sees Kurt, babbling at him reproachfully as she takes in his
pallor, thrusting a large mug of orange juice into his hands.

Kurt sips the soothing liquid, settling back into his chair. The bloodbath is still going on. Blaine’s reached the cover of the dense woods but is still running, seems determined to put as much distance between him and the Cornucopia as possible. Janette has stopped a little ways in, is dabbing her forehead with a patch of absorbent leaves beneath a tall eucalyptus tree. She seems fine. Haymitch grunts that they don’t need to waste sponsor to send medicine for this and Kurt nods in agreement.

It lapses into silence for about an hour. Neither of them acknowledges the moment when they notice Abbie is no longer breathing. The bloodbath continues, excruciatingly long. The sun travels across the sky, sinking closer to the snow-capped mountain and lighting up the arena to look like something out of a fairytale. But perhaps a dark tale – one that makes a mockery of paradise; the sunlight glints off the metal clashing on metal in the meadow surrounding the Cornucopia.

Blaine and Janette are still running in the woods. The woods are vast, none of the tributes are even remotely near each other. When the excitement of the bloodbath is over, the Gamemakers will definitely employ artificial disasters to drive the tributes together.

Lory seems to have found a nice, concealed area near the lake. He burrows into the bushes, hidden quite well from view, and close enough to a water supply. Kurt is glad; hiding is the best option for Lory.

The bloodbath is winding down. The arena is tinted orange by the fading sunset; the serene fields around the Cornucopia are stained with bodies and blood now. The tributes still standing all glance warily at each other and decide to form an alliance. The Career pack has formed.

Blaine stops running. Kurt startles into attention from the passive stupor has fallen into, swiftly scanning the half-mile radius around Blaine. There don’t seem to be any other tributes around. Good. On the screen, Blaine looks around himself, appears to be calculating something. After a few more minutes of contemplation he strides to a tall tree and starts climbing it.

Blaine climbs like an agile monkey. A smile tugs at the corner of Kurt’s lips as he watches Blaine quickly scale up the near-vertical tree which has very few branches except for a dense tuft near the top, finding footholds and handgrips in places where there seem to be none.

Finally, about thirty feet from the ground, Blaine climbs onto a sturdy branch with a convenient bend that he could settle into, with just enough leaf-cover to give him camouflage.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kurt notices that the public broadcast has also shifted to Blaine. He supposes watching Blaine wiggling around trying to get himself situated on a tree branch is more pleasurable than watching the Career Pack looting the dead bodies.

Finally settled, Blaine leans back against the tree trunk and lets out a deep sigh. He tilts his face up, breathing slowly, obviously relishing the warmth of the late evening sunlight on his face. Even in the middle of all this, even with two blades meant for his skull hanging from his hip, he looks like the most beautiful, safe thing Kurt has ever seen and he wants…

The first canon goes off for the body count after the bloodbath. Blaine’s eyes snap open and he sits up, frowning, lips moving soundlessly as he counts along with the canons.

Twenty two. Twenty two tributes were killed today, within three hours of the gong. In a normal Games, this would’ve taken days, weeks. In a normal Games, this would be the point where they arrive at the grand finale, the last brutal showdown before it’s time to crown the Victor.
In a Quell, this is only the beginning.

Blaine’s face has gone small and unreadable at the high death toll. He has curled in on himself, arms wrapped tightly around his ribs and head ducked, taking slow, measured breaths.

There is silence on Blaine’s side except for the gentle swishing of the wind and scurrying of forest animals going about their lives. Kurt’s heart hurts to see Blaine in distress, yearns to comfort him. But he can’t. And that hurts even more.

After a few minutes, Blaine pulls himself together again. He straightens, nods in grim determination and sets about taking inventory of the backpack he managed to grab from the Cornucopia.

A portable water purifier bottle, a thermal blanket, a sheet of plastic, a pair of binoculars, a pair of night-vision glasses, a packet of high-energy nutrition bars, a basic first aid kit and a length of rope. Blaine looks delighted with each find and Kurt shares the sentiment. All that plus the two knives in his belt – Blaine already has more than most can hope to find after weeks in the arena.

It is quiet for a while as Kurt watches Blaine re-pack his bounty, slinging the backpack across his shoulders and wrapping himself in the thermal blanket. He ties himself securely to the tree with some rope and nods off. Kurt watches the gentle rise and fall of Blaine’s chest, thankful that Blaine has a chance to rest before nightfall, when the Careers will begin hunting.

And then Lory dies so suddenly and unexpectedly that Kurt feels like he was clubbed in the head.

One moment he is watching Blaine’s mouth part slightly in sleep, head lolling backwards to rest on the trunk behind him. And in the next, one of the screens light up with warning attention messages, zooming in to show Lory being attacked by a cluster of butterflies.

The sight is so unexpectedly strange, so completely bizarre, that it takes him a good thirty seconds to even comprehend what is happening. There is a thatch of berries lying at Lory’s feet, being trodden to the grass by his flailing limbs while the butterflies attack him viciously, tearing out chunks of skin with razor-like teeth revealed down their middle.

In just a few seconds, it is over. One gigantic butterfly goes straight for his jugular, ripping through his neck in a sickening clench, and the canon goes off before Lory has even hit the ground.

Kurt just stares blankly at the screen, unable to look away from the gruesome, crumpled body of what was a boy just a minute ago. The butterflies appear to shrink in on themselves. One blink later they are serene, placid creatures again, fluttering away prettily, no hint of danger on any of them. Their wings are still stained with blood.

Kurt jumps as another canon goes off, turning swiftly to the nationwide broadcast. Even as he watches, a group of vicious squirrels transform into harmless, tiny creatures, scurrying away from the ripped up, bloody pieces of a girl from District 6.

Another canon, this time a flock of songbirds tearing through a District 8 tribute before hopping back onto trees and chirping a cheerful tune.

“Mutts,” Kurt whispers, while Haymitch swears loudly next to him. “Anything could be… everything could be… they’ve filled the arena with mutts.”

Songbirds that are vicious killers, harmless-seeming squirrels that are cannibals; a place where butterflies can rip a thirteen year old boy’s throat. The ultimate deception.
It isn’t a mockery of paradise like Kurt thought.

The entire arena is one giant trap.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I am soooo sorry for how long this has been. I was swamped with Uni, then hit a bit
of writers' block, then got swamped under more work and its been a mess. Sorry for
the late update you guys!

But I'm on a roll~ now, the next three chapters are already ready, and I plan to put
one chapter every two days, so atleast three updates this week! Hope that is apology
enough :D

And, hope you enjoy this update! Thank you for your patience <3

Blaine startles awake at the series of canons that go off to announce the deaths of Lory and the
others, rubbing his eyes blearily. He grabs one of his knives, looking around for signs of danger –
completely missing the flock of chirping songbirds which fly within metres of his tree. (Kurt
clutches his face in terror then, but the birds just fly past without changing course and Blaine
remains safe and alive).

After a half hour of vigilance, Blaine seems to decide there is no cause for alarm, and settles back
into his branch, eyes trained unfocused on the darkening horizon. (A group of butterflies are
fluttering around a bush a dozen metres from Blaine’s tree and Kurt can’t stop
shaking, Lory’s
death flashing vivid in his mind).

Night falls and the Capitol anthem blares.

Kurt watches Blaine absorb the faces of the dead tributes, watches Blaine’s face crumple at seeing
four District 12 children among them. Blaine raises a silent, two-finger salute to the sky, sorrow
obvious on his face, but all Kurt feels is terror – a group of squirrels are frolicking only four trees
away from Blaine.

After a meagre meal of a few bites of energy bar, Blaine settles in to sleep again. Kurt doesn’t
move from his chair once in the next eight hours.

He sits, hyperaware and paranoid, eyes glued to Blaine’s small figure curled up in the tree,
flicking through each and every camera surrounding Blaine’s location. Mapping all potential
threats from the arena, biting his lips raw as he tries to predict which other creature could be a mutt –
if the group of worms digging through the soil would turn out to be bloodsucking leeches, if
even the tiny ants scurrying through the sand carry some sort of venom.

About a few hours after midnight, Haymitch tries to get him to grab a quick bite and a nap, but he
backs away at the vicious glare Kurt shoots him in reply.

Blaine snuffles adorably in his sleep; two kids die in another part of the arena, killed by poisonous
fruits. Blaine’s burrows deeper into his thermal blanket, wrapping himself around his backpack the
way he wrapped himself around Kurt just last night. A few miles away, a tribute is bitten in two
by a plant.

The night passes on.
Four more die after the bizarre plant attack, all killed by an assortment of deceptively docile creatures turning vicious. Two of them are Careers.

Kurt watches the remainder of the Career Pack run back to the Cornucopia, battling mutts left and right, yelling to each other as they outrun the assault. So the Careers now know exactly how the arena works. They have that advantage as well, apart from their numbers and strength. Bad, very bad…

And suddenly, it is eight hours later and Kurt is a nervous, sleepless wreck, watching the pale blush of dawn lightening the arena, painting Blaine’s sleeping face with a muted-orange glow.

The total number of dead tributes after one day is thirty-two.

If Blaine did win, Kurt knows the sheer number of children who died in the process would haunt him for the rest of his life. In some ways, it’d almost be a mercy for Blaine if he didn’t win. It’d be a mercy for everyone if Kurt had just died in the arena…

He slams the brakes on that train of thought. The sleep deprivation must be turning him maudlin.

Blaine puffs out a sleepy breath and his head lolls back a little, exposing the long line of his neck. Kurt knows exactly what it feels like to press his face there and breathe it in, knows how it feels to have that sleepy puff of breath ruffle his hair…

It feels like home.

He searches for Janette as he’s been doing every now and then throughout the night, and finds her still sleeping, nestled within a spongy nest of herbs in the shade of a tree. The area around her seems safe.

One of green dots on the statistics board lights up red and Kurt startles, turning back to Blaine – a tribute is within the half-kilometre radius of Blaine’s tree.

He toggles the buttons quickly, heart thumping and soon spots a small figure rustling in one of the higher branches of a tall tree. When he zooms in, he realises it’s the little District 11 girl who barely even looks old enough to be reaped. The statistics board says her name is “Rue.”

Rue. A delicate little flower grown in the meadows back in District 12. As delicate as the girl who bears the name. Kurt swallows a lump in his throat and shakes his head. He can’t let emotions get in the way. He concentrates on the screens, analyzing her every move, sizing her up.

Even as he watches, she scurries nimbly to the very tip of her branch, seems to be scoping out something. She balances on her feet, arms thrown out like a baby bird attempting its first flight, and soars. Kurt’s mouth drops open as he watches her land gracefully on a sturdy branch in the adjacent tree, almost half-a-dozen metres away.

No wonder she scraped a seven in her Gamemaker scores. She can simply jump from tree to tree and avoid ever descending to the ground. That is an enormous advantage, even in an arena full of mutts.

Rue nestles down in her tree and starts plucking leaves from the branches around her. She grinds the leaves vigorously, rubbing the viscous sap that oozes out all over herself. Kurt frowns, trying to figure out her reasoning. (Camouflage? But the sap doesn’t impart any colour. Masking her scent? More likely.)

He is pulled from his train of thought by Blaine waking up.
Blaine takes out the water-purifier bottle he got from the Cornucopia, and wets his throat with a few measured sips of the water that must have come with it. The bottle probably only holds a very small amount of water though, if Blaine’s worried frown is anything to go by.

Blaine starts packing away his thermal blanket and the rope harness he used to secure himself to the tree, finishing up his energy bar from last night.

Kurt rubs his burning eyes, runs a hand through his hair. His sleepless, paranoid night is catching up to him.

Haymitch comes out just then, sipping a mug of coffee, looking alert and awake.

“Blaine and Janette are still alive,” Kurt informs him tiredly. “Janette’s sleeping at the same place where she stopped last night to tend to her wound, no other tributes in her half-mile radius. Blaine’s awake, repacking his supplies. The little District 11 girl, Rue, is not far from him.”

“Why don’t you get some sleep?” Haymitch grunts, settling in next to Kurt. “I can take over for a few hours.”

Kurt starts to protest.

“I’ve been doing this alone for decades, boy,” Haymitch cuts in waspishly, toggling a button to zoom closer to Janette. “I can hold my own for a couple hours.”

Kurt stares back at the screens, torn. But he really is exhausted. His brain feels weighed down, filled with cotton. A shower, a hot meal and some sleep would bring him up to speed again. But if something were to happen to Blaine…

“I’ll come get you the second Blaine so much as breathes different,” Haymitch promises, giving him a quick shove towards the rooms. “You can’t help him if you can barely keep your head up.”

With one last glance at the televisions (Blaine is just finishing up re-organizing his backpack and Janette is waking up), Kurt nods and stumbles into the bathroom.

After a quick shower and a perfunctory clean-up, Kurt steps out into the bedroom, pulling on a comfortable cotton shirt. Mags is perched on one of the beds, waiting for him with a tray of food. Kurt scarfs down a couple of slices of toast and gulps a glass of milk in one go, barely able to keep awake long enough to finish swallowing the food. He flops down on the bed and closes his tired eyes, wishing the images of thirty-two tributes dying would stop flashing behind his eyelids.

A warm weight settles on the bed beside him, gentle fingers carding through his hair. Mags. Kurt tilts into her comforting touch, takes solace in the warm, watchful presence sitting next to him. He relaxes his exhausted body and sleeps.

* 

“Kurt, wake up! Kurt!”

Haymitch’s urgent voice filters through Kurt’s consciousness, as though from the other end of a long dark tunnel. Kurt’s mind rebels, tries to sink back into blissful oblivion again.

Rough hands shake him vigorously. “Wake up, boy! It’s Blaine.”

Kurt comes awake abruptly, sits up gasping as though coming up for air after being underwater.

“What,” he gasps, trying to get his bearings, flailing out of bed. Haymitch is already striding out of
the room. “What… Blaine?”

When he rushes into the control room it all becomes clear.

Blaine has slung his backpack firmly across his shoulders, has hopped down two branches from his previous position. He is near the edge of his current branch, peering thoughtfully down at a raspberry bush a dozen yards from the base of his tree, as though planning to go gather some berries.

Peering down thoughtfully at a raspberry bush which is surrounded by six harmless-looking squirrels, which are nibbling at a few berries.

“No,” Kurt croaks, grabbing the back of a chair to steady himself.

Blaine seems to have decided something and has turned back, scrambling down a few more branches.


“I can’t send him a message,” Haymitch bites out, panic bleeding into his voice too. “You know we can’t write tributes warnings. Snow will personally order them killed.”

Blaine has paused about twelve feet from the ground. An errant branch snagged in his clothes and he is picking out leaves and twigs from his hair. The squirrels on the ground are looking up at him now, their beady eyes fixed with unnerving intelligence on Blaine.

Kurt is shaking.

“If only there was a signal we could use,” Haymitch says, hands flitting uselessly about the controllers as though hoping for inspiration to strike him. “Some kind of hidden, secret way to communicate with him. We should have made something up before sending him, we should have…”

And then it hits Kurt.

He runs to the sponsor portal, rapidly calling up the search option to order what he needs. On the screen, Blaine has extricated the last twig from his hair and clothes, is beginning to climb down again, swiftly.

“No, please, just one minute,” Kurt mutters, frantic fingers typing in his specifications for the sponsor gift and jamming the send button. The process bar pops up; Blaine is only eight feet above the ground. “Please, just one minute.”

Thanks to Blaine’s abundant sponsors and the low price for the frankly useless gift items being sent, the process goes through in seconds. The chime signalling successful transaction sounds and Kurt turns back to the screen to see a parachute floating down towards Blaine in the arena.

The parachute gets lodged about six branches above Blaine. Kurt thanks every god he doesn’t believe in for that.

Blaine is a mere six feet from the ground, just preparing to jump down, when the parachute clinks into place above him. He stares at it in surprise for a second, before adjusting his backpack and scrambling back up the tree. The tight throbbing knot in Kurt’s gut loosens a little.

“What did you send him?” Haymitch asks tersely as Blaine swings up and settles into a branch,
reaching for the parachute.

“A message,” Kurt replies, not taking his eyes off the screen.

“What?” Haymitch barks, but before he can start an angry tirade Blaine opens the container brought by the parachute to reveal… flowers.

Haymitch stares at the screen, looking thoroughly bewildered. The rest of the Capitol apparently feels the same, because the commentator on the Capitol broadcast is making confused noises, having no idea what to make of this nonsensical gift.

Blaine seems to have no idea what to make of it either. He picks out a single midnight-blue blossom and stares at the purple flowers scattered inside the vessel, twirling the flower-stem between his fingers for a few seconds, lips curved in a bemused smile.

“Kurt,” Blaine says, smile going softer, wider, and Kurt feels a jolt somewhere around his navel at just hearing Blaine say his name. (He has it so bad.)

“Kurt,” Blaine looks up at the sky, right into a camera, openly grinning now. “These are lovely, thank you. But… not exactly a justifiable Hunger Games sponsor gift, is it?”

He laughs softly, looking back down at the flowers with fond amusement, shaking his head. “I’ll treasure them anyway,” he promises, grinning at the vessel. “Thank you.”

His head tilts back. “Even if nightshade and rhododendron are a strange choice of romantic gift, I’m just saying,” he teases, grinning and winking. “Roses would’ve been much better, Kurt.”

The Capitol commentators are squealing and squeaking, one is miming fainting while another is proclaiming how adorable Kurt and Blaine are.

But Kurt tunes it out, shut it off. They aren’t safe yet, Blaine still needs to understand…

“They are pretty flowers though,” Blaine starts to say. “I’ll give you… that...” He trails off, a small frown crunching his brows, his gaze shifts back to the blossoms in his lap.

Kurt focuses all his energy on the screen, hoping, praying for his thoughts to somehow reach Blaine across the endless distance. For Blaine to get what he’s trying to say.

“Rhododendron…and nightshade…” Blaine says as though in a trance. “Why would you… And you wouldn’t waste sponsor money just to… On the roof. I told you that night on the roof. Rhododendron and nightshade… danger and secrets.” Blaine stiffens, staring up at the camera. “Oh. Oh, right.”

Kurt collapses onto his seat, taking deep, calming breaths.

“What does he mean?” Haymitch asks, but Kurt shushes him. Blaine is still talking.

“I was just climbing down from the tree,” Blaine says, his voice resonating from multiple screens in the control room. “And you sent me… danger and secrets. So there is danger on… the ground?”

Blaine peers down at the serene looking patch of the woods around him, frowning. The squirrels have gone back to scampering innocently in the raspberry bush; Blaine’s assessing gaze slides right past them.

“Secrets,” Blaine continues, thinking out loud. “Secret dangers, then. So what is this secret
“danger?”

The control room is silent except for the sounds from the arena and the Capitol commentators’ high voice nattering excitedly.

“I was just about to pick some berries for later,” Blaine stares off into the distance. “And you sent me the flowers… So the danger, it’s in the berries?” Blaine shakes his head. “But the squirrels are eating them and none of them have died. So the berries can’t be poisoned. Unless… the squirrels are the danger.”

Blaine laughs to himself as though he finds the very idea ridiculous and amusing. Kurt bites his lips hard, trying desperately not to think of the other tributes who died at the hands of the mutts, wills Blaine to not dismiss that thought.

“That’s just stupid,” Blaine states and Kurt’s heart sinks like lead. “But then again… this is the Quell. Better safe than sorry?”

Blaine looks up questioningly into a camera, before shrugging and nodding once. He slides the backpack off his shoulders, rooting through it till he finds the packet of energy bars. He breaks off a small portion of one bar, takes careful aim towards the berry bush around which the squirrels are still scampering, and throws the morsel of food right down into their midst.

The effect is instantaneous.

The squirrels transform into vicious, raving mutts in a second, biting at that tiny bit of food, fighting over it, razor-sharp teeth and claws glinting in the bright morning sunshine.

Blaine collapses back on his branch, eyes wide in stunned horror, watching the squirrels transform into vicious mutts and then back into innocuous, harmless creatures, right before his very eyes.

Relief, pure blissful relief, courses through Kurt.

The emotion is thoroughly bizarre, considering the boy he loves is in the arena of a Quarter Quell, watching vicious mutts ravaging below him.

But in that moment Kurt feels relief, and he lets himself sink into for a minute. Because Blaine knows. Blaine knows the biggest danger of the arena, knows the arena biggest secret. He will be on his guard now. And that is the best Kurt could hope for.

Blaine seems to have gotten over the shock a little, his eyes are now flitting across the arena with newfound awareness.

“Squirrels are mutts?” Blaine is saying, somewhere between disbelieving and hysterical, re-zipping his backpack with precise swiftness and drawing out his knife. “Squirrels. Squirrels are mutts that can kill you.”

“Then what else?” he balances on his branch, ready to defend himself. “What else can be a mutt, Kurt?”

A group of twittering songbirds take flight from five trees away.

Blaine freezes. “Every animal could be,” he whispers, dull horror seeping into his eyes as they track the birds. “If squirrels can be a mutt. Everything can be a mutt. Those birds could be a mutt. Anything could be a mutt. Anything… Oh.”

Blaine turns back to look straight into the cameras.
“Fuck,” he says eloquently.

Kurt agrees.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Obviously I am awful at meeting deadlines and keeping promises /o\ I'm so sorry you guys. This was supposed to have been posted last week. But anyway, the two promised chapters both together as one! Hope this 5k+ installment makes up for the long wait and my inability to do as I say I will. Hope you enjoy! :)

“So if squirrels are mutts and birds could be mutts and well, anything could be a mutt, why am I not dead yet?”

Blaine is still talking out loud to himself when Kurt comes back into the control room and takes his seat.

It’s been thirty minutes since Kurt sent Blaine those flowers.

Blaine had barely come to the end of his initial shell-shocked soliloquy when Finnick stormed into the control room and bodily dragged Kurt into the adjacent private chambers.

“What are you doing?” Kurt had snapped at being pulled away from the screens at such a critical moment, but Finnick had ignored him. He simply ravaged through Kurt’s wardrobe, throwing clothes left and right, looking for something with manic intensity.

“Interview,” was all the reply Kurt got before he was manhandled into fashionable clothes by an obviously insane District 4 victor and shuffled out of the District 12 rooms.

Kurt received a proper answer in the elevators as Finnick keyed them up to Level 20.

“If Snow takes that little stunt with the flowers as a signal or a pre-arranged code, your boy is dead,” Finnick explained rapidly in a whispered hiss as they zoomed up from the Thirteenth floor. “The commentator crew’s on Level 20. Johanna’s already there arranging a special interview session. Get in there and convince them it was just something Blaine said to you during your romantic rendezvous with the flowers, that you were just so scared of him dying that you panicked and did whatever you could.”

“But that’s what did happen,” Kurt told him, heart thumping.

“Well then this should be easy,” Finnick’s smile then had been brittle. The elevator doors pinged open. “Just don’t let them even think for a second about how rebellious that was and get them to focus on how much you love Blaine.”

And so Kurt had taken a deep breath, squared his shoulders and done just that.

Now, he’s back in the control room, watching Blaine still talking to himself in a quiet voice as he tries to figure it all out. (Haymitch gives Kurt a nod of approval when he enters – Kurt takes that to mean his damage-control attempt was as good as could be hoped for, considering everything.)

“Why have I not been attacked yet?” Blaine is muttering to himself on the screen, knife still clutched ready in his hand, posture still tense and defensive. “I have been sitting in this tree for a
whole day. I was asleep for half of it. But no mutt attacked me. Why?"

A rustle from a tree just two down from Blaine’s. A branch breaks and a cascade of leaves and twigs tumble to the ground.

Kurt jumps, whipping towards the stats board but Haymitch is already shushing him, hitting the zoom button.

“It’s just the little girl,” Haymitch says, pointing to the screen where Rue is balanced near the end of a branch, peering carefully in Blaine’s direction from between a tuft of leaves. “She’s been sitting there staring at him for ten minutes now. I don’t think she’s hostile.”

Blaine jumped at the noise too. He is now crouched facing Rue’s tree, knife at the ready, trying to see through the dense cover of leaves obscuring the possible threat from him.

“I know you’re there,” Blaine calls out after a few minutes when there is no further noise or movement. “I have a knife, but I don’t want to hurt you. Show yourself first and we can go from there.”

Another rustle as Rue shifts on her branch. The leaf cover must’ve parted enough for Blaine to see who it is though, because he loosens from his tense defensiveness, a smile spreading across his face.

“Hi there,” Blaine says, voice softer now, a gentle greeting. Rue’s wary eyes peek out from amidst the leaves. “Rue, right? District 11?” Rue quickly hides again and Blaine’s smile goes fond and indulgent.


Rue’s whole head peers out. Blaine slips the knife into his belt and holds out an unthreatening hand. Rue looks ready to bolt at any second, as she stares at him, wary.

“I am kind of looking for allies right now,” Blaine calls out, grinning. “And someone who can scamper through trees would be a pretty neat ally to have.”

Rue stills. She blinks owlishly at him as though she can’t comprehend what he just said. “You want me… for an ally? Me?”

“Of course,” Blaine says, like that’s the most sensible thing in the world. “You got a seven in the Gamemaker scores. And you can obviously travel silently through trees. And you probably know your edible plants and roots well, seeing as you’re from District 11.” He cocks an eyebrow at Rue and she nods slowly in reply. “See? Why wouldn’t I want you for an ally?”

They stare at each other for a minute more. Blaine is a warm and welcoming presence, patient as he holds out a hand to her, content to let her make a decision at her own pace.

This seems to make up Rue’s mind.

With two graceful leaps, she has a firm hold on one of the higher branches of Blaine’s tree and she scurries into a bend in it, settling about five feet above Blaine.

With a grin, Blaine climbs up till he’s on her level and settles into an adjacent branch.

“My name’s Blaine,” he introduces himself affably. He holds out a polite hand for Rue to shake, as if they are attendees meeting in a ballroom, as opposed to messed up tributes in a Quarter Quell who are supposed to be killing each other.
Rue seems as confused by the gesture as the Capitol commentators. She blinks at Blaine’s face warily, reminding Kurt of a baby bird more than anything else, before taking Blaine’s hand. Her palm is heartbreakingly tiny even in to Blaine’s medium-sized hands.

“I know who you are,” she whispers softly as Blaine pumps her hand up and down. “I saw you teaching people to shoot arrows in the training centre. It was really nice of you.”

The tops of Blaine’s cheeks colour slightly. He blinks and whooshes out a grin, fiddling with his backpack as though searching for something, clearly embarrassed. "Let's get you something to eat,” Blaine says, very obviously trying to shift the attention from him.

Kurt thinks it’s adorable.

Rue obviously thinks so too. The last of her inhibitions and wary defensiveness seem to evaporate and she transforms from a cautious little thing into a bundle of friendly energy. She scoots forward on her branch till she’s sitting right next to Blaine, feet kicking out, completely at ease as she peers inquisitively into Blaine's backpack. As though she and Blaine have been friends all their lives as opposed to two people who met mere minutes ago. The sight makes Kurt smile.

A few minutes pass in silence. Rue's eyes seem to catch sight of something within Blaine's backpack, and she stiffens, peering for a better look. A slow, mischievous little grin spreads across her face.

“Kurt sent you flowers,” she says, leaning over to poke Blaine playfully in the ribs. Blaine startles, the packet of nutrition bars he was fishing out falling back into the backpack.

“What?” Blaine evades, the blush darkening in his cheeks.

“Kurt seeent you floooowers,” Rue sing-songs, grin widening. She pokes Blaine a few more times, and giggles. “One day after he kissed you. That’s so sweet.”

Kurt feels a little hot under the collar as sounds of cheering come from the Capitol broadcast. Haymitch quickly stifles a snort of laughter.

“Rue,” Blaine chides. His crimson face isn’t helping matters. He fishes out the packet of nutrition bars again, holding it out to her. “The flowers aren’t meant like that! And how do you know about the ki– about that anyway?”

“Woke really early on the morning of the Games,” Rue says, picking out one bar and munching on it. “So I was watching the television. And there was a flashing news broadcast. Of the two of you on the Training Centre roof.” She pauses for dramatic effect and grins a Cheshire cat grin. “Kissing.”

“What do you mean a broadcast?” Blaine’s face could heat a frying pan right now. “Of us…? That was private. How did they get a video of it?”

“Passing scout camera,” Rue informs Blaine. “It’s all the Capitol was talking about all through morning. Didn’t you see it at breakfast before the Games?”

Blaine is pouting, looking vaguely indignant and embarrassed over this public leak of their rooftop moment. “I didn’t get to breakfast that morning,” he replies absently. “I was still asleep with Kurt.”

There’s a moment of stunned incredulity after that statement, as Rue’s mouth drops open in the arena and there’s a collective gasp at the commentators’ podium in the Capitol broadcast.
After that, it’s like an explosion. The Capitol broadcast is a storm of hooting and catcalling, the audience cheers and claps interspersed with the excited, high-pitched commentary. They go back to playing the rooftop kiss on loop.

In the arena, Rue has burst into uncontrollable giggling and Blaine seems to realize what he just blurted out. He looks extremely mortified, shushing Rue with a flaming red face, as though regretting everything about this entire conversation and his unwitting contribution towards escalating it.

Which is ironical, considering this sort of buzz is exactly what he and Kurt are trying to create. Either Blaine’s temporarily forgotten all about the charade (can it even still be called a charade, when it’s true?) they are putting up for Snow’s benefit, or he’s really, really good.

Kurt tunes out the Capitol broadcast (which has now progressed to risqué jokes) and glares at Haymitch, daring him to let loose with that laughter he’s fighting. Haymitch presses his lips together, face purple with the effort of holding it in.

“It wasn’t like that,” Blaine is saying over Rue’s giggling. “We weren’t doing anything, we were just sleeping… and oh god, why am I even telling you this? You’re twelve.”

“I’ll be thirteen in a month,” Rue says with a toss of her head, like that settles Blaine’s argument. “And you keep saying that about everything! What is it really like then?” She gives Blaine a challenging look, nodding towards the vessel with the flowers.

It’s like watching a little sister pester her older brother for answers. Kurt feels something in his heart squeeze. And judging by the ‘aww’-ing from the Capitol audience, they see it too.

The entire Capitol broadcast is focused on Blaine and Rue, which is extraordinary, seeing as they aren’t trying to kill each other and there isn’t even any blood.

“The night when Kurt and I were, um, talking on the roof, I told Kurt about flowers and how flowers can be used to tell people things you can’t say face to face. I read about it long ago in one of my grandma’s old books,” Blaine adds hastily, “and I was telling him about… a lot of things actually. Rambling. I was nervous.” The ‘aww’-ing from the audience increases.

“Kurt remembered the rambling though,” Blaine says, reaching for the vessel and plucking out a purple flower, twirling it between his fingers with a soft smile.

“And just now, I was about to jump down to gather some berries… and he sent me these,” Blaine looks up into Rue’s eyes. “These flowers… they mean danger and secrets.”

He breaks off a small corner from the energy bar in Rue’s hand and lob into the bush below. Like clockwork, the squirrels come out, vicious razor teeth bared. “And Kurt saved my life.”

A few of the commentators have a hand over their heart, sniffling and exclaiming how lovely that is.

“But I what I don’t understand,” Blaine says, watching the squirrels morph back into harmless little creatures, “is how I’m still alive.”

He turns back to Rue. “I have been sitting in this tree since yesterday and nothing has attacked me. They,” he gestures to the squirrels below, “didn’t attack me. And squirrels live on trees.”

“Because of the calyp tree,” Rue says, giving Blaine a puzzled look. “That’s why you chose this tree to settle in, isn’t it? Since it’s a calyp tree?”
Blaine blinks at her, looking bewildered. “Calyp tree? As in the eucalyptus hybrid?”

He looks around as though truly taking in the tree they are squatting on for the first time. “But why would being in the calyp tree mean…? Oh.” Blaine stutters to a halt, eyes widening in some realization.

“Mutts hate calyp trees,” Rue says, peering down at the squirrels gnawing on the berries. “It does something wonky to them.”

“Disruption of sensory receptor pathway in mutations,” Blaine whispers, as though quoting from a book. Kurt thinks he probably is. And that the book is probably forbidden. He prays no one noticed the slip-up.

This does explain many things though. Like why Blaine didn’t get attacked though there were plenty of times he should have been targeted. And why Rue was crushing leaves and rubbing their sap all over herself earlier. He realizes something else and quickly zooms in on Janette, who is walking through the arena in one of the other screens. One closer look and he knows he is right.

Janette has a long mesh made of calyp leaves wrapped around her scabbed-over head wound. Which means the tree she slept under last night must have been a calyp tree and that is why she wasn’t one of the many to be devoured by mutts last night.

Pure dumb luck.

Kurt wishes he could send her a message too, communicate this survival tip to her, but he can’t think of any covert way to do it.

“Yeah, that!” Rue is saying on the screen with a grin. “Back in 11, when it’s time to call an end to the workday, the fastest of us climb high on trees to whistle out signals. Then mockingjays will sing it back and everyone knows it’s time to go home. And we always make sure to only climb the calyp trees, because tracker jackers never build nests in them.”

Blaine listens to her, looking fascinated by this tidbit of life at District 11.

“I saw your pin,” Rue says, looking suddenly shy as she points to the lapel of Blaine’s coat. The little gold mockingjay pin glints there in the morning sunlight. “It reminded me of the mockingjays back home, hopping on the trees next to me while I whistled to them. It made me want to trust you.”

Blaine smiles. He nudges her gently and hands her the bottle of water when she finishes eating. Rue takes one careful sip before closing the lid and handing it back to Blaine.

“I found a freshwater pond about three miles down,” she tells him. “I didn’t drink it because I wasn’t sure whether it was poisoned. But I put my hand in and that didn’t hurt.”

“That’s good enough,” Blaine says, placing the bottle back into his bag. “This bottle purifies all toxins. We can go to your pond and get it filled this afternoon. And maybe wash up a little too.” Rue nods and they both lapse into silence.

Their section of the arena is silent and serene, leaves rustling gently in the wind.

Blaine breaks the silence. “But don’t mockingjays also hate calyp trees?” he asks, sounding like a curious student in a classroom. “Being part-Jabberjay and all?”

“Mockingjays don’t seem to mind,” Rue replies, plucking off a leaf from her branch and twirling it. “I think the mockingbird part of them balances out the muttation part.”
Blaine digests this for a few seconds before suddenly bursting into quiet laughter.

“What is it?” Rue asks, perking up and shuffling around on her branch to peer eagerly at Blaine. “What’s so funny?” When Blaine continues to chuckle without giving her an explanation, she pokes him again. “Tell me!”

Blaine calms down a little and gives her bright grin. “Nothing. It’s just… I just think it’s funny that mockingjays were never even meant to exist, but here they are thriving everywhere and apparently without the one weakness even the Capitol couldn’t program out of its mutations.” Blaine smiles blandly and gives a noncommittal shrug. “Goes to show, there’s only so much you can control before something decides to take matters into its own hands.”

Kurt gasps and Haymitch swears. The Capitol audience doesn’t notice the double meaning of the sentence, (then again why would they?) but there’s no way anyone in the districts didn’t catch the blatant rebellion hidden in that one sentence.

There’s no way Snow didn’t catch that.

Blaine just put a bigger bull’s eye on his back than he already had, and there is nothing Kurt can do about it.

“Between the two of you, you’ll send me to an early grave,” Haymitch growls as he swipes for a new bottle of wine and uncorks it.

“Don’t blame us, you are doing a good job of it all by yourself,” Kurt snaps back, ignoring Haymitch and quelling the ever-present fear bubbling in his gut.

Blaine and Rue decide to go out in search of Rue’s pond and set about preparing themselves for it. They pluck multiple leaves from the calyp tree, grinding out its sap and rubbing it all over themselves. Rue even weaves a little wreath out of the leaves and ties them around their necks, hips and arms. Blaine secures the backpack around his shoulders and hands one of his knives to Rue. They are ready.

Rue gracefully hops onto a branch on the next tree, nearly six foot away and turns to smile at Blaine. Blaine grins, squinting a little, before following the exact trajectory of her jump.

They go on like that for over two hours, hopping from tree to tree, Rue leading the way and Blaine imitating her movements. Finally, when the sun has travelled well past midway in the arena sky, they reach a clearing.

The little clearing is beautiful, just like everything else about the arena.

A copse of tall trees surround the clearing, leaving a small patch of bright, golden sunshine to shine through the gap in their canopy. The light illuminates a tiny pond, which is fed by a small rivulet of water, probably from the river Kurt saw snaking through the arena earlier. The pond is small but deep, its water crystal-clear.

Blaine lets out a whoop of joy and after careful scrutiny, scrambles down from the tree, Rue right behind him. When they reach the pond, Rue drops a few crushed calyp leaves into it, probably to figure out if there are any hidden fish mutts in the water.

When nothing comes out snapping, Blaine refills the purifier bottle, setting it aside for the ten minutes it takes to complete the purification process. He takes off his shoes and socks, settling at the edge of the pond, and puts his feet into the water with a sigh of contentment. Rue sits down next to him and does the same.
“There are four calyp trees just in this copse surrounding us,” Blaine notes, wiggling his toes in the water. “Are there many calyp trees in the arena?”

“Uh huh,” Rue replies, leaning back happily. “There’s at least one every twenty trees. The mutts don’t seem to migrate much either, only the birds and butterflies seem to move around a lot.”

“I guess they needed to offer at least some loopholes within the arena,” Blaine muses. “If they didn’t, we’d all be dead in a couple of days and that would be boring.” The last word he says with a quiet contempt and disdain, but Kurt doubts anyone except those who know Blaine could have caught it.

The conversation turns to their lives. Blaine talks about growing up at the Mayor’s manor, little stories about life at District 12, about his trips to the coal mines. Rue talks about her sector in District 11, the military level of policing and rules enforcement, of horrors like whipping and beating every single day.

Blaine looks horrified. Kurt remembers his own Victory Tour, his own horror on seeing the even more downtrodden populace of District 11.

The camera has switched from Blaine and Rue to broadcast the Careers setting up camp. Kurt guesses they probably don’t want all that information about other Districts to be broadcast. Or maybe they simply don’t know what to do with two tributes who are treating each other like human beings.

Blaine and Rue take long gulps from the water bottle and refill it for later, getting up from the pond and stamping their feet dry. They pull on their socks and shoes, splash some water on their faces and head towards the nearest calyp tree, climbing it easily and hopping from one tree to another with agile speed.

The sun is well past midday now, looking to be around 3pm. Kurt estimates the arena is ahead of them by about an hour. Not that that can be considered a constant. The Gamemakers manipulate the length of day and the weather within the arena, just as much as they manipulate the mutts populating it.

Blaine and Rue pause about half a mile from the clearing, when Rue spots some edible roots. They decide on grabbing some berries and roots for a quick meal and save the nutrition bars for later.

Rue shows Blaine the plants and roots she is sure are not poisonous in the arena. Blaine produces a box of matches, lighting a bunch of calyp leaves on fire. They climb down carefully, waving the little smoking pile of leaves about while quickly gathering berries and leaves and hacking out some roots from the ground. Kurt spots a few razor-teethed rabbits fleeing the area, avoiding the pungent smoke in panic.

Blaine and Rue complete their little food gathering mission and make it safely back up a nearby calyp tree in a matter of minutes. Kurt breathes a silent sigh of relief when they settle in safely on one of the branches of the tree and start on their meagre meal.

While munching on their food, they agree that staying on this tree would serve well for the night. It is just far enough away from the pond to not be too close to other tributes who may stumble in there, but close enough to be able to go back regularly for refills. Kurt approves.

The two allies are just finishing up with their meal on the screen when Mags appears in the District 12 control room, bearing her own platter of food. She stands over Kurt, glaring at him till he takes a few sandwiches and wolfs them down to appease her.
While all this is going on, in another part of the arena two more tributes die, attacked by mutts. Kurt figures the Gamemakers will soon have to reduce the number of mutts, if they want the actual tributes to kill each other. Blaine and Rue tense when the canons go off, but both deaths are far enough away that after a few minutes, they shake their heads and settle back, watching with sombre eyes as hovercrafts fly in to collect the bodies.

The Capitol lingers on the deaths lovingly and Kurt mutes the Capitol broadcast.

But that doesn’t stop him from mentally noting – thirty-four down.

Blaine announces he’s going to make a bow while it’s still light out and hops around on the tree, looking for some specific type of branch. He finally hacks off one he finds suitable, starts carving at it with his knife.

Rue crouches next to him, watching with wide-eyed fascination. Kurt is once again forcibly reminded of a baby bird.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Rue asks with rapt interest, eyes following Blaine’s every movement.

Kurt groans internally. It’s not like Blaine can exactly say “Oh nothing, Just something I read in forbidden Capitol files that I found by breaking into a secret room.”

“Our old cook John taught me,” Blaine lies glibly, whittling away at the branch. “He knew a lot of things like that. He was ancient, pushing a hundred years old when he died, I think. Must have been a young boy during the Dark Ages.”

And there. A lie that is smarter for being couched mostly in truth, while also shifting any possible heat on someone who is already dead. Out of the corner of his eye, Kurt sees Haymitch give a nod of approval.

“So Rue, did you see any Careers since the Cornucopia?” Blaine asks, neatly changing the topic. “I haven’t seen any of them, but I figure they must be hunting at night?”

“I saw them last night, running away from a group of mutts,” Rue says, eyes fixed on the motion of Blaine’s knife over the sturdy branch. “They don’t know about the calyp trees yet. They’ve set up camp at the Cornucopia ‘cause it’s easier to defend and you can see any mutts coming from a mile away.”

“Hmm,” Blaine says noncommittally, clever hands steady at work. “We need to do something about the Careers. Make a plan, to weaken them a little somehow.”

He looks up and squints at the sun, which is creeping close to the horizon. “Tomorrow though,” he says. “We’ll turn in for the night here, get a good sleep.”

He smiles at Rue and she grins back, looking contented and secure and happy. That little unnamed part in Kurt’s heart twinges again.

The Capitol commentary (which switched to Blaine when he started making a potential weapon) still obviously doesn’t know what to do with the affectionate camaraderie between those two. Allies are by no means a new concept to the Games, but the relationship between allies had always been brusque. Perfunctory. Not this mutual, sibling-like caring.

Haymitch goes to grab a few hours’ sleep and Kurt lets him, agreeing to the stern announcement that Haymitch will be the one staying up tonight. Kurt really does need a good night’s sleep. He
feels wrung out, emotionally and physically.

Rue starts whistling a little four note tune as Blaine works at his bow. A few unseen mockingjays pick up on it, singing it back. Soon it spreads across their little corner of the arena, Rue’s little tune merging and overlapping till it becomes a brilliant, beautiful symphony.

Blaine has stopped carving his bow now, eyes closed and head tilted up, listening intently to the impromptu performance. A mesmerized smile turns up his lips as more mockingjays join in, giving even more complex beauty to the little tune.

The sun has passed well below the horizon before the birds’ singing trails off. When it ends, Blaine sits with his eyes closed for a few more minutes, appearing to breath it all in, before turning to Rue.

“That was amazing,” Blaine says, delight sparkling in his eyes. “Is that what you listen to going home after every workday?”

Rue nods shyly, grinning up at him. “Amazing,” Blaine tells her emphatically.

The Capitol anthem playing loudly in the sky interrupts their conversation. They both turn as one to sombrely take in all the children who died today. Miles away from them, Janette’s head tilts up from where she is gathering roots and leaves in the forest, mouth downturned as the broadcast plays on.

Blaine presses the first two fingers of his right hand to his lips and holds it up to the sky as the announcement winds down.

“What does that mean?” Rue asks him quietly.

“Respect,” Blaine replies, soft and sad. “Goodbye.” He turns to her. “It is a funeral gesture back in District 12. To show respect and say goodbye to someone whose life meant something to you.”

“But you didn’t know any of them,” Rue says innocently.

“But you didn’t know any of them,” Rue says innocently.

“Doesn’t make their life any less meaningful to me,” Blaine’s head tilts up again, eyes reflecting the stars. “If I manage to survive and get out of here, it’ll mean I did so at the cost of all of their lives. The least I can do is acknowledge and respect that…” He opens his mouth as though to say some more but changes his mind.

“Well,” Blaine says with false enthusiasm, clapping his hands. “Now that that’s done and it’s too dark to continue making the bow, might as well go to sleep.”

They both split an energy bar in half for dinner, sip a few gulps of water from the bottle. Then Blaine scrambles up a few more feet and finds a sturdy, large branch that is thick enough to hold both of them.

They settle in for the night there, Rue snuggling into Blaine’s side as he wraps the thermal blanket around both of them, securing them to the tree with a rope for good measure.

Rue is out like a light instantly. Blaine smiles fondly down at her, stroking her hair once before staring up at the sky. Kurt wishes he knew what thoughts were flitting through Blaine’s mind just then that made him look so sad and serious. Kurt wishes he was the comforting weight snuggled up against Blaine.

Mags comes in bearing another tray of food. She seems to have appointed herself as his caretaker for the duration of the Games. Kurt meekly gulps down whatever she’s brought. Mags gets her
way in things one way or another; Kurt’s learned not to cross her.

Haymitch emerges from their rooms looking scruffy and sleep-rumpled.

“You can turn in for the night, kid,” Haymitch orders Kurt in a no-nonsense voice. “I’ll take over till morning.”

Kurt is loathe to leave, even though he can see Blaine is as safe as can be hoped for, considering it’s the Games. He briefly thinks about protesting, but Mags’ glare makes it clear she won’t let Kurt wriggle out of it either.

He turns back to look at the screen, where Blaine is blinking sleepily up at the sky now. The two old mentors are still looking at him pointedly. Kurt huffs out a sigh of resignation and stands up. He is definitely not strong enough to go up against Mags and Haymitch at the same time.

Just as he’s about to leave, he hears Blaine’s voice whisper softly from the screen. “Goodnight, Kurt.”

Kurt turns back to see Blaine relax into sleep, curved up around Rue, eyes closed.

Despite everything, Kurt feels a strange little ember of warmth settle in his gut. He smiles.

“Goodnight, Blaine,” he whispers back to the screen, before slipping into his rooms for the night.
When Kurt enters the control room early next morning, the expression on Haymitch’s face freezes his blood.

“What happened?” he panics, stumbling a little towards his seat. “What…?”

“Janette’s dead,” Haymitch interrupts brusquely. Kurt drops into his seat like his strings were cut off, feeling strangely numb.

“Mutts?” he questions, voice as steady as he can manage.

“Careers,” Haymitch corrects, hands tightening on the glass of wine in his hand. “Went hunting last night. The Gamemakers must have called off a little on the mutts, none of the Careers got attacked while they were on the hunt. Stumbled on Janette sleeping in a bush, surrounded her. I would’ve woken you but… it wasn’t quick. You’re better off not having seen it.”

Kurt feels the numbness ebb, a helpless rage filling his veins. He can see it all too clearly – mindless beasts called off so children can take their place, cruel and vicious and destroying all in their path.

“Careers killed seven tributes last night, including Janette,” Haymitch continues, staring into his wine like he wishes he could drown in it. “Apart from that there were two mutt-related deaths too.”

“Bringing up the total dead count to forty-three,” Kurt mutters despite himself. “Just twenty-nine kids left out of seventy-two.”

“And only Blaine left out of the six from District Twelve,” Haymitch grunts.

Kurt turns to the television screens where Blaine has just woken up, sorting through his backpack and chatting with Rue.

“Only Blaine left,” Kurt agrees.

* 

“…and the Careers’ whole stock is just lying there around the Cornucopia, out in the open?” Blaine asks, whittling away at a branch to make a crude arrow.

“Mmhm,” Rue mumbles around a mouthful of freshly picked roots and berries, wiping at her mouth with a hand when the juices dribble down. “They leave one or two behind when they go to hunt, but that’s all. It’s a good camp though. You can see someone coming for miles, they can defend it easily.”
“Hmm,” Blaine hums thoughtfully, hands testing the sharpness of the edge. “Just seems so tempting. Destroy that horde and the Careers will be next to useless. They know more about fighting and killing than keeping themselves fed and basic survival.”

Blaine looks up, a mischievous smile flickering about his mouth.

“If only we can cause a big enough distraction to get all of them away from the Cornucopia,” he says casually, putting aside his arrow and reaching for a berry, popping it in his mouth.

Rue lowers the root she was munching on and stares at him, a slow grin stretching her fruit-stained lips.

They both grin at each other and Kurt feels vague alarm bells going off in his head that tell him this could only lead to danger and disaster.

*

His alarm bells were right.

Kurt watches Blaine and Rue sit in their tree plotting away the whole day and feels helpless and furious as they lay down a reckless and crackpot plan to have a shot at destroying the Careers’ supplies.

Well, alright the plan isn’t really reckless and crackpot. Considering this is the Hunger Games and no offensive move is without danger, their plan is as safe as one can hope for. There are only a few holes – but as far as Kurt is concerned, those are a few too many.

The plan is brilliant for being so simple. Rue and Blaine will move to the edges of the forest in the evening and lay wait till all but a few of the Careers have gone to hunt for the night. They’ll wait a few hours to ensure the majority of the Careers are far away. Then Rue will lay down a distraction that will draw the Careers left behind on guard to investigate and Blaine will run for the Cornucopia, cover everything with a pile of dry calyp leaves and then set the whole thing on fire with his matches.

Even if the weaponry is salvageable at the end of it, the food and other useful items will almost definitely be destroyed, if Blaine is successful. And that could tip the balance and even out the odds. The Careers would lose their upper hand without their stash.

There are a million things that can go wrong, but the plan has just enough circumstantial behaviour riding for it that it could be a success.

Kurt watches, biting his nails and scarfing down whatever Mags sets in front of him without complaint. Rue and Blaine spend the whole day collecting dry branches and perfectly combustible Calyp leaves, rolling it all into the plastic sheets from the backpack and carrying it on their backs. They are making their way slowly but steadily back towards the Cornucopia and by the amount of Capitol screen time they are getting, Kurt knows he is not unjustified in his anxiety that something big is going to happen tonight.

They reach the edges of the forest cover just as the Career hunting party starts preparing to set out. Blaine and Rue hide behind the trees, camouflaged in the shadows cast by the fading sun, observing silent and still.

The Careers are arguing.

“Why do I have to stay back tonight too?” a boy is snarling. “You haven’t let me come on the hunt once! All of you have at least one kill to your name and Cato has five!”
“Because you are useless,” another girl pipes up disdainfully, the one with the knives from District 2. “And with Glimmer and Tomas dead too, we can’t afford to leave anyone actually good behind.”

With a growl of anger, the boy launches himself at her but he is intercepted by the big, hulking District 2 boy who had so far been watching the proceedings with cocky amusement.

Cato has the boy in a headlock in seconds and pushes him down harshly, to jeering and encouraging laughter from the rest of the Careers. A lethal half-sword is pressed firmly against the boy’s spine and Cato grins.

“Remember, Marvel,” he says with casual cruelty. “You are only alive because we need someone to mind the camp while we’re out hunting. You don’t get to complain about it. Are we clear?”

Marvel lets out a half enraged, half terrified sound. Cato presses the blade deeper against the boy and a thin line of blood seeps out, shallow and staining his shirt. “I said are we clear?”

Kurt stares in disgust at the mountain of a bully, who is smiling, who is clearly enjoying this, torturing and intimidating another person.

“Fine, fine!” Marvel spits out on the television screen, humiliation clear in his tone and Cato slowly moves away, but not before landing a bruising kick to the boy’s ribs.

“Let’s leave,” Cato orders to the rest of the pack while Marvel gasps for breath on the ground. “You,” directed at the boy on the ground, “take care of camp and kill anyone who comes near it. Don’t you dare fuck up or I will kill you.”

With that, the hunting party sets out into the woods, running for a point a few miles down from where Blaine and Rue are hiding. The sun is fully down now, the arena draped in darkness and shadows.

Kurt watches as Marvel picks himself up off the ground, coughing and cursing, and picks up a spear. He climbs partway up the Cornucopia and sits himself there, looking furiously humiliated, keeping a low angry monotone under his breath.

Blaine and Rue look at each other and share a nod. They both start moving in a direction away from where the Career hunting party had disappeared, heading towards the edges of the woods and going back a few miles.

Finally, at a clearing near the edge of the woods, about a mile’s distance from the Cornucopia, Blaine nods his head and they both lower one bundle of dried leaves, setting about making a sizeable fire. The lake glints within view of their belt of trees, serene and inviting in the starlit night.

From his vantage view of the arena, Kurt can see that the spot they’ve chosen is excellent for their plan. The Careers are a good few hours away from where Rue and Blaine are currently setting their trap, would probably not even notice the smoke trail from it unless one of them climbs a tall tree. But once the fire is started, the smoke from it would be in perfect viewing distance of the boy guarding the camp.

And after the fight they just witnessed, Kurt has no doubt that Marvel will definitely take up the bait at a chance to boost his own kill score.

The first part of the plan works out flawlessly. Rue starts coaxing the fire just as Blaine sets off for the Cornucopia. By the time Blaine reaches the edges of the trees, the smoke from their decoy
is quite noticeable and Marvel is squinting towards it, clearly torn between staying put and setting out for a bit of his own glory.

The wind kicks the fire into a roaring inferno, making the smoke even more visible and Marvel makes up his mind. Jumping down from the Cornucopia horn, he quickly gathers a few weapons and sets off at a run towards the fire.

Blaine watches him leave and after a quick scan of the surrounding woods, runs towards the Cornucopia, carrying three bales of highly combustible calyp leaves and branches, running pretty fast despite the weight he’s carrying.

Kurt bites his lip, zooms in on Blaine’s location, checking the surroundings for other tributes, signs of Careers coming back. There aren’t any within a kilometre. He turns his attention exclusively back to Blaine.

Blaine has now piled up everything in the camp into one big pile and covered it with dry calyp branches. He already seems to have pocketed whatever could’ve been useful. He discovers a small canister of oil while arranging the last of the horde and is utilizing this unexpected gift by sloshing it generously all over the pile before starting to coax it into fire.

It takes twenty harrowing minutes before Blaine manages to get the entire pile on fire. The whole time, Kurt zooms over every part of the one mile radius, checking obsessively for threats of any kind. Blaine uses up over fifteen matches to get the fire going, but considering the expression on his face as he stands back to admire his handiwork, it’s obvious he considers the sacrifice worth it.

By now the fire has really caught on and with one last look, Blaine takes off, running full pelt towards forest cover again.

A shrill, terrified scream jolts Kurt back from his one-track focus on Blaine. It takes him just a fleeting second to realize that it is Rue.

The look of horror on Blaine’s face when he hears it in the arena is something that will pepper Kurt’s nightmares for years to come.

Haymitch swears and Kurt turns numbly to look at the next TV screen, where Marvel has managed to snare Rue in a giant gaming net. Rue is on the ground, screaming for Blaine and crying, while Marvel circles around her like a hunter circling its prey, mouth twisted in a gruesome grin.

Blaine is running full pelt through the forest, yelling out Rue’s name in panicked bursts. But he is still too far away, he is impeded by snarling vines and loose roots - he won’t be on time.

“You won’t do much for my kill score, puny thing that you are,” Marvel says over her, readying the spear in his hand and lifting it high above his head. “But any kill is better than no kill at all, don’t you agree?” He brings the spear down with brutal force.

Kurt slams his eyes shut and jerks away from the screens, but nothing can prevent him from hearing that sickening wet crunch of spear breaking through bone and sinew, the horrible pained whimper of a dying child. He feels bile rise at the back of his throat, but he can’t move to the bathroom. He can’t move.

Blaine’s strangled yell startles him back towards the screens.

He turns to see Blaine charging towards the District One boy in incoherent rage, a sword lifted at the ready. Caught unawares and without his spear which is still stuck in Rue’s stomach, Marvel goes down like a stone, his defences nothing against Blaine’s furious, distraught attack.
In ten seconds, Blaine has Marvel on the ground beneath him and has him in a vicious grip, his sword point coming down for a death blow. The razor sharp end is a mere inch above slicing through Marvel’s forehead when Blaine suddenly stops. He freezes, still straddling Marvel in a dead hold, sword poised inches from cleaving his head in two, and looks so lost, so hopeless that Kurt’s heart breaks.

He knows without a doubt in that moment that if Blaine kills this boy, the remorse and guilt will kill Blaine too.

“You killed her,” Blaine’s voice shakes slightly with rage and despair. “She was just a child, barely eleven and you killed her, in cold blood, to boost your killing score.” The last two words yelled with anger so great the boy below him whimpers and struggles weakly against Blaine’s hold. The sword point drops just slightly, its deadly tip pressing against the contours of Marvel’s upper eye lid. He stops struggling, taking in shallow terrified breaths. "It would be justified if I killed you too."

The arena takes on a crystalline quality, the bright moonlight filtering through the leaves, Marvel pinned to the ground and Blaine like an avenging angel above him, sword raised in righteous fury and judgement. There is no movement except for the gentle swish of a breeze through the leaves, no sound except for the gentle background of forest life and the ragged breathing of the two boys on the ground.

Kurt can’t look away from the tableau before him. The Capitol audience obviously feels the same. Even the commentators have fallen silent, waiting with bated breath for how the scene would unfold.

Fifteen seconds pass. The leaves hush around them, a few murderous squirrels scurry innocently over the trees and Blaine sits unmoving on top of the boy who murdered his ally.

After an interminable minute, the terrible anger in Blaine’s face sags and unfurls. His body slackens, the upraised sword falling to the ground.

"It would be justified if I killed you, but I can't. I can't because I am not a murderer and I refuse to let scum like you make me one." And he gets off the boy he pinned to the ground, taking a few steps back with a tired, distraught shuffle, the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“You’re not worth it,” Blaine says with the utmost contempt, before turning his back on the boy who just killed a child.

The series of events over the next few seconds happen so fast Kurt’s brain can barely process it. One second, Marvel is hefting the fallen sword on the ground next to him and lunging towards Blaine’s defenceless back with an ugly snarl, and the next he’s falling to the ground, a gigantic axe embedded in his skull, the splatter of blood painting a pattern of macabre art across Blaine’s shoulders.

Blaine startles back and trips over his feet, staring with wide-eyed horror at the twitching body before him. Kurt notices a red blip reading “District 7”, which he hadn’t noticed before in the heat of the moment, head out of the tree line surrounding the little copse and move towards Blaine.

The dark haired girl with olive skin who threw the axe with such deadly, unrepentant precision walks towards Blaine, who is still on the ground, defenceless – a sitting duck ripe for slaughter. Kurt watches, heart in his mouth, unable to look away, sure the evil-looking knife in the girl’s hand will end up in Blaine’s gut before the minute is out. Sure that this is the moment that will end it all.
The girl comes to a stand in front of Blaine, and holds out her hand to help him up.

Kurt gapes at the TV screens; he can feel Haymitch next to him in a similar state of surprise.

On screen is no different. Blaine is gaping up at the girl, uncomprehending eyes flickering between the girl’s face and the offered hand of help.

“Well don’t just sit there like an idiot, hobbit,” Santana Lopez snaps, wiggling her fingers impatiently. “Get up so we can get out of here before any of the other Career psychos come sniffing.”

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