The Games have always been a perilous affair, but when Katniss Everdeen meets Johanna Mason everything changes and they'll be fighting for more than their lives.
It was an unusually warm midwinter morning when Johanna is awakened by the smell of alcohol hanging heavily in the air. With an audible groan, she wills herself out of bed despite wanting to stay and pull the covers over her head. She takes a quick shower and is soon dressed: wearing a pair of worn out, dark colored jeans and a leather jacket with a fur hood and boots. She shivered, even after all this time the District Seven native was still not used to the ever-changing climate of District Twelve.

How do these people fucking do it? She cursed, pulling the coat tighter around her as she makes her way towards the kitchen. She expected the old bastard to be there nursing a glass of bourbon, possibly drenched in his old vomit like the countless times she's found him in.

Haymitch Abernathy kept his house dark, and his housekeeping was atrocious. For a victor, Johanna would have expected his home to look like a mansion when she started visiting him. The way it was handed to him, when he won his Games. Johanna certainly kept hers in top condition. Now, his looked more like an abandoned, war torn hut than a home. With all the vomit, alcohol, and trash that littered the floor, the dark-haired woman could just smell the house's terrible stench from the train station.

Instead, she finds him sitting at the dinner table without a bottle of whiskey to keep him company. The older man known for his alcoholism; so much so, there was never a time when he wasn't caught without drinking. But to those closest to him, and the oh so few that there were, knew that out of the 365 days of the year, The Reaping was when he abstained the most. Why? It is possible to say that despite passing himself off as a careless habitual drunk, he actually felt remorse and sadness for the eventual children that would soon be forced to fight for their lives.

There was an actual heart inside of him, even if it was drowning in whiskey and bourbon.

Johanna doesn't speak a word to him. This self-imposed state of complete silence was probably the only time he had to himself when he could properly grieve. Ironic, really. One would think it would be better to mourn the dead after their killed not before. Nevertheless, the symbolism of it all is not lost on her.

As a victor of the Games herself, she knew the pain and the tragedy that came with it, before, during and after. She simply chose not to wallow in the mud and continued walking forward.

"Haymitch, when are you going to renovate this place?" She asked putting a hand on the dinner table but immediately retracts when part of it breaks off. "This place is falling apart."

"What for?" The older man asked as he got up from his seat and passed Johanna into the kitchen. "If I can just move in next door, everyone knows I'm the last person that's ever going to live in this village."
Victor's Village, it's where all the survivors of the Games move into when they win. A beautiful little place in the district, built with mansions and luxury items. A little piece of the Capitol for one to call their own. Here in Twelve, Haymitch was the district's 2nd and last remaining victor and ever since his victory 24 years ago, there hasn't been a tribute whose ever managed to put even a sliver of hope in the man.

The thought saddens Johanna, to a point. *This was the nation's poorest district; the only tribute this place can produce is a skinny brat who looks like a corpse than a mere human.*

... 

After getting all dolled up thanks to the Capitol stylists on reserve for today, Johanna waited, if what, impatiently for the ceremony to start. She didn't understand why so much work was put in when the main event was to just read names off a piece of paper. She smoothed her tight, form fitting navy blue dress as she sat down waiting for Haymitch to arrive. The old bastard must've gotten lost on his way here and found himself taking shelter in a liquor cabinet somewhere.

There was a squeak, followed by the sound of overpriced heels clicking against the floor. 

*Oh no.*

If anyone knew how to get on Johanna's nerves, it was Effie Trinket.

Even as she currently walked down the hall, pretty much ran, in a bright fuchsia dress with alabaster make-up and a horrendously bright shade of pink lipstick. After spending the past four years as the District Twelve escort, an especially trying time, the crazed little minx still managed to smile and laugh as she launched herself at Johanna.

"Johanna darling!" She screeched in a high-pitched voice that rang in girl's ears. "Oh how I've missed you! How have you been?"

Johanna shrugged her shoulders, nudging the escort to get off. "Alright, I guess."

In her spare time, the District Seven native mostly took to training and working with her father and brother in their store in the merchant village. Forging tools and constructing furniture, her father also worked as a carpenter. There was once a time when she and her family made weapons and sold them to hunters on the black market. However, when the Capitol stepped in all of their hard work had been confiscated and the store was temporarily shut down despite receiving some of the profits.

That all changed when Johanna won her Games. When not working, she could be found in District Four spending time with Finnick Odair and Annie Cresta. And that's if she wasn't visiting Haymitch.

"Nonsense! You must tell me more, I—" the stylist is suddenly still and stares at the dark-haired girl, bewildered.

Johanna ran her a hand through her long hair. It had been a lot shorter barely past her shoulders when she won her Games, but she took to growing it out ever since. The stylist picked up the tresses and squealed happily. "I am absolutely thrilled! You finally let your hair grow!"

"Don't get too attached," the dark-haired girl said evenly. "I'm thinking about cutting it again."

"Into that godawful bob cut? You must be joking."

"Oh because you're one to know so much about hair. For fuck's sake you're wearing a wig."
"So?" Effie asked defensively. "It's stylish, all the rage in the Capitol."

Johanna rolled her eyes. "As it is every year, moron."

The smell of alcohol hits her, and she watches as Effie scrunched her nose up in disgust. Haymitch who stumbled towards them, burping along the way. "What are you two hens clucking on about now?"

I was right. Johanna shook her head.

"You old coot! We have been waiting for you this entire time to start and you show up fifteen minutes late and... Is that vomit on your shirt?" Johanna doesn't even need to look to know the impossibly loud escort was right.

"Just a stain." Bingo.

With a frustrated sigh, Effie simply closed his jacket to cover it up and pushed them towards the stage.

"Smiles everyone!"

"Time to see who's off to the slaughter." Johanna announced crudely.

...

Johanna watched the crowd of children filling into rows. The oldest in the front, the youngest in the back.

The whole event reminded the dark-haired girl of when she was reaped. It wasn't a joyous affair, like the battle ready districts of 1, 2 and 4 make it out to be. Or a death sentence like in 10, 11 and 12. It was neutral, it was only when she won that made it a time of celebration.

As Mayor Undersee began his speech about the history of the Hunger Games, Haymitch took the liberty to ask Johanna about her own tributes back home.

"Any potential winners from the good ol' lumber district."

She thought back, remembering District 7's Reaping Day a few days earlier: the groups of children shoved into rows, the mayor recounting the Games' history, the district escort, Saffira walking onto the stage and pulling out two names from the reaping bowls.

Two kids, teenagers, similar in age named Gryffin and Kara. Both, from what Johanna could remember lived comfortable lives. They knew their way around an ax, so it was possible that she could have a winner on her hands. Then again, who knows? She has been wrong before.

"Possibly. I'm sure Blight can handle them while I'm gone." She said eyeing the peacekeepers on either side of the stage. Haymitch snorts at the mention of the other mentor's name.

When Johanna tuned back towards the proceedings, Effie was already drawing names. "Primrose Everdeen," Effie called out. Johanna heard the murmurs and watched as a little girl emerged from the crowd, frightened beyond belief. Cautiously she stepped forward, until the commotion a few rows behind stilled her movements.

"I volunteer!" the voice shouted in a strangled cry. The peacekeepers kept her at bay. Johanna squinted to try and see her from the stage. Instead she brought her eyes up to the camera televisions.
"I volunteer as tribute!"

Johanna raised her brow in disbelief. She even looked over to Haymitch to see his reaction at this sudden declaration of suicide, only to find him asleep in his chair. Effie on the other hand, just like everyone else, were stunned. Katniss stepped up to the microphone, introducing herself. "Katniss Everdeen."

Chapter End Notes

Character ages have been slightly changed to keep the kids in the same age circle. Katniss (17-18), Peeta (18), Johanna (19), Finnick (21), and others that will be introduced later. In addition, this story is completely AU with some canon divergence.
"All the world is made of faith, and trust, and pixie dust."

— J.M. Barrie, "Peter Pan"

Soon after the initial shock that stunned the district was over, Effie ushered the children into the Justice Building, pulling Katniss and the boy whom she knew as Peeta Mellark, into separate rooms where they could say good-bye to their families. She remembers the faint smell of lavender on her mother as she hugged her tightly, and consoling Prim to stop crying that she would see them again. It felt like an eternity had passed since the doors opened and Prim and her mother said their goodbyes once more and left.

Effie stayed with Katniss, a reassuring manicured hand on her shoulder, as they waited for Peeta's family to leave. Down the hall, the brunette spotted Haymitch and a dark-haired girl talking. She couldn't make out what they were saying; the corridor was eerily quiet, save for the endless sobbing in Peeta's room.

"What the fuck, Haymitch? Is that shit straight from the medicine cabinet?" The girl practically yelled. Earning a laugh from the older man, as she handed him his flask. He shook his head, taking a casual sip from it.

As the pair continued talking, the door to Peeta's room opened and Mr. Mellark emerged, already on his way out with an older boy who looked just like her forsaken son. Katniss recognized him as the Mellark's oldest, favorite son. From the cracks of the door, she can see his mother weeping with her arm around him. From what Katniss can remember, Peeta was never given much attention to by his parents but there she was, sobbing like he's the only child she ever had and it's the end of days. But for Peeta, it probably is.

As they ate, the brunette watched the other girl, eyes almost squinting trying to place where she's seen her before. She hopes the staring goes unnoticed and it seems like it has, it hits her. She was the victor of the 71st Hunger Games, Katniss remembers seeing her name everywhere and how
her shocking victory stunned the nation. But why was she here? With them.

But when her eyes lingered a bit longer than necessary she is greeted with a smirk from the older girl and looks away. Embarrassed.

When she turns back her eye catches Effie's, and the woman gives her a smile. "Well you two have lovely table manners. Last year the two kids ate like a couple of savages. Completely put me off my appetite."

Katniss can feel her blood rise at the insult. Those two kids were from the Seam as she was. They probably hadn't seen a decent meal in their entire lives. But she keeps her composure and begins eating with her hands. As her eye catches Johanna's, the older girl smirks. This time the feeling is a lot more welcoming.

Soon, Haymitch joins them and Johanna's eyes go wide. He looked as if a train and run him over. "Did I miss supper?" he slurred, then promptly trips over a chair. Falling to the floor.

Effie grunts her displeasure and tosses her napkin on the table. Absolutely disgusted. The rest were laughing at his misfortune, but Effie is beyond pissed. "It isn't funny," she demands in a loud voice. "This man is the only lifeline you two have in that arena. The odds will not be in your favor if he continues to act like a miscreant for the entire trip. Your lives are in his very hands." With that, she storms off, leaving Katniss, Peeta and Johanna at the table.

Peeta's face grows somber as does Katniss'. Johanna sighs, getting up from the table. "Hey, Muffin Man, help me with this?" Johanna calls to Peeta, lifting up Haymitch's arms. The man groans but doesn't really come back to them. Peeta helps drag the Victor back into his room.

"Muffin Man, that's a funny name!" The older man laughs, he hiccups and a spittle of vomit dribbles out of his mouth.

"Uh, I'll clean him up," Peeta offers, looking sympathetically to the drunken man slouched on the floor like a sloth.

"Get some sleep," Johanna suggests. "I'll call the Capitol people. Let them deal with him." Peeta nods his consent, slowly taking off for his room.

"Goodnight." He says on his way out.

"Night, Muffin Man." Replied Johanna before she kicks Haymitch in the leg, getting an angry swipe with his large arm. Johanna dodges him quickly, shaking her head. "You're a fucking mess."

Katniss is still sitting there, staring down at her food. She doesn't look up when Johanna returns. This wasn't at all how the tribute imagined the day would have gone. Then again, she didn't expect much after being reaped.

"Hey." She looks up to see that Johanna had returned to her seat. "You should get to bed. Get some sleep." She takes a sip from her mug of coffee and Katniss begins to expect that there's actually alcohol in it. She doesn't know why, but she does.

"I don't think I'll be able to." The brunette said honestly.

"That's true," Johanna admits with a shrug. Katniss' brow is raised. "But it's good to pretend."

They sit in silence for a few more minutes, Katniss can feel the older girl watching her as she broke apart her sweet bread. For a moment, she contemplates as to whether or not this would be
the right time to ask why Johanna was here in District Twelve than her own. Going for broke she does. "Why are you here?"

Katniss lifts her eyes, staring at the older girl. Who, in turn, remains indifferent. "Drinking and reading the newspaper, ooh… Fifty percent off axes—that's a steal!"

"No, what I meant was why are you in Twelve. Shouldn't you be in Seven?"

"I will be soon. But right now, why don't you stay more focused on going home to your sister than what doesn't concern you."

The remark was like a jab to the side. It hurt to possibly think of Prim and what she and her mother were doing at this very moment. She looks to Johanna to see if there was any malice in her eyes, was it her intention to take a crack at her? But the older girl's look of indifference makes her unreadable. It annoyed with he younger girl.

Nevertheless if she was ever planning on going back home she had to control herself. "Use that to your advantage. The folks in the Capitol are suckers for a heart-warming story."

Johanna walks over to Haymitch, who was still lying on the floor snoring. She reaches into the lapels of his jacket and pulls out his flask. Taking sip from it herself.

"Drink?" The raven-haired girl offered tilting the flask towards Katniss' direction.

She shakes her head. Politely declining. "I'm only seventeen."

This earns a small chuckle from the older girl. What? Did she not know that underage drinking is against the law? Or maybe she did, just didn't think they mattered to her.

"Old enough to kill, old enough to drink and fuck." Johanna said bluntly, clearly unabashed in her vulgarity.

Katniss can feel her face growing red and it gets even worse when she sees, Johanna's self satisfied smirk plastered on her face. It infuriates her as much as it makes her uneasy. Her stomach flips and she doesn't know why. The older girl walks over and places a hand on her shoulder.

It isn't like the reassuring hand Effie had given her earlier. This one was different, it felt… Warm. And the longer her hand lingered on the bare skin of the younger girl's shoulder, the tighter her stomach became. Her breath hitches as she's about to say something but Johanna cuts her off.

"You'll do fine, you're not completely hopeless."

"Thanks," she replies, unconvincingly. Katniss isn't exactly sure what to make of the raven-haired girl. She remembered she watched Johanna win her Games. She had gone in as a weakling, a laughably inept, idiot from District Seven. But after most of the other tributes had cleared themselves out, Johanna emerged as a vicious killer, slaughtering all the remaining tributes with makeshift throwing axes she fashioned out of unwanted weapons in the Game. Which made Katniss wonder if she was deceiving her as she did the rest of Panem.

Who's to say she wasn't here to pull one over on them?

Johanna leaves and Katniss is left with her thoughts. She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding, staring at the cup that had a small smear of crimson red lipstick on the rim. Johanna certainly was an interesting figure. Katniss wasn't going to deny that, she certainly had this way about her that kept your eyes trained on her. Nevertheless, it wouldn't matter in the end what she felt or thought about the older because within a few days, she'd probably be dead.
In this chapter I wanted to get into Katniss' head and see things from her perspective. It'll become a reoccurring theme where a chapter will focus solely on the needs, wants and views of one character in particular. Like Game of Thrones. You can expect to see more Johanna and Katniss chapters and even some centering around Peeta, Finnick, etc. It isn't set in stone as to who will have their time in the limelight but I'm experimenting.
"I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

— Woody Allen

The train had stopped and by the slowly encroaching sound of people bustling about, Katniss could only guess that they had finally arrived.

Curled up in a ball on her bed, Katniss stares out the window. She can already see mentors and tributes alike walking around and taking in the new sights. Some were more eager than others. Which was expected when the Capitol is nothing more than an endless sea of metal, glass, and artificial light. The rising sun was lost behind the hundreds of skyscrapers that clouded her vision.

It was nauseating.

She remembers heading into the forests around Twelve before sunrise with nothing more than a quiver of cheap iron bows strapped to her back and a firm grasp on her bow beside her hip; the thrill of the hunt coursing through her blood just by entering the woods.

There was always a risk of being caught by the roaming band of peacekeepers who patrolled the area. Poaching was a grave offense and if caught, it would result in said offender being punished.

A cringe worthy flogging down in the town square in front of everyone. The whole act was a gruesome message to anyone who dared to think even think about hunting. It was a haunting thought that lingered in the back of her head, but the need to feed her family kept them at bay. Especially with the occasional jokes said by her best friend, Gale as he would help skin her prey.

On particularly unsettling nights, those that revolved around an argument between herself and her mother, usually the topic of dismay was Katniss' need to be out in the wild, she would venture out into the deepest parts of the forest and find relief at the nearby stream.

Oh how free she felt sitting by the riverbed, skipping rocks across that crystal blue surface and getting lost underneath the cool water whenever she went out for a midnight swim.

There was no poverty, no Hunger Games, nothing but absolute freedom out there. It was exhilarating.

She smiles at the memory, a comforting feeling. But it is dashed away when Effie Trinket comes barging through the door.

"Rise and shine!" The overzealous escort calls into Katniss' room.

Effie ignores the younger girl's state of obvious distress and begins rifling through her closet space. Katniss figures the pale woman didn't acknowledge the girl's lack of sleep because she couldn't provide the necessary words of comfort. And rightfully so. How can you tell someone everything will be alright when they were destined for death?

"Come on now, get showered while I find you something to wear." She said pulling out a pair of
pants and a shirt she was trying to match with.

Katniss opens her mouth and was about to protest until Effie went off chattering on about styles of clothing, on what was in — or "fetch" as she would say — and out. Despite not wanting to stay and hear the escort's love of high end fashion, it reminds her of Prim and the way the little girl would fawn over Madge Undersee and those Capitol Couture catalogs she would lug around.

Standing underneath the marble shower head, and its many settings, Katniss' body goes limp. Letting the warm water run all over her; savoring it as if this was the last time she would ever take a clean shower.

Once she is out of the bathroom she sees that Effie is no longer in her room but instead left an outfit of her liking instead. And a mess of clothes all over her bed.

*Great. Something to look forward to later.*

When she arrives at the breakfast table, she sees Peeta eating his breakfast as he watches, amused at Effie scolding their mentor who could care less as he sits with half-lidded eyes and a barely empty glass of what looked to be scotch. She sits beside Peeta and fills her plate with eggs and a frosted sweet roll and begins to listen as the blonde-haired boy fills her in.

"We're going over plans for when we reach the Capitol. You know, like things for the Tribute Parade and stuff." He said cutting a piece of his sausage with a knife and fork.

"That's right!" Effie exclaims excitedly who then proceeds to slap the back of Haymitch's head who was falling asleep.

"Ow! What the fuck that for?" He groaned.

"It's bad enough I have to deal with you and constant your drinking, but could you at least put some effort in paying attention?" She practically screeches at him. He only responds with a hearty snore and some drool.

The older tribute burps and blows a rancid puff of air towards Effie who recoils at the stench.

"Christ! Do you wash your mouth with beer?"

"Whiskey." He says with his chest puffed out. Drunken pride. "It helps with my hangovers."

The horrified escort makes a face and shakes her head while Peeta chuckles. *They fight like a married couple,* Katniss thinks before they finally begin to discuss their plans.

"The tribute parade is tomorrow so I've taken the liberty to call up a dear friend. Cinna. The man is an absolute genius!" The escort says almost dreamily.

The brunette hears a grunt from Haymitch's supposed sleeping form, and for a fleeting seconds, wonders if there is some jealousy brewing. She squints at the clock on the wall to the far left and sees that it's early, *way too early,* in the morning to be drinking. How is it possible for him to be this wasted and still be able to sit at the table. Effie grabs the collar of his shirt and yanks it up to keep him from falling over. From the stern look on her face it is clear that she is no mood for foolishness.

*Same here.*
This brings her thoughts to the other resident drinker they had come to know and question: Johanna Mason.

For the past couple of days the dark-haired victor was nowhere to be seen. After their little stunt during breakfast Johanna had seemingly disappeared; only Haymitch knew what was going and the man was always too far gone to explain anything coherently.

She didn't even see her when the train took a detour and stopped at District Four to pick up the tributes and their mentor, whose sendoff was such a grand affair beyond anything the young girl had ever seen. Nevertheless, Katniss swore she would have attended.

Rumor has it she was sleeping with Finnick Odair, the handsome former victor from Four.

For whatever reason, that didn't sit well with Katniss. First, it seemed unlike Johanna to be some gorgeous guy's playmate. She figured the older girl preferred a suitor who was more refined and had this certain… How should she put it? — A sort of edge to him.

Not some egotistical blowhard whose head was the size of Panem itself.

No, she imagined Finnick was more like Johanna's Gale. Her confidant. Her best friend. It alleviated a weird feeling in Katniss' stomach to decide that Johanna and Finnick were definitely not sleeping together.

There's a nudge and it snaps Katniss out of her thoughts and into soft blue eyes. Peeta was staring at her with a concerned look on his face, and she gives him a slight smile. The boy was like a puppy, innocent and curious.

"Are you okay?" He asks gingerly.

"I'm fine. Just thinking." Peeta only smiles at this and it's reassuring.

Turning away from him, by a sudden surprised yelp coming from their escorts higher than normal voice. Katniss can't quite see but by the surprised yelp and two steps forward Effie takes, it becomes clear he's pinched her bottom. She hits him hard on the arm with her clipboard, muttering a colorful array of expletives.

"So Haymitch," Katniss interjects, trying to bring back everyone's focus. "Aren't you supposed to give us advice?"

It was almost a week since her reaping, and while every part of the Games was as important as the next, none more so than the day she would have to step foot inside the arena. Where she would truly fight for her life.

"Okay, um, embrace the probability of your imminent death," the older male says pouring more alcohol into his glass. His unabashed nonchalance grated her nerves, as did Peeta's when she glances over and sees an irritable look on his face. "And know, that in your heart of hearts there's nothing I can do to save you."

Katniss stares at the man in pure contempt. "Why are you here then?"

Haymitch shrugs his shoulders. Raising his glass. "For the refreshments."

"That's it? Nothing else?" Peeta asks in disbelief.

"Uh," Haymitch replies, lifting his amber colored drink in the air. "Stay alive." He laughs uncontrollably at his joke, but the others on the train sit in silence. Effie leans back in her chair,
crossing her arms over her chest. Shaking her head.

Katniss feels another presence in the room, eyes burning into her as the tension in the air thickened.

"That's not funny we can die out there," Peeta says angrily and it's a surprise to all when he's usually be able to reserve it.

"Not my problem. Maybe you're just unlucky."

Suddenly Peeta lashes his arm out, smacking the older man's glass onto the floor, shattering it. Haymitch reaches back and clocks Peeta in the jaw, sending him to the floor. Katniss instinctively picks up her knife, stabbing it in between Haymitch and his other drink. Out of blind anger and retaliation he grabs his own knife, the young hunter was ready to do what she needed to until a black wave of hair rushes past her.

It takes a second for her to realize that Johanna Mason had pinned Haymitch to the wall by his throat. She's surprised by the amount of strength the older girl possess with the way she's able to hold the drunken idiot a couple of inches of the floor. Knowing well how much bigger he was than her.

Still on a rush of adrenaline the Haymitch grips his knife tighter but it doesn't go unnoticed and he's suddenly gasping for air. The knife clatters to the floor, the only sound to be heard in the compartment.

Katniss watches interestedly the quick exchange between them, Haymitch nods to whatever was said and Johanna lets him go. She wonders what Johanna said to Haymitch that knocked him down a notch or two. She was also impressed with how quick and strong Johanna was. It made her stomach stir in a way she had never known before. Katniss reaches for a cooled cup of coffee that was left unattended during the skirmish and takes a long gulp to try and settle whatever feeling that was.

Peeta applies some ice to his lip. "Don't," Haymitch says as Johanna leaves with Finnick, who Katniss finally notices was standing by the entrance and wraps an arm around the dark-haired girl's shoulders. Maybe I was wrong? And the possibility of that causes her to narrows her eyes. Peeta furrows his brow in confusion and Haymitch gets up from the floor. "Let it look like you got roughed up with another Tribute."

"Fire?" Katniss asks, alarmed at what the stylist was getting to. Effie thought this man was a godsend and from what the prep team was currently sowing onto her she didn't see it. But Cinna smiles and nods. "You're going to set us on fire?"

"Not quite," Cinna replies enigmatically. "The illusion of fire. It will be absolutely amazing. Trust me."

When Katniss emerges from her dressing room, she is immediately met with awestruck looks from her team. The tight black jumpsuit hugs her physique, which is fit, if a little too thin. But the cape? Something about it shimmers a bit too much, too showy, and she catches Cinna's gaze and the man smiles like a madman.

Standing on the chariot, she is free to rake her gaze over the other tributes and their outfits. The tributes from District One look astonishing in their all white outfits that seem to shine like diamonds under the hot sun, strong and exceedingly powerful, those two were the ones she'd have
to watch out for. As is District Two.

The tributes from Four were impeccably dressed as well, with the male resembling a fisherman in a tailored suit and the female in an ocean blue ensemble. Even Finnick took to dressing up, even though his was nothing more than a net that covered his groin. Shaking her head at the ridiculousness of it all she turns away and finds District Seven. Johanna is leaning against their chariot silent as the other mentor, a large man with a nicely cut beard and styled hair, talk to their tributes.

Johanna catches her eyes and before Katniss could turn away out of embarrassment, the older girl smiles and winks. With a blush, she looks down at her boots self-consciously. Turning back, she sees Johanna and the other mentor step away from the chariot and it's just their tributes who are left to talk among themselves. There is a sinking feeling at the pit of her stomach and it tightens into knots as she stares at the tributes dressed as a lumberjack and tree.

In a matter of two weeks, she'd have to kill them and she doesn't know if she'll be able to.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the responses everyone! And Happy Holidays! Here's to another Katniss-centric chapter and I wanted to show more of Katniss thoughts and how she views everything before going back to Johanna or jumping onto someone else's. For those concerned, the story will be a slow burn for Katniss and Johanna's romance as well as the drama that will about to unfold very soon that will drive the story.
"The doors of heaven and hell are adjacent and identical."

— Nikos Kazantzakis, The Last Temptation of Christ

The Tribute Parade was a rounding success, with Twelve — mostly Katniss — stealing the show. Immediately garnering attention from the Career Districts and the Capitol as well as the rest of Panem.

Every flat screen television in the Tribute Center played reruns of the parade almost on an endless loop if it weren't for the occasional repeats of Caesar Flickerman's appearance on Fashion Police where he and his special guests were critiquing the tributes outfits and what their first impressions were. And Katniss was at the center of attention, still.

They were calling her the Girl on Fire. A moniker that had certainly stuck with all those flames billowing around her like a suit of armor. Everyone loved it.

Loved her.

This wasn't good.

The Assessment Tests hadn't even been scheduled and there was already talk of what the poor girl from the Seam was capable of. This increasing word of mouth popularity was making Katniss a prime target for the Careers.

It made Johanna wonder of just what exactly was Haymitch going to do. As far as sponsorships go, tributes from Twelve were among the unfavorable, 2nd to the drug dependent morphlings from Six. They were almost always left to scramble aimlessly during the games without support and that was only off the slim chance that they survived the initial bloodbath.

Johanna hadn't spoken to the girl in almost a week and yet, she had slowly begun to consume her every thought. Even when congratulating Gryffin and Kara on a job well done once word got in that there were several sponsors already lining up at their door after the parade, a certain doe-eyed brunette continuously crept into her thoughts. Clouding her focus.

It's bad enough the older girl let herself lose control and pin Haymitch against a wall, choking the life out of him. All because he threatened to attack her with a knife — a problem that wasn't hers.

She runs a hand through her hair, sighing.

Watching her tributes train at the weapon station didn't spark a light of hope in her as it should have. In fact it made her stomach twist into knots. Just the thought of Gryffin, who was now showing promise with a halberd, impaling Katniss' body made her sick.

And by all accounts it shouldn't. Instead there is supposed to be a sense of pride. But nothing could settle the uneasiness at the pit of her stomach, even as Finnick walked up to her with a toothy grin that had all the girls swooning over him.

"Why the long face Jo?" Asked Finnick in a barely audible whisper. He stands beside her with hands clasped together behind his back, surveying the room of training tributes and their mentors.
"I have a headache." She lies. Eyes locked onto Kara and her unpolished throwing knives technique.

The District Four native rolls his eyes. "I know what you're like when you have a headache, believe me I still have the scars but this, isn't it. Don't lie to me Jo."

"I'm not lying, I'm just not telling the truth." Twelve doesn't make an appearance until a few moments later when Johanna spies Katniss, Peeta and Haymitch heading for the fire starting station.

They aren't alone. The little girl from Eleven is there, smiling talking about the different kinds of plants. Peeta doesn't find much use for the plants after a while and moves on to the knot station. Katniss stays with the girl.

Good. The dark-haired victor thinks, hoping the tall thicket of artificial grass would provide a sort of barrier to keep Johanna from constantly sneaking glances.

It helps. But only to a certain degree, because on the off chance that she decides to steal a glance for just one last time, their eyes are locked onto one another. Those gray eyes partially shadowed behind several tall blades of grass that seem to ignite under her gaze.

A shiver runs down Johanna's spine and it goes unnoticed by Finnick.

"Cold?" He asked with the makings of a smirk forming on his lips.

"Very." She practically spits at him, venomous but completely harmless.

Kara throws her knife at the target and it misses the bullseye by only a couple of inches. It's an impressive feat, a tribute from a non-Career District with that kind of skill and precision, even though somewhat unrefined, was going to be a force to be reckoned with. Johanna looks over at the fire starting station and sees Katniss and the little girl chatting as if they had known each other for all their lives. What can you do? She wonders, more to herself than the girl from the Seam who was probably rehashing memories of Prim through the little runt.

At this rate, what skills did Twelve even possess? On the other side of the room by the knot station, Peeta is talking amicably with Tributes from Three and Eight. Hell, even the ones from Four found the baker's son enthralling.

"It seems as though your tributes find the Muffin Man, charming." Johanna says offhandedly.

Finnick turns to face the tributes by the knot station and raises his brow. "Apparently. Charisma is a viable weapon, when used right."

Johanna scoffs. "Thankfully not everyone is falling for it."

"Is that jealousy I hear in your voice?" A smile breaks across Finnick's face, his ocean blue eyes twinkling in delight.

"You know, you're tributes don't exactly look like they could win the Games this year." A distraction disguised as an observation; the kids from Four were younger than her own and despite coming from a Career District they weren't exactly capable of holding their own. Lean bodies made for swimming, they looked as if they were born and raised in the water.

So was Finnick, but he knew how to use a net and a trident, for both offense and defense. Maybe he knows. He never was "proactive" as a mentor; possibly viewing it as an occasional thing he
could escape to once a year when Snow's jobs were a bit more demanding than usual. It was actually a surprise to see him mentoring all by himself.

She expected him to at least be accompanied by Mags (Annie was definitely out of the question) but from what he had told her the poor woman had fallen ill.

Being as old as the Games themselves would do that to a person.

"Probably, I wouldn't put it past them to fail. But who knows, miracles have happened before." He says lightly, reminding her of that one tribute who won and only scored a 3 in his tests some time ago.

"I don't believe in miracles." She says in a monotone voice. Eyes following Katniss and Haymitch as they step off the training platform and stand against the wall. Conversing, in what appeared to be brief whispers.

Finnick follows her train of sight and leans closer into her. "Doesn't seem like the Girl on Fire plans on putting her combat skills to use."

At this Johanna nonchalantly shrugs her shoulders. "Maybe she doesn't have any? Time to weed out the weak."

The District Four native snorts at her sudden change in attitude. "You know, I'm all for lying and putting up a front to everyone else but not me. I don't like it when you lie to me, I won't stand for it."

"Then sit. Or leave. It's your choice." The dark-haired mentor sneers. What the fuck makes you so superior all of a sudden?

"I know that. But you're my best friend Jo."

The auburn-haired victor stares at her, ocean blue eyes searching for an answer. Already used to the closing walls Johanna had the tendency to surround herself with; years of friendship allowed for special privileges. In this case, being able to coax out the truth and soothe the volatile girl without getting punched in the gut. But it was always a game of chance with her. Even as he stood in such close proximity to her while in such a state, he still risked getting a broken nose. And it wouldn't be the first time either.

And yet, throughout it all, he had always stayed by her side. At one point they had been inseparable and for this she loved him.

"Don't you trust me?"

And hated him.

Johanna doesn't respond, deciding to stay silent and with this he gets his answer and she immediately regrets her decision. Not wanting to stick around him anymore she motions for Gryffin and Kara to follow her to the wrestling station.

…

Once the day started winding down, everyone retired to their rooms and Johanna took off towards the roof. Receiving disparaging looks from Blight, and it made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.
Nevertheless, she brushes it aside and heads up towards the terrace. Clutching her leather jacket closer to her in protection from the chilly air. Damn it's cold. Her teeth almost chattering as the Capitol skyline comes into view.

Surprisingly, Katniss Everdeen is already there. Seated on one of the benches positioned around the lavish water fountain made of marble and the plots of gorgeous exotic flowers.

"What are you doing up here?" She asks.

"Peeta, I told you to leave me alone." The younger girl says in an exasperated tone.

"Good thing I'm not him, brainless."

Looking up, Katniss meets Johanna's eyes and a feeling of warmth washes over the former victor. Taking a seat on the far end of the bench and pulls out Haymitch's flask from within her jacket. She takes a sip, the taste of wine opening up her taste buds after having emptied out all of the scotch that was in it.

In the corner of her eyes she sees Katniss staring at her, shyly. Reading the brunette's mind, Johanna hands her the flask. The young tributes takes it with thanks, gratefully.

"Stepping up, huh? Finally ready to drink like the adults?" Her tone amused and superior, evidently irks Katniss.

There's a hardened look in the girl from the Seam's gray eyes, a silent anger that simmers. But they both know that she isn't mad at Johanna so it dies down to barely a flame flickering in the wind.

"What's on your mind Girl on Fire?"

She crosses her arms over her chest. "I think this whole idea is ridiculous. We have to kill each other. Why are we pretending to be friends?"

Johanna shrugs. "Beats me. Most people get the impression that working as a team would look good for sponsors." It's not a complete lie, but Johanna feels dishonest.

"Why if I'll just end up having to kill him or him kill me?"

"It's the inevitable betrayal that hooks them in. The sponsors only feed the money to speed up the part where one teammate stabs the other in the back." It was the truth, the Capitol was filled a bunch of sadistic fucks.

"Personally? I think you should rely more on your combat and survival skills. Parades, interviews and assessment tests won't mean a thing once you're in the arena. Sponsors can help you, get you things you may need like food and medicine — but nothing will help when staring death in the face." There's a faraway look in Johanna's dark eyes. The feeling of adrenaline rushing through her veins as she felt death's cold embrace every time she managed to slip away and every time she drove her axe into someone's head or throat.

Katniss nods. But she bites her lower lip, gnawing at the skin there and Johanna can't help but be drawn to them. There's something on her mind and she's unsure how to say it. Or if she even should.

"Say it Twelve. We're both friends here." It's a lighthearted tone that makes Katniss smile the first real, open smile she's had in a while.

The young hunter shifts in her position, turning her body halfway to fully face Johanna.
"Why are you being so nice to me?" It's an insane question.

"Because I like you." The words come out faster than her mind can process and it's only a second later that Johanna realizes what she said. A blush creeps across Katniss' cheeks.

"I'm not like the others. What you did for your sister, is something I don't think anyone else would have done. It's admirable."

The thought of Prim makes Katniss' eyes brim with tears. She looks away, embarrassed at her show of emotion. She should be passed this by now, accept the possibility that she wouldn't go home. But she's not. The fresh pain of missing her family still stings her heart. "I'm sorry."

"What for? For missing your family? Shit, Katniss, everyone misses their family. Hell I miss my Dad and little brother even if their sole purpose in life is to drive me up the wall. I know this sounds hypocritical coming from me, because I'm an unemotional bitch, but showing emotion can be a good thing."

Katniss raises her eyebrow, rubbing her face with the back of her hand. "That does sound awfully hypocritical." Johanna smirks. "But I don't think you're an unemotional bitch. You're a survivor."

"Like you," Johanna answers quickly, a genuine smile gracing her face. Replacing the usual scowl.

"Not like me," Katniss replies, shaking her head. "I'm a nobody."

"For now." Johanna looks up watching the night sky and its stars. "When you go into your private session, don't let them ignore you. You'll be last, but make sure to be the one they remember."

The obvious question hanging over their heads was suffocating. Despite the easy going atmosphere between them it. Was something that had to be said.

"I'm not trying to trick you or psyche you out or anything. I'm rooting for you just as much as for my own tributes. I know a winner when I see one." The older girl says taking off her jacket and wrapping it around Katniss' shoulders.

You can trust me.

A moment of silence passes between them. She was a lot closer than before and Johanna didn't remember seeing her move towards her if she herself had moved. But if there was one thing that made sense in some nonsensical way, for in that moment, she wanted to was to kiss her.

She wanted to truly, sincerely kiss her — and as she leans forward, a pang of guilt centers in her chest. She's backing out. But Katniss continues on and presses her lips to Johanna's cheek.

It's a friendly kiss, soft and warm, the more modern version of a pinky-swear.

It's not a kiss on the lips. It isn't erotic, barely even romantic - but Katniss trusts her and now Johanna has proof, blazing beneath her blush, the ghost of a kiss haunting her cheek.

…

Coming back down from the terrace, still reeling over the feeling of having felt Katniss' lips against her, she practically floats to her room door. It's late a night and the halls are empty, and yet a voice in the darkness stills her movement.

"What is your relationship with Twelve?"
The question catches Johanna off guard, and immediately pretends. She knows who it is.

Blight.

"Well, Effie is like that aunt who never shuts up but has her moments, and Haymitch is the drunk uncle who—"

"I meant the girl! Because we both know you sure as hell could care less about the boy." The barely restrained anger in his voice is jarring and Johanna stares at him in shock.

Blight was never one to get heated. The man had the patience of a saint.

"What's it to you?" She asks crossing her arms over her chest. "Last time I checked my business was my own. Not yours."

"You're right. But when it can put our tributes endanger than it becomes my business." The look in his eyes is unsettling. That of a protective father who lost his own and isn't ready face another heartache.

A father who could possibly unhinge at any moment.

Before her reaping, Johanna didn't know much about Blight other than the fact that he was a former victor and was very private. He was extremely guarded and never let anyone in. It was only until after she won her Games that she found out what made him put up so many walls.

What makes all victors do.

He had a wife once. Treasured her more than life itself. Even built the perfect home for their soon to be family with his own two hands. His wife Lily had gotten pregnant and on a bright summer's morning gave birth to a baby girl of only two pounds. A small, fragile little thing who giggled constantly.

The dark-haired man was the happiest he had ever been. And yet, by some cruel twist of fate, it all changes when he returns home from work one evening. The house he had built from dirt with calloused hands turned into a hill of ashes. Set ablaze by peacekeepers under Snow's orders. There was no proof, and having the local authorities dismiss any claims of foul play the man couldn't do much else except isolate himself from the rest of the world.

What he did know was that he, and he alone could shelter the guilt weighing on his shoulders. He had defied Snow once as a child, fresh off his victory and refused to take part in the maniac's games any longer.

A proud man, loyal to none at the time but his own self-respect refused to work as one of Snow's "agents".

He remembered Snow having told him that he would pay for his disobedience. And in a fury of flames, a decade later, he had come to make due on his promise.

Johanna never had to bear the loss of losing a loved one. But she understood why Blight was so protective of her and all their tributes until they were lead away to be slaughtered.

"Helping this girl will make you a traitor. For Christ's sake Johanna you are going to end up throwing your life away."

But it's not your life to protect.
"I get it, Blight. I do." She says softly. "But you don't get to decide what I do with my life."

"I'm just looking out for you. Betraying your tributes for the favor of another — that can be swept under the rug. It's happened before. But if you get too close, too attached... What do you think is going to happen when she doesn't make it out alive?" The words ring in her ears like requiem bells.

"We'll see when it happens."

Chapter End Notes

Another Johanna-centric chapter and I feel like this is much more fitting because we are finally reaching the overarching drama in the story. The addition of Fashion Police was because I felt as though the Capitol was too monotonous and for them to just soley revolve their entire lives around the Hunger Games was just absurd to me. Here, the Games are like the Super Bowl or World Series.

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