Within These Walls

by ryrous

Summary

Trust gets tricky when everyone's a liar. Post Victory Tour, Katniss and Peeta are shipped off to the Capitol for what is supposed to be a five-day Victor's panel, but things take a sinister turn when someone ends up dead, and it looks like Katniss could be next. Canon-divergent AU with eventual Everlark.
Storm Incoming

The arrow sliced through the air, missing its target by a foot. Startled, a deer scrambled away, and the girl in the bushes scowled.

“You’re getting soft,” whispered the boy next to her.

“I am not,” she said, getting up to retrieve her arrow. The deer was long gone.

As she walked across the forest floor, the girl berated herself for losing the deer. She would not find another before the storm hit; the air was already heavy and smelling of rain.

The girl tried to pull her arrow free from a bramble, but it was deep within the bush and she kept cutting her hands. She pretended not to see the amusement in her companion’s face.

“A little help here, Gale?” she said, giving up on the bramble and lifting her hands to her face to inspect the damage.

The boy stood and gave a stretch before walking across the moss to help her. He chuckled at her.

“I think you should just let this one go, Katniss,” he said, looking at the bush.

“That’s the third arrow I’ve lost this week, though,” said the girl. “I don’t want to keep letting them go.”

“You could always try hitting something,” Gale said.

He was completely unmoved by her glare.

“I think it’s the string. It’s old,” she said. “We should probably head back anyway, it’s going to rain soon.

“Alright.”

Without another word, Katniss and Gale began to make their way back to the District. She ignored him as they walked, their footsteps silent on the soft forest floor. He’d been trying to get on her nerves all day. It didn’t help that he’d shot a huge, fat turkey.

“So are we going to have time to come out here again before you go?” asked Gale, hoisting the turkey over his shoulder.

“I doubt it,” Katniss said.

“When do you leave again?”

“Three days,” she said. “I’m pretty sure, at least.”

Gale nodded slowly.

“What,” she said, rolling her eyes.

For a while he didn’t respond and they continued in silence. She’d twice forgotten the whole thing when he responded.
“You’re always there,” he said. “You’re barely here anymore. That’s why you—“ he broke off.

“That’s why I what?”

“You’re just going to get mad.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“That’s why your aim is such shit lately,” he said.

“That’s why your aim is such shit lately,” she said, her temper flaring. “Barely any time at all.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The trees thinned and the slope steepened sharply. They were approaching the edge of the forest now. Heavy breathing provided an excuse for Katniss not to answer.

At the top of the hill, Katniss slipped her bow into its hiding spot at the base of an old tree, thinking of the time the forest had been her escape. She glanced at Gale and wondered if her aim was the only thing suffering.

Gale was offended by her engagement. A week earlier, Katniss had repeated to him a joke Peeta had told her. Gale had not laughed, and then he’d claimed to be feeling under the weather and gone home early. He was unwilling to accept what she’d told him: that she and Peeta were friends who’d made a choice for safety alone. Still, he seemed to think Peeta had won something.

After double-checking that her bow was not visible, Katniss bent close to the fence that marked the border of District 12. It was humming and she let out a groan.

“It’s electrified today,” she said, turning to look at Gale a few feet behind her. He nodded and headed in the direction of the tree they used on these occasions.

Gale scaled the tree and landed elegantly on the other side of the fence. Katniss rubbed her hands on her pants before attempting. Though she’d learned, with practice, how to get down safely, she still sometimes fell gracelessly to the ground. The first time, she’d even broken her ankle.

Katniss hung from the branch and dropped. Though she landed on her feet, her momentum shot her a bit forward and she barreled into Gale, knocking him down. He laughed, and after a moment Katniss joined him.

Laughing, that was more like before.

They recovered, stood, and brushed themselves off. Katniss could feel Gale’s eyes on her.

“Are we still going to do this once you’re married?” he asked.

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” she said lightly, turning away from him.

“It’s not like you need the money anymore,” he said quietly.

“That’s not why I hunt.”

They set off across the meadow, and Katniss kept her gaze forward.

“I hunt because I like hunting,” she said. She doubted that was what he had wanted her to say, but steering him clear of certain subjects required her to play dumb.
“Any other reasons?” he asked a moment later, as she’d expected. She walked a little faster so he’d fall behind her. “Say it. Just say it.”

“Stop, Gale,” she said.

“Fine,” Gale said with a sigh. “Never mind.”

They were quiet and Katniss continued walking ahead of him. She noted absently that the pollen smell would be gone once the rain came. It was a shame; she actually liked that smell, and she’d never had allergies.

“Look,” she said, turning around. “I hunt because of you, okay?”

Gale looked at her as though expecting more, but nothing else came. It was never enough, what she gave him. He sighed.

“All right. Okay. I’ll see you later then,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“Home,” he said, looking confused. He pointed at a fork in the path ahead of them, one she hadn’t noticed. “The Seam is that way. To the right.”

In the old days, of course, they’d walked the whole way together, when she’d been poor and lived in the Seam too. It had been a five-minute walk to the Hawthornes’ then. She missed having them as neighbors. Nowadays, though her house was much larger, there were only two occupied houses in the vicinity; Haymitch occupied one by himself, and Peeta and his family the other. Peeta was the only one of the Mellarks she’d ever really spoken to.

“Oh, right,” said Katniss.

Before he could get too far away from her, she threw her arms around Gale and hugged him. He hugged her back, tightly, before slipping away.

She turned and started down the path towards Victor’s Village with no bow, no game, and no Gale. Very different from the old days. A second later, she remembered.

“Hey!” she called after him, hoping he would hear her. “Come to the train station with us!”

He flipped her the bird and she relaxed.

_Ding dong_

Katniss jerked awake. She peered groggily at the clock over the mantle, and swore. She’d sat down on the couch for five minutes and ended up falling asleep for an hour and a half. She’d been the one who was supposed to make dinner, too.

_Ding dong._

She jumped up and tried to smooth her mussed hair, unsuccessfully, before going to get the door. She opened it to see Peeta on the doorstep.

“Hi,” he said. He was carrying a box and a canvas bag “Oh, sorry, did I wake you?”
“No, you’re fine,” said Katniss, rubbing her eyes. “What’s up?”

“I’ve got your mom’s cake,” he said, holding up the box.

“Thanks,” she said, opening the door wide and motioning for him to come in. He stayed on the doorstep.

“Oh, but I gotta go right away. We’ve got a big order.”

“Oh, well--” she said, as he handed her the box. “Thanks for bringing it over.”

“These are for you too,” he said, and held out the canvas bag. She could clearly smell cheese and the yeasty smell of fresh baked bread.

“You really didn’t have to,” she said, though she was very glad he had. “Please let me pay you, at least.”

“I would be offended if you tried to pay me,” Peeta said easily, and patted her on the shoulder. She smiled awkwardly, not knowing what else to do.

A month and half ago they’d shared a bed (a literal description only) and now here they stood, vaguely uncomfortable even though they shouldn’t have been. They’d been getting along fine, and they knew each other well enough. They were friends.

Friends who were engaged to be married.

“Oh,” said Peeta. “This was lying on the doorstep for you.” He handed her a letter. “It’s private, I think.”

“I never get private mail,” Katniss said.

“It’s got your name on it,” he said, shrugging. “See you in a few days.” He went to walk down the steps.

“Yeah, see you,” Katniss said. She closed the door, embarrassed.

Peeta was in love with her. He would do anything for her, die for her even. His captivation with her was puzzling. Sure, he’d been the one who kept her sane during the Games and after, but the degree of his devotion had never made sense to her. Twelve years seemed a ridiculous amount of time to carry a torch.

Katniss placed the cake and cheesebuns on the table, paused, then took out one of the loaves. She took a bite and brought it and the letter with her to the couch.

She plopped back down on the couch and examined the letter. The paper was dingy and slightly yellowed, her name printed perfectly across the front of it. Flipping it over, she saw it was unmarked otherwise. The lack of a Capitol seal meant that it had to be from the Districts.

She opened the envelope and removed a folded piece of paper.

So this is how it is:

You don’t know me, but I know you. I don’t care that you won the Games. Let there be no mistaking that I will kill you without blinking an eye.

This letter doesn’t exist. You tell nobody about it. Trust me, I’ll know. There’s a shitstorm coming,
and if you don’t tread carefully...well, let’s just say you’ll be sent back home in a coffin, or maybe I’ll go down the list of certain... other people first. I guess we’ll see.

Let the 75th annual Hunger Games begin.

Katniss ignored the prickling on the back of her neck as she grabbed for the envelope again. She looked all over it, but it was no use. There was no sign of who sent it.

You don’t me, but I know you.

Katniss jumped at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Her cheesebun fell to the floor.

“Was that Peeta I heard?” asked Prim’s voice.

“Oh. Yeah. He brought mom’s cake,” said Katniss, shoving the letter under her thigh. “It’s there on the table. How long have you been home, by the way?”

“I was home when you got back,” said Prim, coming down the stairs. She went straight to the table to inspect the cake.

“Why didn’t you wake me up then? I was supposed to make dinner tonight,” said Katniss.

“I thought I’d let you sleep. Ooh, purple frosting.”

“Mom’s going to be angry with me,” said Katniss.

“No it’s fine, I threw a stew together,” said Prim, waving her off. “I don’t mind, and I think it’s better if I make the food, anyway.”

Katniss opened her mouth to protest, but her sister was right. All serious previous attempts at food preparation had been disasters, and Katniss didn’t want to serve cheese and water crackers again. Prim grinned at her.

“What’s that paper you’re sitting on?” she asked. “And you shouldn’t leave bread on the floor. We’ll get ants.”

“It’s nothing,” said Katniss, scooping up the cheese bun. She looked at it and tried to decide whether she could eat it, or if she should wait until Prim left.

“Why are you hiding it then?” asked Prim.

“I’m not.”

“So what is it?”

“I told you,” said Katniss. “It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. It’s trash, that’s what it is.”

Prim crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes.

“It’s nothing,” said Katniss again. She held the letter out in front of her and ripped it up. Prim stared at her as she went to the fireplace and threw the shreds into it. Pausing a moment to light a match, Katniss set the letter ablaze, and a moment later it was no more.

She turned back to face her sister, who was studying her carefully, with pursed lips. Katniss thought vaguely that Prim was too young for the kind of adult worry she wore now.
“It’s fine. Just forget about it,” said Katniss. “Trust me.”

Prim studied Katniss’s face a long time.

“Okay,” she said finally.

The next day Katniss ran out onto the doorstep to catch the mailman. She tried to describe the letter and ask him if he knew where it came from, but got nothing useful. Not only could she not produce the letter she was talking about, but the mailman also said he delivered too many private letters to know much about any one in particular. He asked if she’d checked the return address and District number, and when Katniss told him there hadn’t been one, he simply shrugged and said he couldn’t help her.

The night before she was to leave, Katniss and Prim went to pack Katniss’s things.

“Is this all you’re taking?” said Prim. The suitcase was very small.

Katniss laughed. “I don’t really need anything.”

They were kneeling on the floor of Katniss’s room, which was originally a closet. The tiny, shabby old house she’d grown up in still had a hold on her. She’d felt uncomfortable and exposed in the large bedrooms, so she’d moved her things into the linen closet.

“Why pack a suitcase at all then?” asked Prim.

Buttercup stood next to the suitcase, pawing at the handle. He jumped into the case as Katniss tried to close it.

“I leave space so Peeta can bring back painting supplies from the Capitol. Get out of there!” Katniss said, picking up Buttercup. The cat hissed halfheartedly.

“He’s got a lot of paintings of you,” said Prim.

“You’ve seen them?”

“Peeta’s my friend too, you know. But yeah, he showed them to me. I think he was a little embarrassed.” Katniss looked away and closed the suitcase again, double and triple-checking the clasps. Buttercup glared at her. “What’s happening in the Capitol again?”

“We’re having a panel on the Quarter Quell,” said Katniss. “Whatever it ends up being.”

Prim frowned, and Buttercup forgot about Katniss and went to her immediately. He settled in her lap.

“Hey,” said Katniss, putting her hand on Prim’s shoulder. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I’m just going to miss you is all.”

Katniss hugged her sister tightly.

“I’ll miss you too,” she said. “But I’m only going to be gone five days.”

“Yeah...” said Prim with a sigh. She petted Buttercup and didn’t say anything for a moment. “We’re
never going to be rid of those Games, are we?”

Katniss sighed as well.

“I don’t think so, no.”
Katniss found herself at the train station the next morning in an exceedingly foul mood. Used to sleeping in now, she was puffy and pale-faced from waking up at seven A.M. Gale was likewise grouchy, but Prim was as bright-faced as ever.

Peeta's mother was apparently not as anal when it came to time-keeping as Katniss's. He was nowhere to be found.

"You've got about ten minutes now," said Prim. "Where's the train?" she looked up and down the platform but saw only the beat up, rusty Twelve trains.

"Don't worry about it," said Katniss with a yawn and a wave of her hand. "It won't be late, they follow their schedules exactly." Katniss amused herself with the thought of Effie running around squawking at the prospect of being late to pick up her Victors.

It struck Katniss suddenly that Prim had never gone with her to the train station before, as on every other occasion she'd been swept away in the town square. The station was, for now, mercifully devoid of Peacekeeper escorts.

"Oh yeah," said Prim. "I think I see——"

But she was cut off by a loud whoosh as the train materialized before them.

"They're very fast," Katniss said as Prim stared, gaping.

"Looks like Peeta's running late," grumbled Gale with a glance at his watch. Not a second after he'd said it, the baker's son appeared on the platform, carrying several bags.

"I'd say I got here at the perfect time," he said pleasantly.

He was certainly much more of a morning person than Katniss was; his blonde hair looked clean and combed and his face was bright, his blue eyes clear.

"Why do you have so much?" she asked him.

"Good morning to you too," he said, and let down some of the luggage. "I was supposed to be here a while ago, but I wanted to make sure Haymitch had everything together. It's a good thing I did, too."

Katniss peeked over Peeta's shoulder and saw Haymitch lying down on a bench, rubbing his eyes and looking very green.

"Have you carried Haymitch's things along with your own this whole way?" asked Prim, raising her eyebrows.

"Well, I mean I had to, didn't I?"

"Katniss! Peeta!" came a high-pitched voice from behind them. There was no need to turn to see who it was.

"Hello Effie," said Katniss, as a woman in a bright pink dress approached them with noticeable spring in her step.

"Oh, wonderful, wonderful! And we're all on time, perfect, oh hello dear." she'd spotted Prim.
"Yes yes, very good. And where is Haymitch?"

Peeta motioned to the bench behind them, and Effie pursed her lips in distaste.

"Well, I suppose it was too much to hope for three for three. Come Peeta, help me wake him up and get him on the train."

Effie trotted over to Haymitch, looking very much like a flamingo in a wig. Peeta followed her while Prim giggled.

"Oh, by the way, I brought this for you," said Gale suddenly. The *this* he was talking about was a bag he'd been carrying over his shoulder since he'd arrived at Katniss's house that morning.

He held it out and she took it, but looked at him in confusion.

"It's your bow," he said quietly, "I restrung it for you."

"Well, thanks," said Katniss awkwardly. She had actually already restrung it herself. "I won't be needing it though."

"Take it anyway," he said. "Use Capitol citizens for target practice or something."

From behind her, Katniss heard shrieks and puking noises followed by cursing. She handed the bag back to Gale.

"It's fine."

"Take it, Katniss," he said. "Just take the bow. Maybe you'll learn to hit something again."

She knew he was joking, but it was much too early for Katniss to take a joke good-naturedly.

"Fine," she conceded, gnashing her teeth. "If it's so important to you."

They walked over to Prim and Peeta. Effie joined them a moment later, looking perfectly distressed.

"Well at least he didn't get anything on me," she said. "Oh dear, we are a minute from departure!"

Katniss gave Prim a hug and Gale a sullen nod. She saw Gale frown as Prim hugged Peeta goodbye as well. Gale and Peeta then shook hands stiffly, and Katniss thought she saw each huff himself up slightly. Katniss met Prim's gaze and saw a sly smile on her face, but she looked away immediately so that she wouldn't blush.

"You'll look after her, make sure she doesn't do anything too stupid?" said Gale

"I can look after myself," said Katniss.

Peeta flashed a friendly smile. "That's what I was going to say."

"Well now," said Effie. "We really *must* get going now. On the train, both of you!"

She shoved Katniss and Peeta up off the platform and onto the train, the bow and Katniss's small suitcase in tow. Katniss went straight to the window. She waved and kept waving until the train roared to life and Gale and Prim's faces vanished in a blur.

"I hope you're not planning on being moody all day, Katniss," said Effie. "You don't want the other Victors to think you're a stick in the mud."
Katniss ignored her.

Peeta went to make sure Haymitch was cleaned up, while Effie prattled on about manners. A little while later Peeta returned, carrying a sketchpad.

"Hey Effie? It's fine that Haymitch is already going through the minibar, isn't it?"

"Well it's not ideal," said Effie, deflating a bit. "But as long as he's not dipping into the Glengoolie Blue I'm sure it's not worth trying to stop him."

"Uh," said Peeta. "Tall, brown bottle, blue label on the front?"

"Yes!" cried Effie, jumping up and bolting past Peeta. "Haymitch! That is very expensive!"

Peeta chuckled as the door slid shut behind Effie. He sat at the table and started drawing in the sketchpad. Katniss left the windowsill to sit across from him.

"Already he's starting?" she asked him.

"No, he's asleep," said Peeta, grinning. "I just thought I'd get her out of your hair. She might be awhile."

"Thanks for that," said Katniss, grinning back. She noticed he was looking between her and the sketchpad, and tried to sit still for him.

"Would you mind scooting to the left a little?" he asked, after a moment.

"Sure," said Katniss. "How do you want me to sit?"

Peeta looked confused and then embarrassed.

"Well, I'm actually drawing that flower behind you, so..."

"So it doesn't matter where I sit as long as I'm not in front of it," said Katniss, her cheeks flaming. She turned to look at the flower, if only to minimize her embarrassment.

"It's called Olvidia, I think," said Peeta. "It's supposed to be one of the plants unique to District Twelve, but I've only ever seen it in pictures."

"Weird," said Katniss. "My dad never mentioned it...It's pretty though."

And it was. One bloom in a planter on the windowsill, it was enormous and bright blue, with many layers of narrow petals that bent outwards at the top.

"What was in that letter, by the way?" Peeta said. "Anything good?"

Katniss turned back to him and shook her head. "It was a death threat, actually."

Peeta put down the pencil.

"What?"

"Yeah," she said. "Something about 'There's a shitstorm coming and you better watch it.'"

"And you're just telling me about this now?"

"I..." said Katniss. "It doesn't have to be that serious. I can look after myself."
Peeta raised his eyebrows, as if she were a small, silly child. She hated when he looked at her like that.

"Can I see the note?" he asked.

Katniss felt her cheeks flush again. "I, uh, burned it."

"You what?"

"Prim saw me with it!" said Katniss. "I didn't want her to see it and think it was a big deal."

"But what if it is a big deal?" said Peeta, rubbing his temples. "Do you remember exactly what it said, at least?"

Katniss tried to remember. She'd only read the letter once before her focus had switched to Prim. She could only really recall a hazy outline.

"No," she said. "But it doesn't matter, the gist was 'watch out and don't try to find me.' Like I said."

Peeta sat for a moment in deep thought.

"We should tell Haymitch, and see what he thinks," he said finally.

"What? No," said Katniss, getting a little annoyed now. "It's fine. He'll just yell at me about it, like you are."

"I'm not—" Peeta broke off. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm not yelling at you. It's just not generally good practice to ignore death threats."

"You're right," said Katniss, suddenly remembering. "Which is why we're not telling Haymitch. That was one of the conditions of the letter."

"Not telling Haymitch?"

"Not telling anyone!"

Peeta stared at her.

"But you just told me!" he said.

"Exactly, and that was clearly a mistake."

There was a long pause as Katniss glowered at him. She was vaguely aware that her argument was flawed, but she wouldn't show it.

"Fine. We won't tell him," said Peeta finally. "But we're going to keep an eye out this week, alright?"

The compartment door slid open and Effie appeared, looking a bit out of breath. Her hair was slightly lopsided.

"It's only five days," Katniss reminded Peeta.

"Effie," he said, looking at Katniss, "who is going to be at this thing?"

"Oh!" said Effie, plopping down into a chair at the head of the table, forgetting her distress in an instant. "Well, it's all the favorites really, who better to discuss the Quarter Quell than the very best
"Victors?"

"Like who?" said Peeta.

Effie thought for a moment, "Let's see, yes, well there's Cashmere and Gloss—the twins from District One—and then District Two is sending two Victors, though I can't remember which ones, Beetee from Three—quite strange, I barely remember him—Finnick Odair—" She practically fainted at the name. Katniss could see Peeta doing the math in his head, weighing every name Effie gave them. "And a second one from Four. Woof from Eight was supposed to come, but poor thing, he died a few weeks ago. He'd been sick," Effie added. "Then there's two from Seven, and then Seeder and Chaff from Eleven—they're both good friends of Haymitch's, you'll like them."

"Wow Effie," said Katniss, looking at Peeta. "That's a lot of people, and we don't know any of them. Oh what will we do?"

She was pushing it now. In a moment she would probably regret her obnoxiousness, but she was desperate to assuage Peeta's worries. When he was worried, she also tended to become so.

"No? well, that's the point of a mixer dear, to mix," said Effie, completely clueless.

Peeta sighed, defeated for the moment. Suddenly feeling guilty, Katniss took his hand over the table. His concern was, at least, moving.

Peeta smiled meekly at her and squeezed her hand. It was the first time they'd touched like that since the Victory tour.

"Trust me?" she said.

Effie looked back and forth between them, her brow furrowed.

"Yeah," said Peeta finally.

A half hour before arrival Katniss went to her compartment and changed into the dress laid out on her bed. It was long and yellow, in the same vein as the dress she'd been interviewed in, if slightly less juvenile.

Katniss looked in the mirror as she put it on, thinking about the letter in spite of herself. Snow had also once told her to tread carefully. Was it possible the engagement hadn't done its job of convincing him after all?

No, definitely not. If Snow wanted to threaten her, he would have been unequivocal; he would have shown up at her house himself. Snow had no need for games.

She smoothed the dress down and tried to convince herself that the letter was just troll mail, scare tactics. Maybe it was even a prank.

When she made it back to the main compartment she saw she was last. Peeta was dressed in a dark blue suit, his hair combed up away from his face. She liked it better when it hung loose, and curly.

He smiled when he saw her. "I like that dress on you."

"You'd like a burlap sack on her," said Haymitch, who was standing in the corner, nursing a screwdriver.

He too, had cleaned up impressively. His hair and beard were clean and neat for once, and he wore a
smart red suit. His prep team might actually be satisfied, him having at least run a comb through his hair once.

Katniss looked down at her dress. Yes, it was pretty, but she may as well have been wearing a sack, for all the good it would do her hair and face.

"Nobody can pull off burlap like I can," she said. "Anyway, Haymitch, I thought you were still throwing up on yourself." He made a face at her and took a sip from the screwdriver.

Soon enough, Effie collected them to prepare for their exit of the train. Katniss could tell by the way Effie was looking at her that she was just slightly below satisfactory, but she said nothing, and instead busied herself with positioning the three Victors and explaining what to do and where to go.

"Eyes up, everyone, there will be camera people at the entrance of the train, and then I'll lead you to the Tribute Center directly after. And remember, I want smiling faces and absolutely—"

"We've got it, thanks. Not our first rodeo." said Haymitch.

Katniss felt no nervousness as she stood before the door. The cameras were normal now. She grabbed Peeta's hand; it was time to start acting.

The doors opened and Katniss was blinded. She heard Effie mutter something about flash being very outdated.

Once her eyes adjusted, Katniss pasted on a dreamy smile and waved to the cameras. She looked once or twice at Peeta, making sure that the video cameras caught it.

One of them approached her.

The girl behind it said something to her, but she missed it. She'd been distracted by the green, swirly tattoos on the side of her head. Something about this girl looked intensely familiar, but the sensation was gone almost as soon as it came on.

"Katniss," Peeta said, nudging her. "Aren't you going to answer her?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Katniss said, reddening. "Would you mind repeating?"

The girl smiled. "I was just wondering what it must like to be back in the Capitol again. You must be getting excited for your wedding, too!"

Katniss tried to formulate an appropriately vapid response, but she didn't get the chance. Before she knew it she was yanked away from Peeta and the camera girl with extreme force.

"Let go of me!" Katniss yelled at her assailant, a heavily made-up Capitol citizen she didn't recognize.

"Don't worry," the person said, "Octavia's going to create a diversion!"

"Wha-? Venia?" cried Katniss as the other girl continued dragging her away from the crowd of camera people. They were moving towards a large building about a hundred feet ahead. She'd never seen the Tribute Center from the outside before.

"Don't"—pant—"worry"—pant—"Katniss,"—pant—"we won't let them see you like this!" cried Venia, clearly tiring from the effort of pulling all of Katniss along with very little help. Katniss turned her head and saw green-skinned Octavia dash into the crowd.
"Oh," yelped Octavia, "I feel so very faint!"

She collapsed into the arms of one very confused looking cameraman, and Katniss saw him mouth something along the lines of *who the hell is this?*

They were only a few yards away from the entrance now. Venia turned and bellowed "CLEAR!" whereupon Octavia regained her faculties and raced after them.

Katniss knew better than to fight back, so she allowed them to whisk her away to the Remake Center. Katniss remembered the smell of hair product more than the look of the room.

"That was close," Venia said, wiping her forehead as she pushed Katniss into a chair. Katniss sat frozen as the two Capitol women studied her.

Katniss heard Flavius's shriek before he appeared.

"What happened?" he cried. "We gave you everything you needed to keep it all up!" He was taking bits of her hair and studying them, his look of alarm growing.

"Just one thing," said Octavia, closing her eyes to center herself. "Have you at least kept up with your hair removal regimen?"

"Um," said Katniss. "No."

All three members of her prep team groaned and began working on her immediately.

"I just knew I wouldn't be able to do it like you guys," she said, inventing. The prep team was a bit more forgiving after that.

"But what about poor Peeta?" cried Octavia.

Katniss thought a moment.

"He says he'd love me hairy and dressed in a burlap sack." Octavia looked like she might faint for real.

"Now that's sacrifice," muttered Flavius under his breath.

"Well he's not perfect either," said Venia, brushing Katniss's hair so hard it was giving her a headache. "He needed a few maintenance things as well—Katniss, if you just let us do a few—"

"No permanent changes, please," Katniss said. She'd been prepared for that question.

Katniss dropped out of the conversation after that, mostly because Octavia started waxing her and the pain was enough to focus on. It was just as well, really; it was tiring to try to keep up with the gossip and inanities of the prep team's lives.

"Oh, and this spot too, we won't have done that before," said Octavia, winking at her. Katniss was about to ask what she was talking about when she felt Octavia tug off her underthings and pour wax on a very sensitive part of her body. She didn't have time to yell at her to stop before Octavia ripped away the waxing strip. Katniss howled as her eyes filled with tears.

"Well, well," said Octavia flatly. "Beauty is pain."

Venia grabbed hold of the hem on Katniss's dress and held it over her head to inspect Octavia's handiwork. "Should we put ice on that?"
"It's fine," said Octavia. She looked at Katniss. "Don't worry, it'll all be worth it. Peeta will be so pleased."

And now Katniss's face was bright red; she forgot a bit of the pain in her embarrassment. She was terrified they'd make more sly comments about bedroom activities, which would be horrible enough even if she had known what any of it was about, but thankfully the subject ended there.

She'd started to doze off, trying not to think about her throbbing nether regions, when the conversation took a turn that caught her attention.

"I wonder what the Games will be like this year," said Venia, while buffing Katniss's fingernails. "There's no way they'll be as good as last year," she beamed at Katniss as if it was a compliment.

"Our girl here is mentoring," said Flavius, patting Katniss on the shoulder. "You must be so excited, Katniss."

Katniss gritted her teeth.

"Um," she said. "I'm not so thrilled about sending in kids to die, thanks."

All three prep team members stopped what they were doing and stared at her. She was hoping that they'd at least have the good sense to be ashamed. When Venia spoke, though, Katniss thought she looked—afraid, almost.

"Oh, Katniss, you don't mean that," Venia said, trying to force a cheery air. She lowered her voice almost to a whisper "You might give someone the wrong idea!"

"What kind of idea?" said Katniss at normal volume.

"Haven't you heard?" said Flavius, with wide eyes. "Octavia, she hasn't heard!"

"Heard what?" demanded Katniss.

"About the terrorists," whispered Venia. "There's rumors about some...some terrorist plotters out there."

"Out where?"

"Shh!" said Flavius, shaking his head. "The Districts, somewhere, but nobody knows who they are or what they'll do."

"I'm afraid for our livelihood!" cried Octavia.

"All we know," said Venia, "is what my cousin Phyllis said, she works in the department of District relations, and she thinks that the terrorists are trying to get some of the Victors on their side, if they haven't already."

Katniss wondered if the prep team even knew what the word terrorist meant.

"Has this been on the news?"

"Just barely," said Flavius, "President Snow went on the telescreen to tell everyone to be vigilant against traitors and people with violent tendencies."

_Like the Victors_, thought Katniss.
"Phyllis says the President is worried someone might try to assassinate him or something," murmured Venia, finishing up with Katniss's hand.

"Oh," said Katniss. "Alright then, I'll try to be careful. And I'll keep an eye out, too."

This seemed to placate her prep team and they fell back into the rhythm of babbling about nothing, but she noticed that the subject of the Games was not broached again.

When they finally were finished with her, they led her to her room.

"We know it's not the penthouse," said Octavia as they exited the elevator on floor ten. "They've mixed up all the room assignments for the fika, to get you to socialize more."

Then they left her, assuring her that they would see her again in a few days, to make sure she was ready for the fika. Whatever that was.

Disappointed she no longer had easy access to the roof, Katniss inspected her room and found it to be identical to the one she'd stayed in before the Games the year before. Her bag and the bow were already there. As she sat there, she contemplated the difference in feeling she had. Of course, she still wished she could be home with Prim, but last time, Peeta had been an unknown, her friend, then her enemy, and then her suitor. Plus she had been prepared to die.

There was a card on her bed that assured her she was very welcome in the Capitol, and that she should be in the café downstairs at five o'clock to join her fellow Victors for dinner.

She had twenty minutes to wait, so she did, wondering about what made a terrorist a terrorist and whether they could be so bad, if Snow was against them.
The Victors

Katniss decided to look for Peeta before heading down to the dining hall. It proved to be a bad idea, because after sweeping floors 12, 11, 10, 9 and 8 she hadn't found him, and worse, it was ten past five.

She hurried into the elevator and pressed the button for the first floor, hoping that it would be straightforward to find the dining hall once she got there.

It wasn't.

The collective dining hall was either a new feature or simply one Katniss hadn't noticed the last time she'd been in the Tribute Center. She stumbled into the gymnasium by accident and received a stern scolding from a Peacekeeper, who then led her straight to the dining hall, as though she were a lost child.

As she'd feared, all eyes were on her when she finally stepped through the doors. It had been that way at school too: Katniss would stumble in a few minutes late, often from having dropped off Prim, and every student would turn around to look at her, as if it concerned them. It had been one of the things Katniss most hated about her classmates.

And now it was the same, all of the victors turning to look at the one who was late. Most of them went almost immediately back to their conversations, but one girl glared at Katniss like she was something nasty you stepped in.

"Katniss!" called Peeta's voice. She turned and saw him and Haymitch at the far end of the table.
"Katniss, over here."

Relieved, she rushed over to him, wondering why it seemed to take a thousand years just to get down to the other end of the table.

"You're lucky Effie's not here," said Peeta, as Katniss slid into her seat. "You might get a lecture."

"I'm not that late," said Katniss, though she had no idea how late she was. Settled now, she could take better stock of the room, and saw two empty chairs at the end of it. "And besides," she said, "Look over there. Those two aren't here yet."

"They're not coming," said Haymitch, from behind Peeta. "Lucky bastards from District One weaseled out of coming until the day after tomorrow."

"Weaseled out of it," said Katniss "How? And why couldn't we do that?"

"Because you're not from District One," said Haymitch. "Only they get to do that kind of thing. Career perks. No great loss though, Cashmere is just going to act like a princess anyway."

"Oh, come on Haymitch," said a large dark man across from them, reaching over the table and clapping him on the shoulder. "Don't be such a grump."

"We can't all be as patient as you, Chaff," said Haymitch, though he was smiling slightly.

"I think he's just being a grump," Chaff said. He looked at Katniss and Peeta, smiling. "Don't you?"

"Every day of his life," said Katniss.
Chaff laughed loudly, almost embarrassingly, because Katniss hadn’t found her own joke that funny. He shook the table as he laughed. It was then Katniss noticed that one of his arms ended in a stump, and she remembered who he was.

"Chaff Etheridge," he said, holding out the hand he did have.

"Kat—" Katniss started to say her name, but Chaff was laughing again.

"I know who you are!" he said. A woman appeared next to Chaff and sat down, passing him and Haymitch each a glass of bubbly liquid. "But I like that. Keep on assuming people don’t know who you are. That’s one bad habit our District One friends do have."

"What is?" asked the woman.

"A whole bunch of things," said Haymitch.

"Nothing," said Chaff. "I was just saying hello to Katniss and Peeta here."

"I’m Seeder Agyeman," said the woman, reaching over Chaff with her hand extended. She was also dark like Chaff, and very pretty, in a tough sort of way. She looked to be in about her mid-thirties. "It’s very nice to meet you both."

"Thank you, you as well," said Peeta. "We hear you two have been putting up with Haymitch for a while."

"You deserve a prize," said Katniss.

Chaff laughed again and Haymitch made a face into his glass. Out of the corner of her eye, Katniss saw Chaff’s laughter had caught the attention of the glaring girl. She was staring directly at Katniss, not bothering to hide her dislike.

"Where did you get those, by the way?" asked Katniss, pointing to the glasses.

"Oh, up there," said Seeder, pointing past Katniss to a large, heavily decorated table. "There’s cheese and a bunch of things to choose—"

But Katniss had already stood and yanked Peeta up from his seat. They made their way to the appetizer table Seeder had pointed to.

"Is everything okay?" asked Peeta. "I thought they were pretty nice."

"It’s not that," said Katniss, grabbing a cheesecracker. "That one girl keeps glaring at me. She’s in a white dress, behind me. Don’t make it obvious you’re looking."

Peeta nodded and waited a moment before stealing a glance over her shoulder.

"The girl in the white dress? You mean Johanna Mason?"

"That’s Johanna Mason?" said Katniss. She abandoned her discretion and turned to look at the girl. She was talking to the man next to her, Finnick Odair, and there was no trace of the vitriol she’d demonstrated earlier. "But she looks so different now."

The girl Katniss knew as Johanna Mason, the one she’d seen win the Hunger Games, was a million miles away from the one who sat there now. Johanna had then pretended to be wimpy and weak, only revealing how handy she was with an ax once the field had been reduced to her and five others. She’d personally killed them all.
She'd been a scrawny sixteen-year-old, with huge, doe-like eyes and plain, shapeless long hair, but now she was built and had her hair cut short and spiky.

Peeta shrugged.

"She said hello to me earlier," he said. "Seemed pleasant enough."

"Well she keeps giving me the stink-eye."

"Sure it wasn't the woman from Two, Enobaria? That would make more sense. She's the one with the shark-teeth."

"Shark-teeth?" said Katniss, surveying the group of Victors again to see if she could identify somebody with shark-teeth. After just a moment, she found her, sitting on Finnick's other side and laughing. She would have been pretty if it wasn't for her mouth. Katniss turned back to Peeta. "And yes, I'm sure. It was definitely Johanna, and weren't you the one to say we should keep an eye out?"

Peeta opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again.

"Point taken," he said finally. "Yeah, okay."

"Good. Now grab me like twelve more of those cheesecrackers and let's get back to the table."

They returned without fanfare. Chaff was talking to Haymitch, and his expression had turned serious. Seeder's hand lay lightly on his shoulder.

"But she's better. Much better. Thank you," Chaff was saying.

"She might be along when we're back for the Games, though," said Seeder. "Right?"

"We'll see," said Chaff. "It depends on if she keeps making progress and how much."

"Send her my love, at any rate," said Haymitch.

A tense silence followed. Katniss picked up, drank from, and replaced her waterglass three times before saying:

"The cheesecrackers are really great."

Peeta only barely glanced at her, but she could tell just from it that she'd said something stupid. Chaff, however, seemed to take it in stride. He laughed again, albeit more subdued, and it was a genuine, pleasant sound.

"Oh good," said Haymitch, as a half dozen Avoxes appeared with covered platters. "The food's coming. Yes please," he said, motioning to an Avox carrying a bottle of wine "You can fill it to the top."

The Avox did so, served Katniss and Peeta, then moved around the table. When he got to Seeder, she put her hand over her glass.

"Oh, no thank you," she said. "I'm not drinking."

"You were serious then, huh Seeder? How long has it been now?" asked Haymitch.

Seeder smiled shyly.
"Seven months, four days," she said, and turned to look at Peeta and Katniss. "I'm an alcoholic," she explained. "Trying to kick the habit."

While Katniss groped for the appropriate response, Peeta came to the rescue.

"Congratulations," he said. "That's very admirable of you."

"Thank you," said Seeder, as an Avox placed a plate of lamb chops in front of her. "It might sound strange, but it was actually Katniss who made me stop."

"Me?" Katniss blurted.

"Yes. You," said Seeder, taking a sip of water. "You and... well, you know what else."

And Katniss nodded, because she did know what else. She wasn't sure it was right to attribute the credit to herself though. It was Rue who had inspired her to begin with. Rue's gentleness, her hopefulness, her strength, were all reasons to not give up.

"Maybe you can help out Haymitch next, then," said Katniss. "I think—"

"Haymitch will ask for help when he wants it," said Haymitch, pointedly gulping down a mouthful of wine. "I'm not as good a person as Seeder. Plus I don't find you all that inspiring."

One Avox placed a serving of lamb chops before Katniss, and another placed a white paper card next to her plate before continuing to the others. Picking it up, Katniss saw it was an itinerary card for the next day: Nine am they were to meet in the ballroom for the announcement of the Quarter Quell. They would have the day to mull it over, and then they would reconvene at five for the live panel, called the "celebratory fika."

"What's a fika?" Katniss asked Peeta, pointing to her itinerary card.

"No idea," said Peeta. "Just another type of Capitol party, I guess."

"It's a custom from pre-collapse days," said a man next to Katniss. She hadn't noticed him at all until that moment. "It's from an ancient place called Scandinavia, and it's all about sharing and socializing, and—"

"Oh hello Beetee," said Haymitch. "Didn't see you there."

"I've been here the whole time," said Beetee good-naturedly. He introduced himself to Katniss and Peeta as Beetee Latier from District Three, and they small-talked a few minutes before starting on their food. Within ten minutes, Katniss had quite forgotten Beetee's presence again.

The food, as usual, was delicious, and Katniss and Peeta cleaned their whole plates. It was followed by another course and a dessert, so when the meal was finally over and they excused themselves, they were both so full they could barely walk.

They took the elevator up to the tenth floor. Peeta was staying on the fifth.

They lounged on the sofas in the middle of the room. Katniss knew that if they went into her bedroom, she would get sleepy and be tempted to ask him to stay with her, and it was better to just avoid that.

She usually slept better with him next to her, but time had given their friendship label some rigidity, and Katniss thought it was only fair that she stay firmly on one side of the line, lest she confuse
herself again. Besides, they'd be sharing a room soon enough, once they were married. No reason to hurry it along.

Full and satisfied, Katniss relaxed now that she was away from the other Victors.

"Did your prep team do something to your eyebrows?" she asked, not having realized it at dinner. It was to a seriously different degree, however. Where Peeta had had a few hairs gently plucked from his eyebrows, Katniss had been subjected to full torture.

Peeta grinned at her. "Yeah, they plucked them a bit. It's not as bad as it was the first time, though."

"Lucky. Mine kept saying 'oh poor thing, you look dreadful.' They even--"

Katniss broke off and reddened, deciding not to tell Peeta the waxing story.

Peeta touched her hand, still smiling. "You could never look dreadful."

"Thanks. I told them you'd think that. Didn't help."

Peeta's tone had been casual, but both of them were a bit awkward as they let go of each other's hands. Usually whenever Peeta slipped and hinted at his feelings for her, they would just pretend he hadn't said anything.

"It's weird, this new layout," said Peeta, watching as Seeder passed them and disappeared into her room.

"Yeah, I don't like it," said Katniss, "Do you know where Haymitch is?"

"First floor I think."

"Oh.

They were silent a moment longer.

"Speaking of my prep team," said Katniss, "they told me something weird today." She chewed at one of the fingernails Venia had worked so hard to make smooth and round.

"What's that?"

"It was something about rebels, or conspirators, or—"

"Do you want to go up to the roof?" interrupted Peeta. "We haven't been up there since last year."

Momentarily irritated, Katniss realized why he'd interrupted her. Up on the roof, it was safe to talk about almost anything. The wind would drown out their voices, so they wouldn't have to worry about bugs. She nodded and followed Peeta to the elevator.

The city was beautiful from the roof. All of the lights were far below, and their brightness helped her feel closer to the sky.

It was chilly. Katniss crossed her arms as she recounted what her prep team had told her. When she was finished, her teeth betrayed her by chattering, and Peeta insisted she take his jacket.

"But why the word terrorist?" he asked, as he wrapped the jacket around her shoulders. "You can't be the first Victor who's said something like that."
Katniss shrugged and watched the people below. Tiny dots probably stumbling home drunk from parties at their friends' houses.

"But I just wonder," said Peeta, "if terrorist to them just means rebels, or..." he trailed off.

"What do you mean?" said Katniss, "Wouldn't they call them that anyway?"

"Yeah," said Peeta, "but there's a difference between overthrowing the Capitol and offing the President."

Katniss looked at him in astonishment. Dead President Snow sounded like a great idea to her. "How?"

"Snow's not the bad guy," Peeta said with a shrug.

Katniss stopped and stared at him.

"Of course he's the bad guy," she said. "Snow's the one who threatened me last year, threatened you. How could he not be the bad guy?"

"Think about it, Katniss" Peeta said quietly, "Snow dies, so what? Someone else takes his place, nothing changes. Actually, it could get worse for the Districts, if the Capitol decides to use Snow's death as an excuse. Anyone who wants a real rebellion is going to have to take care of a lot more than just him."

Looking away, she sighed. There was a boiling inside her.

"I was hoping there was someone on our side," she said quietly a few minutes later.

"There still could be," said Peeta, "But we shouldn't just assume that. Especially with that letter you got."

Katniss surveyed the city again, saw how it lived and breathed even at night. District Twelve, even in the nicer parts, had spotty electricity during the day, never mind at night.

Before her she saw a huge, bright pink building as tall as the Tribute Center. A sign hung on it that said "Center Square Shopping Center," and Katniss imagined it was filled to the brim with silly things that nobody needed. Things kids in Twelve would never imagine.

"Maybe we should go back down now," said Katniss. "We've got to be up early tomorrow."

Peeta walked her back to her room, and then took hold of her hand again.

"Good night," he said, kissing the back of her hand before dropping it and hurrying off. She wondered if he was embarrassed.

Katniss paused in front of the door for a moment, thinking of a night from a year earlier. Peeta had given her his jacket on the roof that night also, but Katniss had still been completely oblivious to his crush on her.

She opened the door and instantly collided with another person. Katniss was about to start yelling when she realized it was the red-haired Avox holding a stack of towels, presumably there to make up her room for her.

Katniss apologized profusely, but the Avox shook her head. Katniss looked around the room, saw the pillow was fluffed, the comforter turned down for her, and felt a rush of anger at the Capitol for
enslaving the girl for such meaningless tasks.

"I'm glad to see you again," Katniss said, to which the Avox smiled, looking very self-conscious.

It was strange, Katniss knew this girl, in a way, yet she had not a clue what her name was. She went to her nightstand and pulled out a pad of paper and pen she found there. She brought them back to the Avox.

"Would you mind, um, writing down your name for me?" said Katniss. The Avox stared at her for a moment, but set down the towels on the dresser and took the pen and pad of paper from Katniss.

A moment later, she handed it back. Katniss looked at it and noticed the elegant handwriting of someone well-educated.

"Lavinia?" said Katniss, and the girl nodded. "That's a beautiful name."

Lavinia nodded again and took up her towels. She left the room before Katniss had a chance to ask her anything else.

Someone had told her, a while before, about Avoxes not being allowed to acknowledge anything that wasn't an order, and Katniss felt another stab of anger.

As she fell asleep that night, Katniss wondered if Lavinia was lonely, and felt, with a pang of her own loneliness, how the bed felt too big for just her.

The next morning Katniss woke up screaming and covered in sweat. She had dreamt about oppressive heat and acid fog, and aiming an arrow at the heart of the girl with shark teeth. She saw Johanna Mason's face, lit up with otherworldly light like a demon's, and felt the sharp biting of a knife and felt her own hot, sticky blood run all over the place.

It took her a good ten minutes to realize where she was, and she felt sick. Guiltily, she wished she had asked Peeta to stay with her after all.

She looked at the alarm clock. It was seven thirty. She had an hour and a half before they were all to be downstairs at the ballroom, but she didn't feel like going down to the dining hall for breakfast. The thought of food made her nauseous.

She was kicking herself for not finding out which room Peeta was staying in when there was a knock at the door, and she opened it to find him standing there as if on cue. He had a plate of eggs and bacon "I brought food," he said. "Woke up early. Time difference."

Though she made a valiant effort, she could not eat the eggs and bacon. They sat on the nightstand and got cold.

Effie stopped by a half hour later to make sure Katniss was on track, and her disappointment that Katniss wasn't dressed was tempered by her delight that Peeta was completely ready to go.

Five minutes later, Effie led them to the ballroom, which was huge and decorated with Capitol banners. There was a row of chairs in the center. Beetee from Three was the only one who'd beaten them there, and he sat in a chair on the near end, typing away on a laptop computer.

Haymitch appeared shortly after, with the girl with the tattooed head. He was looking a bit green.
"Think he got a bit lost," said the girl. She was carrying an enormous camera on her shoulder. "Found him wandering on the second floor."

"I was just looking for some ibuprofen," said Haymitch, smiling slightly. "You said you wouldn't tell. Why is it so damn bright in here?"

"Let's go sit down, Haymitch," said Peeta, chuckling. Katniss was about to follow them when the girl stopped her.

"I'm Cressida, by the way," she said. "I think we got interrupted earlier."

"Hi," said Katniss, eyeing the camera suspiciously.

"I know now's not the best time," said Cressida, "but I just had to meet you. She saw Katniss looking at the camera and shifted it so it was pointing away.

"It's off," said Cressida. "Sorry, should have said."

"Alright," said Katniss, still wondering what the girl wanted. No cameraperson had ever addressed her directly before. They usually yelled things at her or just put the lens in her face.

"Right," said Cressida, "I'm doing the editing for the unveiling, and I wanted to pepper in a few interviews and things, if you wanted to help me out."

"I'm not usually asked for interviews," Katniss said. "I'm usually just expected to give them."

Cressida smiled. "We're not all vultures. Plus, I think we've got some interesting things to talk about."

She pulled a lens cap out of her pocket and fixed it on the camera. Looking closer at it, Katniss saw there was a bird on it, or no, not just a bird, a mockingjay. Cressida smiled at her again.

"Where do I find you?" asked Katniss. Cressida opened her mouth to answer, but Caesar Flickerman, who had appeared while neither was paying attention, cut her off.

"Good morning good morning, Victors. Miss McGregor, we are ready, I believe. he did a little bow in Cressida's direction. She gave Katniss a miniscule wave and retreated to the edge of the room, turning on the camera. While they had been talking, the rest of the Victors had filed in, and Katniss took the only seat that was left, between Beetee and a large, mean-looking bald man.

Caesar had on his white white suit, and he was holding an ancient-looking envelope that looked almost brown in comparison. This year his color was yellow, which didn't quite fit his tanned face. It was almost hard to look at him directly.

"I'll just be quick then," he said, "the real fun is this evening, anyway."

He was trying to be cheerful, of course, but he wasn't as charming away from the stage and huge crowd. Opening the envelope and still beaming at the Victors. He removed a small card from it, and read aloud.

"On this, the Third Quarter Quell, to remind the Districts that the choice to make war against the Capitol only hurt themselves, the Districts will reap only one Tribute, who will then choose his or her partner."

While still processing what Caesar had said, Katniss spoke almost without meaning to.
"That... is... horrible," she said.

There was an icy stillness in the room. Katniss felt all the eyes on her again, and she could have heard a pin drop. The other Victors stared at her. She'd broken the unspoken rule, given up the game of pretend.

Caesar looked at her blankly.

"Well," he said after a moment, regaining his smile. "I think it's safe to say we'll have a lot to talk about this evening. Enjoy your day."

Katniss felt slightly light-headed as she stood. She was back on the stage in District Twelve, facing the choice of who would follow her into the arena. The choice of who else to put to death.

She was deep in thought when she was almost bowled over by the shark-toothed woman.

"Out of my way," Enobaria snarled. Under normal circumstances, Katniss probably would have snapped something back at her, but she had not yet regained herself.

Shark-tooth was racing towards the door, heeled closely by Cressida, who was saying, "just a moment, please Miss Enobaria!" Enobaria didn't stop; she ran from Cressida as though she were diseased.

Peeta appeared at Katniss's shoulder

"Come on," he said, taking her by the arm and leading her out of the room, Haymitch close behind.

They headed for Peeta's room, and once they got there they sat in silence. Haymitch poured himself a drink from a bottle he'd hidden under his sleeve, and Katniss suddenly understood why he always braved the hangovers.

Year after year, this would be her life now. She would send two people into the arena, with barely any hope of getting one of them out alive. Getting both out was out of the question. Peeta and Katniss had been a one-time thing.

"What the hell are we going to say tonight?" said Peeta, sitting beside Katniss on the bed. "What the hell are we going to say?"

"Oh, Peeta," said Haymitch. "You already know exactly what you're going to say. You just don't like it."

He waited, but Peeta volunteered nothing.

"You're going to say..." said Haymitch, pausing to take a gulp of white liquor. "You're going to say the Quell is going to mean some interesting things for strategy and Tribute dynamics. There's going to be tributes who pick the weakest, smallest person they can think of, and others who pick someone they think will protect them. There might even be some Tributes who just go blank and yell out the first name they think of, be it a sibling, a parent, a best friend."

"Stop, Haymitch," said Katniss. "Stop it. I can't-"

She didn't finish her sentence. Peeta put his arm around her.

Haymitch placed his glass on the little coffee table beside him and leaned forward.

"This is who you are now," said Haymitch. "The Capitol owns you, and this is a way they are going
to make sure everyone knows it. Katniss, I appreciate the righteous outrage, I do, but you're going to have to knock it off and grow up, both of you. You're going to go act like retired players of an exciting sport. People are going to die, and you have to accept that, or you won't make it."

Katniss stared at the ground.

"I need a drink," she said.

"Get your own," said Haymitch.
Death Pays a Visit

When Katniss saw herself in the mirror, she gaped. Her prep team had spent very little time, and yielded a result that made her barely recognizable to herself, ("See what we mean? Upkeep’s not that hard if you do it little by little")

There was no fire theme today. The dress she wore was tight, glittery, and poison green, with a slit that went up almost to her waist. Her lips were colored blood red and her dark hair curled to look old fashioned. She knew very little about makeup and could not tell what else exactly had been done to her, but her features were more pronounced, her eyes brighter.

She also didn't look anything like herself.

"Did Cinna choose this?" Katniss asked. She didn't like the reflection she saw. The girl in the mirror was the kind who seduced you and then slit your throat while you slept. Someone whose looks were deliberate parts of a façade meant to trick and harm.

"Oh, dear me, no," said Venia. Coming up behind her in the mirror "This is nothing like Cinna's style." She said it as if it should have been obvious, and that to think otherwise was to insult Cinna.

"It's still nice though," said Octavia, putting brushes and creams back where they were supposed to be. "Katniss looks all dangerous and powerful."

"I guess," said Venia. "For a Victor having designed it."

Octavia shut a drawer loudly.

"Of course you look lovely," Venia said. "Best of the best, like always."

Katniss wasn't as invested in whether she looked like the best of the best as her prep team was, but she felt oddly touched that Venia felt the need to support her like that, even if it was slightly faked. In Venia's small world, being beautiful was the most important thing there was.

An Avox came to escort her to the ballroom, though she didn't think she'd needed an escort, and it only made her uncomfortable as the tongueless man stood silently beside her in the elevator. He barely looked at her.

She mustered an uncomfortable goodbye at the ballroom door and the Avox disappeared without a word.

Once again, she was the last person to arrive. The Victors were standing in small groups, talking to each other, most of them holding white mugs, that they were, as the itinerary note had specified, not drinking.

Katniss scanned the room for Peeta or Haymitch, but did not see either. She felt incredibly self-conscious without them, and began to regret that she had not taken the time to speak to the other Victors the night before, so that she could have had a lifeline.

There was a table with a large white tablecloth, filled with all sorts of cakes and rolls, at the far end of the room, and Katniss thought that it would be natural for her to get something to eat, first thing. There were also peacekeepers stationed at every corner.

Then she spotted the Avox in the red dress standing beside the table holding a plate of mugs, and
remembered that she had to get her "fikabrew," whatever that was.

She reached the Avox and the plate of mugs. The liquids inside each were all very different. Some had ice cubes while others radiated heat. One of them was a translucent bright blue, and another was brown and looked thick and viscous.

Katniss grabbed the blue one; it was the most appealing. The Avox tapped Katniss's hand and shook her head. Katniss looked up at her in confusion, but the Avox pointed at the mug with the thick brown liquid. On closer examination Katniss saw that her name was clearly printed on the side of it.

"Oh," said Katniss, embarrassed, "Thanks, I wasn't paying attention." She looked again at the girl's face and felt a second pang of embarrassment. She really hadn't been paying attention.

"Thank you, Lavinia."

In fairness, Lavinia's face was strangely made up. Where Katniss's makeup had made the contrast between her skin and her features sharp and dramatic, a powdery substance the same color as the Avox's skin smoothed hers out. The revealing characteristic was the bright red hair.

Lavinia smiled politely, apparently not offended. Katniss scanned the room again, but didn't see Peeta or Haymitch. She turned back to the Avox.

Not that Lavinia provided particularly stimulating conversation, but Katniss tried.

"Your nails are very pretty," she said awkwardly, looking at Lavinia's blood red nail polish. The girl stared at her for a moment, but the ends of her mouth went up slightly.

"It really is good to see you," Katniss said, patting Lavinia's arm. Lavinia's smile vanished and she looked nervously at the Peacekeeper standing a few feet away.

"Sorry," Katniss whispered, "don't mean to get you in trouble." She backed up, giving up the idea of talking to Lavinia.

"Well if it isn't the girl on fire?" said a voice behind her.

Katniss turned and was startled by the speaker's proximity. Finnick Odair stood before her, much too close. She took a step back.

"Finnick Odair, District 4," he said, holding out his hand.

"Katniss Everdeen," she said, reaching for a handshake. Instead, Finnick grabbed hold of her fingers and kissed the back of her hand, and then laughed at her expression.

"Are you looking for your fiancé?" he asked. "I think he's over there."

He gestured towards the corner of the room, where Peeta, dressed in a dark green suit, was deep in conversation with Johanna Mason.

Katniss's jaw clenched seeing him talking to someone she'd already decided was terrible. There was something else rubbing her the wrong way, too: something about the way Johanna kept laughing and touching his elbow.

"Doesn't look like there's any rush," said Finnick, and Katniss refrained from wrinkling her nose at him. "Which is wonderful, because I've been dying to talk to you."

"Is that so?" asked Katniss, still watching Peeta and Johanna.
"You look ravishing in that dress," said Finnick. "Is this Cinna's work?"

"No," said Katniss. "Cinna's on vacation. I heard this was designed by a Victor."

"Ah," said Finnick. "And a talented one. Cinna's on vacation, you said?"

"That's what my prep team told me."

"Interesting," said Finnick. "You'll probably want to wait with that."

"Wait with what?" she asked, before realizing the mug was at her lips. She brought it back down, not believing that she'd actually been about to take a sip of the liquid tar. She'd been watching Peeta, who had not backed away from Johanna though her hand was now resting on his shoulder.

"Oh right," she said, embarrassed. "Thank you."

"No problem. So Cinna's on vacation, is he? Strange. Lots of people seem to be going on vacation these days."

Katniss opened her mouth to ask what he meant, but Finnick started talking again almost immediately.

"Well, better be going. I should say hello to stumpy over there."

He gestured at Chaff, who was laughing loudly at an old lady with a four embroidered on the front of her dress.

"All right," she said stiffly.

"Don't worry about Johanna, by the way," said Finnick. "She's probably just trying to haze you. Don't let her see that it's got to you."

His wry smile infuriated her, with all that it implied. Of course, he thought she and Peeta were engaged, but she hated that Finnick thought he could read her, when they'd only just met.

Still, she might not have been scowling if Peeta would just ditch Johanna and come relieve her of this awkwardness.

"Katniss!" called Haymitch's voice, and she saw him standing with Seeder at the other corner and was relieved.

"Thank you," she said when she got to him. "Finnick Odair just said some weird things to me."

Haymitch and Seeder looked at each other and laughed.

"He does that," said Haymitch. "Nothing to worry about. But never mind that. I called you over here to make sure that you're not going to say something like what you said this morning."

"I won't," said Katniss. She saw Cressida in the corner of the room, setting up a tripod. Caesar had yet to appear.

"You shouldn't berate her so much, Haymitch," said Seeder warmly. "She's a smart girl."

"Her brain works perfectly well," he said. "She just has a tendency to forget it's there."

"I agree with Seeder," said Katniss. "You shouldn't – what word did you use? Berate me so much."
Katniss saw Seeder glance around the room, and before she knew it the older Victor's mouth was at her ear.

"I wanted to say this to you yesterday but I didn't get the chance. Rue's and Thresh's families are alive, but the Mayor won't let them have the gifts you promised them. You did a brave thing. Never let anybody tell you bravery is the wrong choice."

Haymitch looked a bit displeased, but said nothing. Seeder receded and looked as though nothing had happened.

"Oh, look," said Seeder. "Just on time."

Katniss turned and saw Caesar Flickerman enter the room, done up and gaudy as only Capitol men would ever be. Two Peacekeepers were with him, silent and stoic. Suddenly, it was as though someone had lit a fire inside Katniss.

"Good evening Victors," said Caesar. "Thank you so kindly for joining us, and I hope you've enjoyed your day."

Caesar Flickerman had never aroused such anger in her before, but in her mind's eye she saw him talking to Rue.

"So don't count me out."

"Rue, my dear, I wouldn't dream of it."

Nice words, but that was all they were.

She couldn't listen as he prattled on about the tradition of sharing and trusting. Couldn't listen as he expressed sorrow that dear old Woof had passed away. Her grip on her mug tightened.

"You coming?"

Haymitch's voice broke the spell, but she looked at him and willed him to feel what she did.

"Katniss," he said sharply. "Are you coming?"

"Coming where?"

Haymitch grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her along with him, and she came back to reality. Seeder and the other Victors had formed a ring around Caesar, as per his request, apparently. Katniss stood between Haymitch and Seeder.

Caesar started talking again.

"In fika tradition," he said. "We toast and then pass the mug to the right."

"Wait, what?" said Johanna Mason. She was standing across from Katniss, beside Peeta. "What if we don't want to pass them?"

"Sharing, Miss Mason, it is tradition."

"But I still don't—"

"Hush, Johanna," said Chaff gently.
"A toast, my friends," said Caesar, backing up to stand between Finnick and Chaff. He raised his mug in the air before passing it to the right. Katniss did the same, looking guiltily at Seeder.

"Don't worry," said Seeder, noticing Katniss's hesitation. "I've got a strong stomach."

The Victors drank.

Caesar expressed the importance of eye contact during a fika, and asked them to join him on the couch set up in front of Cressida's camera.

"Alright, everyone comfortable?" asked Caesar. "Seeder, are you coming?"

Katniss looked behind her. In the seconds since they'd drunk from the mugs, Seeder had become pale.

"Seeder?"

She dropped the mug and it shattered on the floor, the dark liquid oozing out like liquid tar. This alarmed the Victors, and even Caesar. Chaff stood up.

"Poison!" he said, and ran towards her. But Seeder suddenly came out of the daze and glared at Chaff.

"Get away from me," she said, backing up. She lost her balance and fell to the floor. Her head hit the ground with a loud thwack, and she rolled over and vomited. Her sparkly dress wrinkled and tore.

Katniss's thoughts went to the cup. She herself had almost drunk from it. She dashed around the couch to Seeder's side, Haymitch and Peeta close behind.

"What are you doing?" cried Peeta to Caesar. "Call for help or something!"

Caesar was wide-eyed as he waved his hand. The two Peacekeepers dashed out of the room, and Lavinia a moment later.

When Katniss got to Seeder's side she dropped to her knees, ignoring the tearing sound her dress made. Up close, she could feel heat radiating from Seeder's body, see her bloodshot eyes and the vomit on the corners of her mouth. Katniss touched her forehead and felt the coolness of sweat quickly give way to burning.

Haymitch put two fingers to Seeder's neck as her breathing got shallower.

Katniss was somewhere else entirely. She was in the field where Marvel threw the Spear, sitting over Rue.

Deep in the meadow,

Under the willow

"Breathe, Seeder," whispered Katniss.

A bed of grass, a soft green pillow

"Katniss," said Haymitch.

"Please," said Katniss.
"Katniss, she's gone."

And suddenly Katniss snapped back to the present. Seeder's bloodshot eyes stared at the ceiling, unfocused, unlit. Her breathing had stopped altogether.

"Was it-?"

"It must have been," said Haymitch, looking at the shards of porcelain and the black stain on the carpet. "It must have been."

Katniss couldn't remember a moment so silent as this one, a moment she could hear her heartbeat and Haymitch's and Peeta's and the absence of a fourth.

But then a voice broke it.

"What, no cannon?" said Johanna Mason.
Katniss could smell death on the wind.

She was in the forest again, and the death smell mixed with mosses and fungi and rain, decaying perfectly. The dead girl was in front of her, her hair, once so sleek and groomed, lay about her head, tangled and caked with dirt.

The girl's lips were purple, stained from the berries that ended her life. She was a slip of a thing, tiny and sheet-white, her empty eyes pointed at the heavens, no longer pleading for release. Katniss remembered, disjointedly, what her father had told her about carcasses that lay there too long. The bloating and the roting and the hot, putrid air that burst from them if you came too close. Bodies made you sick if you didn't get away from them.

"Katniss?"

She slammed back into reality. Shaking her head, she reminded herself that she hadn't seen Foxface's body up close, hadn't seen the cold stare of a person whose eyes were never closed for them.

"Yeah, I'm good," Katniss told Peeta. "Why, what's going on?"

"They said we've just got to wait until the inspector gets here," said Peeta, frowning. "It shouldn't be too much longer."

"Oh," said Katniss. "Okay."

Peeta chewed his lip but didn't say any more. They sat in the corner of the ballroom, where they'd been for three hours, since the Peacekeepers had come and taken Seeder away in a bodybag.

Johanna Mason was not having it. She was screeching at a Peacekeeper by the door, who was looking very tired.

"How much longer then?!" she demanded. The Peacekeeper mumbled that he wasn't sure, but it should be soon.

"Please just give it a rest, Johanna," said a Victor Katniss didn't recognize. "We're all upset right now, and you're just..."

"Making it worse, as usual," said Johanna, without a hint of remorse. "I don't need a lecture, Blight, thanks."

"Come sit down at least," said Finnick Odair, patting the empty folding chair beside him. The Peacekeepers had brought the folding chairs an hour after they took Seeder away, and Katniss had set hers up as far away from the other Victors as she could manage.

Johanna glared at the Peacekeeper but gave in and returned to her seat, furious.

"I don't know what they want us here for, anyway," she said. "We all know what happened."

"Do we?" said Katniss. All the Victors' heads swiveled towards her.
"Yeah," said Johanna, crossing her arms. "Someone tried to off you and got Seeder instead."

"Jesus, Jo," said Finnick, rubbing his eyes. "You could be a little more—a little more delicate."

"Why?" said Johanna, throwing her hands up in the air. "What's the point? We train people to die
every year, why is it supposed to be different when one of us bites it? I wasn't all that close with
Seeder, honestly. And little miss new girl over there just met her yesterday, so what the hell are we
pretending for?"

"I've known Seeder for twenty-seven years," said Chaff quietly. "She was the first tribute I ever got
through the Games."

"Right. And what did she make of it? How many of those years did she spend drunk off her ass?"

"She was seven months sober," said Chaff. Enobaria scoffed and got a dirty look from half of the
Victors. Katniss had almost forgotten she was there.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, Johanna," said Haymitch. "But it doesn't matter. Any of us
could have been standing where Seeder was. It could have been any one of us."

Johanna opened her mouth to answer just as another Peacekeeper entered and whispered to the door
guard. Then she made a come-here motion at Katniss.

"Everdeen," she said. "If you'll follow me, please."

"I'm coming too," said Peeta.

"Hell, if he's going so am I," said Johanna.

"Just Miss Everdeen, please," said the Peacekeeper.

Peeta started to argue, but Katniss shook her head. She stood and straightened her dress.

"It's fine," she said. "I'll meet you back at your room?" Peeta nodded grudgingly and reached out to
give her hand a squeeze.

"See you," he said, as she crossed the room and followed the Peacekeeper out.

She led Katniss to a door on the second floor. The Peacekeeper knocked cautiously.

"Come in," said a cold voice.

This room looked a lot like the mayor's office back home, cramped, with sharp white walls and shiny
plastic tile flooring. The back wall was mostly covered in telescreens, though at the moment they
were all off. Up against the wall there were three tan file cabinets and a large cupboard. A dark
mahogany desk stood in the middle of the room, and a man in a white Peacekeeper's uniform sat
behind it, writing in a notebook. Without looking up, he motioned for Katniss to sit across him. The
Peacekeeper who escorted her there retreated into the hallway and closed the door.

The man before her looked like he was entirely made up of blocks: his jaw, his hands, his face. His
hair was iron gray and close cropped, giving the impression that he'd just rolled off an assembly line.

He looked as though he'd been born in his Peacekeeper uniform, though the extra badges and clips
on his lapel suggested he was more than an ordinary Peacekeeper.

Finally, he put down his pencil and looked up at her. His eyes were the same color as his hair.
"Welcome to the surveillance room, Miss Everdeen," he said. "My name is Inspector Romulus Thread. I'll bet you can guess why I wanted to speak to you."

The metal chair was cold and hard, and Katniss couldn't decide where to focus her gaze.

"Um. Yes," she said. "I don't know what help I'll be, though."

Romulus Thread's smile had no warmth in it.

"Seeder Agyeman," he said. "I thought I should speak to the girl who passed her the poisoned beverage."

"When you say it like that it sounds like I was the one to poison it," said Katniss.

"Weren't you?"

"No!" said Katniss. "I almost drank from it myself by accident!"

"No need to shout, Miss Everdeen," said Thread. "It was only a question, and the most obvious one."

"Right," said Katniss, a bit annoyed. "So ask me whatever else you were going to ask me, then."

"Have you ever heard of a fika before?" asked Thread, picking up his pencil again. "Were you aware of the cup-passing?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"How do I know you didn't know?"

Katniss stared at him. She'd been numb for the last few hours, but anger was bubbling up inside her now. Seeder was dead because she'd drunk from Katniss's cup, and this was the avenue the Capitol was taking?

"You have to trust me, I guess." said Katniss

"Yes, yes, trust," said Thread, nodding. "But that's the issue. You can't blame me for finding the context a bit strange."

"You lost me," said Katniss.

"The drink that killed Miss Agyeman was laced with nightlock, Miss Everdeen. Surely that strikes you at least as interesting as it strikes me," said Thread. He waited for her to respond, but her stomach tightened up and she was unable to. After a moment, he asked her: "Why don't you just tell me what you remember."

Katniss breathed heavily. The mention of nightlock unsettled her, knocked her off balance again.

"I got to the ballroom last," she said. "But I went over and got my cup from Lavinia right away."

"Lavinia the Avox," said Thread, narrowing his eyes, and she realized she'd blundered. Victors were not supposed to socialize with Avoxes. Thread scribbled in his notebook. "I see. And I presume you
didn't notice anybody put anything in your mug after that."

"I think I would have noticed that."

"I think so too," said Thread. He cleared his throat. "As far as I can tell, that would make the people who handled the mug, in order, the chef, this Lavinia, and you."

"If you say so," said Katniss.

Thread laid the pencil down again. "Now there's your problem, Miss Everdeen, because these other two people certainly knew that at a Capitol fika, the cups are passed. So unless one of them wanted to kill any Victor but you, I don't quite see that scenario."

"What do you see?" Katniss asked.

Thread leaned back in his chair and studied her. He reminded her of the way a lynx might look at a rabbit.

"I don't know yet, but you concern me, Miss Everdeen. I wonder if you've heard the rumors flying about terrorism."

"I've heard something," said Katniss quietly.

"Then you know," said Thread, and his lips curled almost into a smile, "that the point of terrorism is to inspire fear, and what better way to inspire fear than to steal one of Panem's beloved Victors from under their noses."

"The Capitol does know a lot about fear," said Katniss, unable to stop herself. Thread nodded slowly, smiling his horrible smile.

"Edna," he called, still looking at Katniss. "Fetch the Avox called Lavinia, and whomever you need to interpret for her."

"Right away sir," said the Peacekeeper guarding the door.

Again Katniss didn't know quite where to look. Thread seemed to sense it and dragged the moment out. He was playing with her.

After a moment he picked up his pencil again and tapped the end of it against the desk repeatedly.

"Well, you should at least know this," he said. "If you don't have a part in this, a supposition of which I am not at all convinced, you should be very careful, Miss Everdeen."

"How so, Inspector?" asked Katniss. There was a pricking on the back of her neck. Thread shrugged theatrically.

"Maybe you got lucky this time," he said. "And maybe that luck has an expiration date. Just a thought." He looked back down at his notebook and wrote a few sentences.

"You may go, Miss Everdeen," he said. He caught her hesitation. "Unless there's something else you'd like to tell me?"

And suddenly there was. One person had made a fuss about passing the cups. That person also had seemed very unconcerned about Seeder's passing. It was almost as though she knew what would happen. There was an enemy here, but who was it? She had no inclination to trust Thread, yet what else was there?
"Look at Johanna Mason," said Katniss, standing up from the metal chair. "She didn't want to pass the cups, if that helps."

"Ok," said Thread, and his smile made Katniss shiver. There was a knock at the door and Edna entered the room.

"The Avox is not at her post, sir," she said. "I spoke to Ada Fray and she told me she hasn't seen Lavinia since before the murder. Nobody knows where she is."

"Well now," said Thread, sounding very pleased with himself. "That is very interesting." He looked back at Katniss. "You are dismissed, Miss Everdeen."

Katniss didn't waste a thank-you on him. She'd given him a lead, her fellow Victor. She'd never felt like such a traitor before.

Edna followed Katniss out into the hall. All of a sudden there were Peacekeepers everywhere, at every hall junction. Katniss wondered where they'd all been kept until now. It was eerily quiet here, in the hallway, and Katniss wondered briefly if she should try to make conversation with Edna, to get rid of the horrible silence, but could think of nothing. Besides, Peacekeepers weren't usually the type of person one made easy smalltalk with.

They arrived at Peeta's door and Katniss knocked, but there was no answer.

"Still in the ballroom," said Edna. "They'll be here soon."

Katniss nodded at her and gave an emphatic good-bye, wanting to get out of the Peacekeeper's presence as soon as possible. She entered the room and sat on the bed to wait for Peeta.

Twenty minutes later, he and Haymitch burst through the door. They were panting and wild-looking, and Peeta's hair had escaped some of its styling. One large lock was curling up and away from his face in the opposite direction of the others; it made him look quite silly.

"Katniss!" said Peeta breathlessly, "what happened?"

Haymitch plopped down in the chair by the window, and Peeta beside her, both listening carefully to Katniss's retelling of Thread's interview.

"Oh," said Peeta, when she got to the part about Johanna. He turned to Haymitch. "So that's why they did that."

"Did what?" Katniss asked.

"Peacekeepers came and got Johanna," said Haymitch. "They said she was under watch or something."

"The rest of us got to walk back to our rooms by ourselves just now," said Peeta.

"I don't think that's the important part, though," said Haymitch. He stood and bolted the door. "You said they couldn't find Lavinia?"

"Yeah, so?"

"You don't think it's strange that a Capitol slave, who never leaves this building, disappeared right after someone was murdered?"

Peeta looked up at him. "I saw her run out the door after the Peacekeepers. I assumed she was going
"She was probably running away," said Haymitch quietly.

Katniss narrowed her eyes. "So where is she now? They would have noticed if she left the building, wouldn't they? They have cameras monitoring the entrance, I saw them." Haymitch shrugged.

"She would only have run away if she saw something," said Peeta. "But that doesn't make sense either."

"Because she didn't signal," said Katniss. Haymitch sat down again.

"Maybe she didn't realize what she saw until Seeder dropped, and then she ran," he said.

"But why run away?" said Katniss, "If she'd seen something, why didn't she tell someone what she saw?"

"Avoxes don't speak, Katniss—"he held up his hand to silence her protest"—and very few people know how to sign. Part of the Avox punishment is also the isolation. It's very probable she just became afraid and ran."

"But she could write," said Katniss. "When we first got here, she wrote her name down for me." To this, Haymitch only shrugged.

"There's another possibility too," said Peeta, and Haymitch and Katniss looked at him. "She could also have run if she was the one who poisoned the mug."

"No," said Katniss firmly. "Lavinia's from the Capitol, she knew that the cup was going to be passed to the right."

"That's also a pretty big risk to take," said Haymitch. "She had no control or knowledge of where Katniss would stand. It doesn't make sense to give up her anonymity just to kill a random Victor."

Katniss's thoughts raced after him. "Also, why would she do it to begin with? What would make her kill anyone, as an Avox, especially a Victor?"

Peeta looked at her like he was trying very hard to make up his mind. She knew what he was going to say before he did.

"The only thing I can think of," he said, "is what your prep team said about terrorists."

"Terrorists?" said Haymitch, and Katniss told him about what Venia's cousin Phyllis had said. He nodded along and looked thoughtful.

"Thread said the same thing," said Katniss.

"But if Lavinia was in with these, er, terrorists, they'd be giving up a position on the inside of the Capitol," said Haymitch. "And that's if they managed to recruit her somehow. It doesn't add up."

Katniss nodded vigorously. Peeta looked at her again. "We need to tell him, Katniss."

"Tell me what?" said Haymitch. Katniss was trying very hard not to look at him. She felt a twinge of annoyance with Peeta for bringing it up, because there was no way she'd escape now. She glared at him before turning to face Haymitch directly.

"A few days before we left to come here, I got a letter. Private mail, no seal," she said.
"Okay."

Katniss took a deep breath

"It told me to watch out, and not get in the way... and that they wouldn't hesitate to kill me if I didn't tread carefully."

"Let's see the letter," said Haymitch immediately.

Peeta shook his head, and Katniss felt the blush rise in her cheeks.

"It's gone," she said in a small voice, looking at her hands.

"What?"

"I burnt it," she said, looking him in the eye and preparing for the storm. It never came.

Haymitch's face fell forward into his hands, and he rubbed his eyes, like Peeta had done.

"Why? Why do you do things like that, Katniss?"

"It was freaking out my sister!" she said. It sounded stupid out loud.

"So?" said Haymitch, standing up. "That doesn't mean you go around destroying evidence!"

"I still remember what it said, sort of," Katniss said weakly.

"Not the point! You could have sent it off for analysis right now," said Haymitch.

Peeta put a hand on Katniss's shoulder while Haymitch swore. She turned her eyes back down to her hands.

"I don't know that it matters," said Peeta. "Someone who can get poison into Katniss's cup under the Capitol's nose is not going to leave such an easy trail."

It didn't seem to calm Haymitch down much, and they had to let him stop fuming on his own. When he finally did, he fell down onto the bed beside them, staring at the ceiling.

"This is serious, kids."

"We know," said Katniss. "I get it, I saw Seeder."

"I don't think you do," said Haymitch. "If someone is trying to kill you, they're not going to stop now."

Katniss threw her hands up in exasperation. "Someone's always trying to kill me." Haymitch sat up.

"Why do you think Thread's trying to solve this," said Haymitch. "Why even bother? We both know the Capitol has reason to want you dead."

Katniss didn't know, but Peeta realized it right away.

"It's about control," Peeta said. "Someone got in and murdered someone right under their noses."

"Atta boy," said Haymitch. "That's why the place is crawling with Peacekeepers, they have no idea who it was or how they did it. And if they scare the Capitol, they should scare you too."
"It's got to be a Victor," said Katniss quietly.

"That's right," said Haymitch, with a solemn nod. "The murderer was in that room with us, Katniss. One of those Victors is not your friend."

When Haymitch left an hour later, a Peacekeeper appeared at the door to escort him to his room.

"For Christ's sake," said Haymitch's voice, "I can get down three floors by myself, thanks."

"No sir," said the Peacekeeper, "All Victors are to be escorted to their rooms tonight."

"But earlier—"

"All Victors, sir," said the Peacekeeper. Haymitch sighed and called in to Katniss and Peeta that he'd see them tomorrow, then followed the Peacekeeper out, grumbling.

Katniss was still sitting on the bed with Peeta.

"Is it alright if I stay here tonight?" she asked. She couldn't go back to her own room tonight; she knew she'd see Seeder's face and a dozen other dead faces in her dreams. She couldn't bear the thought of facing it alone.

"Of course," said Peeta, and Katniss was pleased that it didn't feel weird at all. At least not until she realized she didn't have pajamas, and had to borrow one of Peeta's shirts to sleep in. She was thankful then that she'd resisted her prep team's attempts to get her to forego underwear under her dress ("but the seams will show!")

She turned off the light and got in bed beside Peeta, though her brain was still churning, and she knew she wouldn't be falling asleep any time soon.

She lay there thinking of Seeder and Lavinia and Johanna and Thread, her mind racing. It resisted relaxation, and an hour later she was no closer to sleeping than when she'd first lay down.

"Are you asleep?" said Katniss into the dark. She hadn't heard Peeta's breath go long and even yet.

"Not even close," he said, and then a moment later: "I'm glad you're staying here tonight."

She was glad she couldn't see the expression on his face.

"I keep thinking," said Peeta, "that I'm so relieved that you didn't drink from that cup."

Her insides squirmed; in her mind's eye she saw him standing next to her, drinking from the poisoned mug and falling to the ground, all red eyes and wheezing, and then the twitching and the final ceasing of movement altogether.

Katniss reached up and turned on the light, then turned to face him. She backed up a bit, because their faces were almost touching.

"You have no idea how grateful I am that you weren't standing next to me," she said. Johanna had actually done her a favor by distracting him.

Peeta brought his hand up to her face and stroked her cheek lightly once, before bringing it away. "It's terrible, actually," he said, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry about Seeder, of course, but all I can think about is how I'm glad it wasn't you."

"I almost drank it, you know. Finnick Odair stopped me at the last second."
"Then I owe him everything."

Katniss didn't know what to say to that. The way he was looking at her now, she could see everything. His worry, his longing. She could see in his face that he was aching to kiss her for real, to make sure she was still here, but was holding himself back. His restraint was touching, and out of respect for it she turned around again and turned out the light before she had time to decide how she felt about it.

It was nice, to be close to Peeta again, but guilt crept into her heart as she thought about what he must be feeling every moment she lay right there. Allowed to hold her, but only to give her comfort, never to receive. How much of his heart was she rebreaking?

She'd wondered what it would be like once they were married, if they'd sleep like this every night. Katniss knew Peeta would never expect physical intimacy from her, but she also knew that Snow expected babies.

She wondered if Peeta would even want to touch her considering the circumstances. He loved her, yes, but the fake affection they shared was just as bad to him as it was to her. It had to be even worse in the bedroom.

She remembered with a pang his face last year when she'd told him she'd been acting. He'd gotten good at covering up his thoughts and feelings, but sometimes he let his guard slip just slightly, and she could see them. His lot hadn't much improved.

Would he ever get over her? Would it make it better for him, easier, to be married to her? The scene from earlier in the day, when Johanna touched his elbow, popped into Katniss's head and she felt her stomach twist in unexpected anger.

But she wouldn't worry about Johanna just now.

She waited until Peeta started dozing off before grabbing his hand, bringing it to her face and kissing the back of it, grateful that it was still warm, and alive.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to everyone who's commented or left kudos on my story. You guys make my day :)}
Avox, interrupted

Katniss and Peeta awoke the next morning to an Avox bringing them breakfast, with a note that they were expected in the ballroom at ten o'clock.

"I wonder what that's all about," said Katniss, "It's not like any of us didn't see what happened, they don't need to brief us, or anything." Peeta shrugged and took a bite of his eggs.

"It's probably about the fika," said Peeta. "I wouldn't be surprised if they rescheduled it already."

This hadn't occurred to Katniss. "Rescheduled it?"

"Still need their publicity, don't they?" said Peeta. Katniss took a sip of her orange juice and felt particularly righteous towards the Capitol, before setting her glass down, realizing that at the exact same moment she'd been thinking about how good the food was.

Despite the food, Katniss felt a pang of homesickness, though this was only her third day away from District Twelve.

"I should go find clothes to put on," Katniss said. They'd slept in today; there was only a half hour left until she needed to be in the ballroom. She stood up from the bed and Peeta reached out his arm to stop her.

"What?" she asked, as she waited for him to swallow the toast in his mouth.

"Are you sure you should go alone?"

For some reason, this made Katniss angry.

"I'll be fine in the hallway, thanks!" she said. She could feel her face flush, and braced herself to argue.

She was confused a moment later when Peeta laughed.

"I was teasing you, Katniss,"

"Oh," she said. Her cheeks burned as she turned around again and headed for the door.

"Wait."

"What?" she snapped, wheeling around for the second time.

"Are you going to go up to the tenth floor like that?" he said.

She had forgotten that she was wearing Peeta's shirt and nothing else. Anyone who passed her would think... well they probably would think it anyway, and they were supposed to be engaged, weren't they? Still, she would have preferred to keep the gossip about her and Peeta's private life to a minimum.

The dress from yesterday lay on the floor by the bed, discarded and crumpled. She cursed herself for not having hung it up. Going up to her room in yesterday's dress covered in wrinkles was nearly as bad as going up in her underwear.

No, she would need to run for it, and hope she didn't run across anyone. She nodded at Peeta and
hurried out the door.

As if on cue, she heard laughing down the hall, and turned her head to see Finnick Odair coming towards her. She cursed under her breath.

"Well," he said, with a salacious smile. "Good morning to you." Katniss turned around and was suddenly having lots of trouble getting the door open again. "Looks like Johanna owes me ten bucks."

Katniss was sure he was just trying to provoke and embarrass her, and she was tempted to yell at him. The knowledge that he would probably just find it hilarious quelled the impulse. Instead she glared at him as she got the doorknob to work and went back inside.

"Don't ask," she told Peeta, who'd lifted an eyebrow.

After waiting a good five minutes, and making sure the coast was clear, Katniss made a second attempt. This time she met no other Victor.

However, there were quite a few Peacekeepers in the hall. Somehow, she didn't feel self-conscious around them, though. They stood at every hall junction, arms crossed and helmets down, so she couldn't see their faces. It gave Katniss an impression of aloneness, despite how many of them there were.

There was something eerie about their silence as she walked by, though she was not inclined to greet any of them. There was even one stationed directly outside of her door, staring at it like he was guarding something. She nodded at him/her and entered the room.

Trying not to think of her earlier embarrassment, Katniss went straight to her closet, hoping her prep team had given her something practical to wear instead of another dress. Several minutes later she was enjoying the freedom of pants and flat shoes.

Katniss and Peeta made sure to get to the ballroom early. There were no chairs today. Caesar was standing by the door, purple bags under his eyes and welcoming everyone with such vigorous, manic enthusiasm that it had to be forced. Katniss had never seen him lose his suave demeanor like this before.

The other Victors showed little sign that anything had changed since yesterday morning. There was a bit less idle chatter, perhaps, but that was all. Katniss felt herself slightly annoyed by it.

Caesar muttered that the Inspector was coming to brief them, and a moment later Inspector Romulus Thread strode into the room, chest out and head held high, as though trying to make himself look even larger.

The room fell silent as one by one, its occupants noticed him. He seemed to fill it, his smile condescending. Katniss felt dislike waft from the Victors like a heat wave, and she found herself, for the first time, with a sense of camaraderie for the Victors.

"Caesar, if you please," Thread said, and Caesar approached the Inspector and the center of the room with palpable distaste. He cleared his throat loudly and glanced at Thread before speaking.

"Dear Victors," he said, and the warm smile that spread across his face completely erased the last few minutes of behavior. "Due to the passing of poor Seeder during yesterday's fika, it has been rescheduled for tomorrow morning." He paused a moment before adding, "There will be no drinks."

The way he said it, it sounded like he was waiting for a reaction, or a release of the tension in the
room. None came. Nobody went along with Caesar's unspoken claim that the fika was the main matter of the meeting.

"Yes, well," Caesar said, "We will have the pleasure, then, of Mister and Miss Carmichael's company from District One."

At this, Johanna Mason, who had been standing quietly behind Katniss somewhere, let out a laugh, and Katniss wondered if the opinion Haymitch had expressed, that Cashmere and Gloss were snobs, was a common one.

When Johanna's laugh died, the silence returned.

Caesar gave up and told them the part they were all waiting for. "This is Inspector Thread, and he has some messages for you all as well."

Caesar hurried to the door, as anxious to get out as the Victors, Katniss thought.

"Good morning," began Thread. He looked at each of the Victors individually, as though trying to establish dominance over all of them in turn. "As Mr. Flickerman said, my name is Inspector Romulus Thread." He waited a moment, looking pleased with himself.

"I am the investigator in the case of the death of Ms. Seeder Agyeman, and over the next few days, I will probably be calling each of you to my office to tell me what you know."

Katniss heard the Victors shift in their seats.

"In the meantime," continued Thread, "there will be no leaving the Tribute Center, until I personally decide otherwise."

"That's nonsense," said someone, and Katniss couldn't help but turn her head to see who it was. Brutus from District Two was smoldering, red faced.

"No, sir," said Thread with a nasty smile. "There will be no exit of the building whatsoever, for as long as it takes me to determine the cause of this unfortunate death." The way he paused on the word unfortunate left Katniss unconvinced.

"That's ridiculous!" said Brutus, even redder than before. "I will leave this place whenever I like."

"You will not," said Thread.

"What are you going to—?"

"Shut up Brutus," Enobaria said, though she too was glaring at Thread.

"Best heed the lady's advice," said Thread. "You may give me cause to wonder why you feel the need to escape so urgently."

Katniss saw Brutus roll his eyes, but he didn't protest again.

Thread adopted a superior tone and addressed them all once more. "At any rate, the President was kind enough to lend us several members of his personal guard last night, but they must return to his service. This is the main reason you are restricted to the building."

Katniss shivered. There were probably cameras everywhere throughout the building. The Peacekeeper army had probably been mostly for show.
"This is a murder investigation," Thread continues. "Miss Agyeman and an Avox have been killed in less than twenty-four hours, and I expect total compliance in the meantime."

Katniss heard the word Avox and jumped to her feet.

"Avox?" she cried. "Lavinia's dead?"

Thread looked at her as if she'd only just appeared. "Yes."

No Victor made a sound, not of shock, or distress. The silence now was one of discomfort, specifically the discomfort one feels when someone else gets horrifying news and makes a scene. Peeta grabbed Katniss's hand.

"Why didn't you-?" began Katniss, but Thread spoke over her.

"I expect total compliance in anything I should ask," he repeated. "If anyone has information for me, my office is on the second floor. That is all."

He started to leave the room, and Katniss chased him past Caesar and into the hall.

"Mr. Thread," she said to the back of his head. "Mr. Thread! Just a second, please!" He didn't stop. "What happened to Lavinia? Tell me!" she cried.

Thread paused, turned and frowned at her. He studied her a moment with pursed lips.

"I don't believe that concerns you, Miss Everdeen," he said after a long time. She glared at him.

"You barely even brought it up."

"Because it is a detail, Miss Everdeen. You should be able to understand that," he said, taking a step towards her. "And I would suggest being a tad more respectful in your requests." He turned around again and started walking away.

"A detail?" said Katniss, blowing past the rest of what he said. "Tell me what happened to her!"

If nobody else was going to care at all, then Katniss would care extra. Lavinia was as human as Seeder was, and her story had already been so tragic. She deserved mourning, too.

Thread didn't turn around this time, didn't deign to look at her.

"I don't believe I am required to do anything you ask of me, and as I just said, I don't respond well to demands." Then he walked off, leaving Katniss dumbstruck by the ballroom door.

Victors pushed past her on the way out of the room and Peeta and Haymitch appeared beside her.

"He wouldn't say anything," she said, before they could ask. Haymitch looked like he was going to be sick.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I've got to go, I'll catch up with you later," and he took off in the direction of the other Victors.

"He's really upset about Seeder," Peeta said. "He was quiet the whole time in there."

"What about Lavinia? Why doesn't anyone care about her?" asked Katniss, pushing past him and following Haymitch with her gaze. Lavinia's face popped into her head, smiling shyly as Katniss had complimented her nail polish.
"Do you want to go back to the room?" Peeta asked, his hand on her shoulder.

"As opposed to where, exactly?" she said bitterly. "We can't leave the building."

They stopped in the café for a brief snack before heading up to the room in almost total silence. Katniss was still angry with Thread, and indirectly with the other Victors for their apathy. She also felt some of her anger transfer onto Peeta, though it wasn't rational. She walked with short steps, slightly in front of him. His quiet willingness to let her anger burn out without bothering her was only irritating her further.

She half wished he would leave her and go somewhere else, but he came into her room with her and sat on her bed. She went into the bathroom to wash her face and stood there for a moment, collecting herself, and she tried to examine the feeling she had. An innocent girl, probably only a few years older than her, already ignored and treated like furniture, and now gone forever. Her death had been an afterthought, a footnote in the murder of a Victor that was supposed to be aimed at Katniss herself. In a month, would anybody even remember the gentle, beautiful girl who couldn't speak?

And Seeder was gone too. Seeder, who'd quit drinking and told Katniss that bravery was always the right choice, was dead because she'd been unlucky enough to stand beside Katniss.

As the anger and emotions faded, more questions came to her mind. If Lavinia had seen something, why couldn't she at least have gotten Katniss's attention? Why couldn't she have stayed put until she could get to someone she could communicate with?

Katniss grabbed a towel from the rack and dried her face. When she exited the bathroom, she saw Peeta reading something.

"What's that?" she asked him, and when he looked up his face was white as a sheet.

"You've got another note," he said. She rushed to him and snatched the piece of paper he was holding so she could read it.

_Dear Girl on Fire,_

_Looks like Eleven bit the dust. It's alright honey, she was no prize._

_I'm glad she's gone actually, she was a hell of a lot of trouble for me._

_As for what went wrong, well, you got lucky, we can't all know what goes on 'round these parts._

_Until next time, sweetie, be careful, and watch the old man and your boyfriend too._

"This has got to be some sort of sick joke," Katniss said, laying the note down on the bed, away from her. She knew Peeta wouldn't say I told you so, but she felt it nonetheless.

"It's a game to them," he said. "It's a game to them and they're chasing you." She couldn't meet his eyes.

"Why?" she said in a small voice, "What does a Victor want with me? Why kill me?"

Peeta shrugged, but it didn't look very casual. "Who knows, maybe they're going nuts, but this-" he tapped the note "-is about more than motive. I think they're going to try again, while we're here."

Katniss swallowed. "'The 75th Hunger Games,' the first letter said."

"Exactly."
It was quiet except for the hum of the air conditioner kicking on. Peeta took a deep breath like he was preparing for an argument.

"I think you should turn the note in."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you mean?"

"That Thread guy is investigating, right?" he said. "Maybe you should bring the note to him and see what he thinks?"

Katniss stood up. She met his gaze full force now.

"Why would I ever do that?"

Peeta sighed. "Look, I get why it sounds like a bad idea—"

"A horrible idea," Katniss said.

Peeta ignored her. "The Capitol can do stuff with it," he said. "Handwriting analysis, fingerprints, I don't know," Katniss had rolled her eyes at fingerprints. "I'm just saying it can't hurt, even though the guy's a creep, even though he's a goon for Snow, we're on the same side as the Capitol for once, Katniss."

Katniss wondered if he would still feel the way he did if he'd seen Thread over that cold, hard desk, looking at her like she was an animal fit for slaughter. She could not bring herself to like the idea, or even trust that it would have good consequences. Unfortunately, she could come up with very little concrete reasoning for why it was a bad idea.

"It just doesn't feel right," she said, and the words hung limply in the air. She saw Thread's cruel gray eyes before her. "I don't trust him."

"I don't trust him either," said Peeta, standing up as well, "I don't trust anyone in this place, Katniss, but what should we do? Do you expect me to just sit here and do nothing and just wait for..."

He took both her hands and leaned down, resting his forehead on hers and closing his eyes. For a second she thought he was going to kiss her.

"Look," he said after a moment's silence, "I understand your attitude. I do. If it was about me, I'd probably feel the same way, but I don't want to take that risk with your life. I can't."

It was the kind of bald honesty that she couldn't handle, unselfconscious, matter-of-fact. Despite her objections, she understood what he meant. She looked down at the note again.

"I'm not wrong for not wanting to do this," she said.

"No, you're not," Peeta said.

"Fine," she said, after a second more of consideration. She snatched the note up from the bedspread. "I'll take it to Thread. I'll even do it right now."

She stormed out of the room without another word and headed toward the elevator and the sitting room down the hall. She was annoyed with Peeta again, and with herself. She could perfectly understand how Peeta felt, but it did not stop her from detesting the idea of cooperating with, much less giving evidence to, someone she did not like or trust in the slightest.

In fact, the influence that Peeta's reasoning had on her faded as she got to the elevator, eclipsed by
the anger and distaste for Thread. It was snowballing inside her, and she allowed herself to stop and sit on the white leather sofa in the sitting room to decide, with a cool head, what she really thought.

A few moments later, her concentration was broken by noise from the elevator, and she turned to see a man and a woman exiting it. The woman exited first, and the man after her, looking harried and irritated. He was dragging two enormous suitcases behind him.

These two had to be Cashmere and Gloss Carmichael, Katniss recognized them from television. She could only partially remember the two years of consecutive Games they had competed in a few years back, but she could tell by the clothes they wore that they were District One.

Cashmere was tall and lovely, her long blonde hair falling in loose waves around her face. Her pale skin and delicate, dainty features contrasted sharply with her bright green eyes. Those sultry eyes were famous; they gave the implication that she could rip you apart if she chose. Cashmere had the kind of gaze that exerted power and control over people. There was nothing girlish about her beauty – she was all woman.

Gloss, though tall and well-muscled, looked rather washed out by the coloring that worked so well on his sister. His own hair lay flatter and did not have the subtle red and gold tints of hers. He too had a full mouth and a small, slightly upturned nose, but they made him look effeminate and childlike. There was a reason Finnick Odair was the heartthrob of choice, and not Gloss.

"And did you bring the red one?" Cashmere was saying.

"Which red one?"

"The only red dress I care about," she said dismissively. Katniss didn't think they could see her.

"I don't know," said Gloss. "Maybe if you want to make sure you bring specific stuff along you should pack for yourself."

"Hush now," said Cashmere. "Try to remember: red, spaghetti straps. I think it's silk."

Katniss was surprised that Cashmere could have a silk dress. Victors were wealthy, but silk was astronomically expensive, and Katniss couldn't see herself paying for a handkerchief of silk, let alone a whole dress.

"Just check your suitcases," said Gloss. Cashmere made a face, but didn't complain. Katniss couldn't for the life of her imagine what she could fill two suitcases with for a short trip to the Capitol. One she'd been late to, no less.

Cashmere opened the first door in the hall, one Katniss could still see from the couch. Gloss heaved the suitcases over the threshold and then turned to go back to the elevator.

"Gloss," she called after him, and he turned (reluctantly, Katniss thought). "I'm sorry I was such a nightmare today. I—I'm still not myself."

"No worries," Gloss said, but Katniss thought he looked slightly less tense as he went to the elevator and disappeared from view. Katniss heard Cashmere humming from within the room, and then close the door.

Katniss looked back at the note, she had crumpled it without noticing, and found herself wondering if there was any use in trying to get fingerprints or DNA when she had handled it so much. The short interim she'd been focusing on the Carmichael twins had derailed her train of thought, and she could not remember why she had agreed to bring the note to Inspector Thread.
Her insides lurched at the prospect, so she shoved the piece of paper in her pocket and decided she would just avoid telling Peeta that she had not done what she was supposed to be doing. Suddenly and with indignation, she realized that the note made no reference to Lavinia either.
The Cook and the Beauty Queen

As Katniss woke up, the full force of Thread's words hit her. There would be no leaving or going home to District Twelve until he said they could. That meant that this little trip, provided she survived it, was not going to be so very little after all. She wondered if her family would be notified of why she was taking so long.

Meanwhile, Peeta had spent the night in Katniss's room. Her prep team arrived in the morning, and giggled at the sight of them in bed together. They were openly disappointed that neither Peeta nor she was naked. They hurried him out of the room so they could get to work.

Barely able to suppress their curiosity over what had happened to Seeder, the prep team kept alluding to the deaths by dropping words like tragedy or incident and then glancing at Katniss, hoping that she would volunteer the rest of the story. She refused to do so.

Katniss's look today was by the same person who had designed her outfit for the first fika, though today she looked less like a succubus. This outfit agreed with her. Her makeup was not as harsh and dramatic as it had been the first time, but it still made her cheekbones look higher and more prominent and her mouth look full and feminine.

Octavia had attacked her with some strange pink substance for her eyes and a lipstick of the same shade while Venia fetched her dress. It was simple and white, not quite as tight or revealing as the poison green one from the other night. Still, it complemented her figure.

Katniss admired it in the mirror, along with the hair, which was voluminous, wavy, and feather light. She was enjoying tossing the hair from side to side, before she remembered that she detested vanity and the things the Capitol gave her. She felt embarrassed even though there was nobody around who might judge her for it.

When they left her room, she sat at the far corner of the bed so she would not see the mirror and be tempted to resume. Now that the initial pleasure at seeing herself had faded, she felt silly and over-feminine.

There was a knock at her door; she had been expecting Peeta, but it was not his face she saw when she opened it. Instead of Peeta, a tiny woman stood on the threshold, wringing her hands and looking nervous.

She was wearing a white coverall and a tall white chef's hat that clashed with short, violet hair and dyed blue eyelashes that must have been at least six inches long. Her skin was unnaturally orange.

"Good morning, Miss Everdeen!" the tiny woman said, and Katniss did a double take. The woman's voice was a high-pitched whistling sound, like those of cartoon mice in children's shows.

"Good morning," said the small woman again, wilting slightly before Katniss. "Good morning."

"Hi," said Katniss.

"My name is Ada Fray. I—I prepare a lot of the food here, a—at the Tribute Center?"

"Okay?" Katniss said.

Extremely flustered, Ada Fray directed her eyes at Katniss's doorframe. There was a shabbiness to this small person beneath her makeup and dye-job. She gave off the aura of an older person who
tries, but fails, to stay current.

"I just, I needed to — Oh, I just want to apologize to you!" she said, and her eyes welled up with tears.

Katniss told the chef to come inside and sit on the bed, mainly so she wouldn't make a scene in the hall. The reason for her visit became evident a moment later.

"I made the fikabrews," Ada Fray squeaked, and tears spilled out of her eyes, leaving black track marks down her face. She cried noiselessly for several more minutes as Katniss tried to decide what to do.

"It's not your fault," Katniss said stiffly.

"I'm such a huge fan," said Ada. "I just want you to know that I would never!" she sobbed, "never do that! I should have watched closer. I know I should have, but I was so busy and I had so many to make and I wanted to be creative."

The chef collapsed into sobs again. Though Katniss didn't know what to say, pity washed over her. Ada had a sort of vulnerability that made Katniss want to protect her.

She patted Ada on the back while the smaller woman sobbed. While she cried, it occurred to Katniss what a golden opportunity this was. An opportunity that would probably not arise again.

"Ada," she said. "You didn't... see anything, did you?"

Ada's crying slowed and she looked up at Katniss in confusion, her eyes bleary and unfocused. "I don't think so, what do you mean?"

"Why do you say you should have watched closer?"

"I left the fikabrews alone," squeaked the chef, and her bottom lip quivered. She offered no further explanation, so Katniss prompted her.

"Why don't you tell me the whole story, Ada? Just tell me everything you saw."

"Oh," said the chef, "Oh, okay." Her breath was still coming in short, loud rasps.

"I was in the kitchen and I'd just finished your brew," Ada said, "and I was doing the last one, for Mr. Etheridge.

"All I needed was some root of Keval vine — a nasty District Four plant, but the root makes a wonderful tea — and Lavinia got there late and—poor Lavinia!" Ada started sobbing anew, and Katniss felt a surge of warmth for the shabby little woman.

Another thing occurred to her in that moment. If Ada was on a first name basis with Avoxes, she was probably not of the same class as people like Effie. She wondered what it was like to be a cook in the Tribute Center. Katniss generally assumed that all people in the Capitol led a comfortable, hedonistic life, but there was something sad about working in a kitchen for celebrities who had no idea who you were.

When she'd calmed down, Ada continued.

"Lavinia was that Avox, by the way." The cook went on before Katniss had a chance to tell her she already knew. "Lavinia got there a bit late and I had to go get more root of Keval Vine from my
storerooms in the back, and I left the fikabrews alone."

"For how long?" asked Katniss, before Ada could start crying about her carelessness again.

"Oh, I don't know," said Ada, "I was in the storeroom for about, maybe, fifteen minutes? When I came back Lavinia was there and I was in a rush so I just finished Mr. Etheridge's drink and handed her the tray." She paused and looked at the floor. "If only I hadn't left! I shouldn't have left. Not even for a minute."

"And this was right before the fika started?"

"Yes. Like I said, Lavinia was a bit late, and I was in a rush... I remember looking at the clock when I got back from the storeroom, and then panicking because I only had five minutes before the drinks had to be ready."

Katniss thought for a moment. "How do you get to the kitchen from the ballroom?"

Ada looked at her in puzzlement, tears still shining on her cheeks. Katniss dared not tell her what she suspected: that a Victor had snuck into the kitchen and poisoned the drink while it had been unattended.

"There's a little stairwell," the cook said slowly. "The ballroom's above the kitchen, and there's a little door in the corner of the room, but only Avoxes use that."

"So what do you think happened?"

"Me?" she said, her voice jumping an octave even higher. "I just assumed it was a terrorist." She lowered her voice to a whisper when she said the word 'terrorist.' It made Katniss want to roll her eyes.

"Don't you think someone would have noticed if someone had been lurking around?"

"Yes," said Ada, her face reddening. "There were two Peacekeepers guarding the door so- so I don't know what happened!" It looked like she might start crying again; Katniss waited for her to calm down. Once she had, the little chef apologized profusely, and jumped down from the bed. She was heading for the door when Katniss had another thought.

"Mrs. Fray," she called. "What happened to Lavinia?"

Ada turned. "Why do you want to know about that?"

"Never mind that," Katniss said sharply, and then to soften her tone: "She helped me some."

She had no desire to elaborate further. Luckily, Ada said nothing more about it.

"Another Avox found her body in her sleeping quarters, it's horrible," said Ada, and she looked truly sorry.

"Didn't the Peacekeepers look there already?" said Katniss, surprised.

"I don't know, Edna only told me—"

"Edna the Peacekeeper?"

"Yes."
"Ah, go on."

Ada took a deep breath. "Edna only told me they found her this morning and—" she broke off and sniffled a few times. "And they said they found an injection mark on her shoulder."

Katniss wanted to get more detail, but the chef was clearly a bit fragile, so she didn't want to push any further.

"Thank you, Ada," she said. "It's not your fault." Ada nodded and receded from the room.

So Lavinia had been injected with a lethal substance in her own quarters. It made no sense. Katniss had thought that she might get clarity with Ada's story, but the idea that Lavinia had been hiding in her quarters the whole time was bizarre. Why would she go there? How did the killer know where to find her? How did they get to her through all the security, and why hadn't the Peacekeepers found her first?

***

Peeta was lost in thought when he realized he had gone the wrong way. He was supposed to be headed back to his room to prepare for the second fika, but the door he'd thought was his opened into a different bedroom altogether. This was the wrong floor. He thought he'd hit the five button, but he hadn't been paying close attention, and he couldn't remember now.

Wandering about, Peeta tried to find his way back to the elevator. The corridors had never proved particularly problematic before, but they suddenly all looked the same. It was extremely confusing.

He'd just turned a corner into a hall he was sure would lead him back to the elevator when he heard whispering, low and conspiratorial. Instinctually, he darted back around the corner he'd just passed. Eavesdropping wasn't normally his thing, but the circumstances weren't exactly normal, either.

He listened hard, but could only catch a few words here and there.

"No idea... tried to talk... was done."

Another voice spoke, louder.

"I heard about it months ago, I knew it was in the works, but—"

Peeta frowned to himself. He was pretty sure he recognized that voice, but the second one was indiscernible. Everyone's whispering tended to sound the same.

"Voice down," said the whispering person.

"—planning, I didn't know about that part. She's had a target on her chest since last year—"

"Shh," said the other voice gently, but Peeta could hear it much clearer now. The pair was walking towards him. In a moment they would see him, and if that happened...

He saw a janitorial closet down the hall. It was farther away from the junction where the whisperers were, but if he was lucky they'd be proceeding down that hall anyway. He walked as quickly as he could without making a noise, and just managed to get inside the closet and pull the door shut when he heard the footsteps that told him they had indeed come in his direction.

The room he was in was dark and musty, wet mops in the corner filling it with the tangy smell of beginning mildew. Bare cinderblock walls reinforced the damp feeling.
"... time to make contact," said the voice Peeta didn't recognize. It was harder to hear in here, with the door in his way. The other voice mumbled something unintelligible, and the footsteps faded.

Peeta decided to take a risk. He had to confirm, be methodical.

People didn't often look back; he should get away with it.

He opened the door a foot, praying it wouldn't betray him. It creaked and whined, and Peeta winced, but the whisperers were too far away to pay any attention. He stuck out his head a tad and saw the heel of one person vanishing behind a corner, and behind, just as Peeta had thought, the unmistakable auburn head of Finnick Odair.

Annoyed at how little he'd managed to hear, Peeta waited for a moment before exiting the janitorial closet. He glanced at his watch, realizing he'd be late if he didn't hurry. He only had a few minutes to get back to his room, change, and then find Katniss so he could tell her the little he had gleaned.

Cautiously, Peeta approached the corner he'd seen Finnick and his companion turn. He was relieved to see, at the far end, what looked like the sitting room and elevator.

He jogged down the long hall, and was surprised as he passed a door on his left that had a temporary plaque on it that said INSPECTOR ROMULUS THREAD. Now he realized where he was. Somehow, he'd gotten off the elevator at the second floor instead of the fifth.

***

Katniss waited for Peeta, but grew impatient when he didn't show. Not wanting to be late again, she abandoned the idea and figured she'd see him in a few minutes anyway.

When she got down to the ballroom, Katniss saw Haymitch in a corner, looking sullen and leaning against the wall. He wasn't talking to anyone. Katniss was trying to decide if it was worth it to try to talk to him when she felt a tap on her arm.

Peeta's hair was slicked back again, but it looked hastily done. He could barely contain his excitement.

"I found out something," he said, leaning in for discretion. "I don't know what it means yet, but it's something."

Katniss frowned. "What kind of something?"

"I'll tell you after."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

A woman with a clipboard and a strange electronic contraption on her head suddenly appeared between them. In a very nasal voice, she told them to take their places.

"Places?"

The woman sighed impatiently, as if they'd asked her to show them to some out of the way spot.

"We're having assigned seating today, and I've been asked to collect you all now, go ahead."

"That's why," said Peeta, looking at Katniss again as they shuffled to their seats. Katniss was annoyed to see that her nametag was at the opposite side of the circle from Peeta's.
Meanwhile, the nasal assistant was herding the Victors to their places like sheep, and a moment later, a very irritated and hurried Cashmere was shoved into the chair next to Katniss. Gloss, apparently, had indeed packed correctly; Cashmere was stunning in her red spaghetti-strapped dress.

Throwing open a folded lace fan, Cashmere made a hmphing noise in the direction of the assistant and crossed her legs. Katniss found the room's temperature perfectly pleasant, but she imagined Cashmere mainly used the fan for fashion, anyway.

Katniss saw Caesar sitting in a foldable chair outside the circle, getting his makeup touched up by a young, frazzled-looking girl. In her head she heard Gale's voice scoff at him. Capitol men were so vain.

"He'll looked washed out if they don't," said Cashmere from next to her. It took a moment for Katniss to register that she'd been spoken to.

"I'm sorry?"

"You were looking over there at Caesar," Cashmere said.

"Where is she then?" Caesar asked headset-assistant with clear irritation. Katniss had never seen him even slightly annoyed before. This icy tone was new. Granted, she never saw any version of Caesar that wasn't the camera-ready one.

"You look lovely, by the way," said Cashmere, and Katniss's attention snapped back to her again.

"Thank you, so do you."

Katniss had said it almost automatically, but it didn't sound right, rather like she was a child scribbling with crayons who'd complimented a famous painter. Cashmere, with her even skin and long, curvaceous legs, was a goddess; Katniss felt shapeless and plain in comparison.

"Do you know what's holding them up?" asked Katniss, so the rest of her last sentence wouldn't hang.

Cashmere shrugged and fanned herself. She was looking at Katniss from top to bottom, absently. Somehow it didn't feel as rude as it should have.

"I have a confession," said Cashmere, waggling her eyebrows. "I designed that."

Now the compliment made more sense. "I thought my prep team had mentioned something about a Victor," said Katniss with a fake smile. She didn't relay the part about the prep team also thinking the design was amateurish.

"Normally, I wouldn't get the chance to see how it looked on you. I got lucky, I guess. I hear your stylist's away."

"Vacation," said Katniss, wondering when Caesar would give her an excuse to end this conversation.

"Someone fetch Cressida McGregor," Katniss heard him say, "I don't care that she says she's busy, this is her job. The other two have been here for ages." He gestured at the two men with cameras. Katniss smirked and decided she liked Cressida.

"I'm glad I got to see the result," Cashmere said. "Television's not the same."
In Cashmere's lazy stare there was an implied request for more compliments on her abilities. No doubt she was used to getting them.

It rubbed Katniss the wrong way, so instead she said: "I got the impression you had other things to do."

Cashmere smiled hugely, not put off at all. She leaned forward so Katniss would be the only one to hear her next words. "Don't we all have better things to do than come here and act brainless for Caesar Flickerman? I'm thoroughly bored of it." She sat back in her chair and resumed her earlier, disinterested expression.

There was something to the hype, Katniss decided, because when someone as beautiful as Cashmere lowered herself to be amused by something you said, you felt an inexplicable pull to keep her there. Katniss was trying to figure out what to say next when Cashmere spoke again.

"Of course, I'm sure boring is not the word you would use for the other night. Poor, dear, Seeder." She shook her head, and Katniss thought she detected an ounce of genuine feeling in Cashmere's eyes.

"No," said Katniss, "definitely not."

Cashmere looked away for a second, pursing her lips and swinging her leg out. The moment was long and drawn-out, probably intended to make the observer curious, and Katniss became annoyed again.

Cashmere looked back at her, ready to impart her message. "It's a bit gross, isn't it? They won't even acknowledge that they're sending in real people?"

"Yeah. Good thing the Tributes from One are always volunteers," said Katniss, unable to help herself.

Cashmere frowned at her. It wasn't an offended frown, but a puzzled one.

"We always lose at least one," she said. She fixed her green eyes on Katniss. "Just because they're stupid doesn't mean they deserve to die."

Shame crept up on Katniss as she realized her blunder. Cashmere was right, of course. And she'd been nice about it, even though Katniss had been the one to personally kill both tributes from her District.

"That was a dumb thing for me to say," she said, and Cashmere rewarded her with a very small smile.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Cashmere said, amused. "I was more interested in talking about your dress. I was particularly excited about that green one."

"It was pretty," said Katniss, and the tiny ember of respect she felt for Cashmere flickered again.

Just then, Cressida burst into the room, red faced and looking murderous. She marched up to Caesar, who did not scold her in the face of her evident fury.

"I told you, Flickerman," she cried, with no regard for who heard. "I told you I wanted someone by my office. It's gone!"

"What's gone?"
"The tape! Stolen!" cried Cressida.

"What tape?" said Caesar. He waved his hand at the Peacekeeper by the door, who took a step forward.

Cressida didn't seem fazed. Groaning, she turned away from Caesar to face the Victors. "I hope you're happy," she said. Katniss got the sense that Cressida knew exactly who she was talking to.

"You'll have destroyed it by now, I guess," she said, and she was tearing up in anger.

Katniss looked around to see if anyone in the circle looked guilty, but all the faces looked equally confused to her. Most of the Victors were balking at Cressida, even Johanna. Haymitch looked very tired.

"Oh, don't bother," Cressida said to the Peacekeeper now approaching her. Then she turned and ran from the room, as if standing there a moment more would cause her to burst into flames.

Caesar was looking quite rattled; he called over headset-assistant, who'd been cowering in the corner of the room, and said something to her that Katniss couldn't hear. She guessed it was about finding a different third cameraperson.

"What was that all about?" asked Chaff, who was seated next to Haymitch. Katniss saw Johanna throw him a look of dislike before muttering: "I bet I know."

Katniss was pretty sure she knew, too. Seeder's presence hung heavy in the air, but there would be no acknowledging it today. While they were together, the Victors were just going to pretend that Seeder had died like dear old Woof — of natural causes.

Caesar took a few more moments to finish getting made up, and the ugly frown on his face softened. By the time the girl was finished with him, he had resumed his regular good humor.

"At long last, we have arrived at our main event," he said brightly. Katniss saw Gloss roll his eyes.

"All ready? Good. Cameras on in three, two, and..."

Katniss found herself hopelessly bored in the hour that followed. All of the Victors had donned their television masks. Brutus harped on the necessity for the Tributes to prove themselves through confrontation with other Tributes. Johanna was sarcastic, Finnick turned on the charm, and Peeta was as winning as ever with gentle self-deprecation.

Katniss was pulled into the mix when Caesar referred to her as "the undisputed Queen of favorites" - a statement which earned a snort from Johanna Mason. Inventing, she expressed a hope that she could instill District Twelve pride in whoever the Tributes were this year, and Caesar's beaming told her she was right on the mark. Using the excuse that she had no other mentoring experience and therefore had nothing to compare to, she managed to exit the conversation gracefully after that.

Peeta winked at her from across the circle, and she smiled back. Maybe she was getting the hang of this, if only little by little.

Cashmere, whose deliberate movements were always vaguely seductive, played it up to such extent that Katniss wanted to throw up. Oozing the sense that she had somewhere better to be, Cashmere was just engaged enough to be enticing. It was genius, if a little one-note. Katniss wondered if Cashmere's mentoring was the reason girl Tributes from District One always went the strategic sexy route.
When the camera finally shut off, Cashmere turned to Katniss. Finnick, Johanna, and Blight would be joining her and Gloss for dinner at the café, and she wanted Katniss and Peeta to come as well. Katniss said she would ask Peeta, not wanting to reject the invitation outright.

She no real intention of meeting Cashmere anywhere, but she knew better than to say so.
"... and then she asked if we wanted to have dinner with her, as if we all don't eat at the same place already," Katniss said upon their return to her room.

"Just her?" Peeta asked, loosening his tie and tossing it on the dresser. Katniss went into the bathroom to wash Cashmere's make-up off her face.

"No. Her, Gloss, Finnick and both of the Victors from Seven," she said, turning on the faucet. Peeta appeared in the bathroom doorway. "We should go."

"What?" said Katniss. She always had a hard time taking make up off, and now she'd smeared it around the right side of her face instead of getting it off.

"We should go," he said again.

"Why?" said Katniss. Her plan had been to use Peeta as the excuse not to go.

Peeta told her about the conversation he'd overheard in the hallway while she wiped her face with the towel.

"Make contact?" she said. "What does that mean?"

Peeta shrugged. "No clue, but Finnick knows something. All that stuff about you having a 'target on your chest' and stuff. That's why I think we should take Cashmere up on the offer."

"Fine," she said, turning back to the mirror, "we'll go, but I want to be able to leave whenever. I can't stand these people."

"Johanna's all right," he said.

"Johanna?!" said Katniss. Her stomach twisted as she wheeled around, facing him again. "All right?! The one sitting around cracking jokes as Seeder's convulsing?"

Peeta looked puzzled. He leaned against the doorframe. "I think that's just... how she is," Katniss didn't say anything, only wet the towel again and wiped her face. She felt much angrier than she knew she should.

"Plus," added Peeta, "she's one you can cross off. She didn't kill Lavinia."

"How do you figure?"

"They guarded her door all night after Seeder died because of what you told Thread. She couldn't have done it."

Katniss wiped her face one final time and hung up the towel. "Yeah, I guess."

On the way to dinner, Katniss remembered Ada the cook and relayed her story to Peeta. He was as baffled by it as Katniss had been.

The café was surprisingly empty, and Katniss wondered how many of the Victors were taking dinner in their rooms. Perhaps the murders had ruined the social atmosphere. Dinner was buffet-style today,
and Katniss and Peeta's party sat at a table at the far end of the room.

Seeing them, Cashmere rose. She was still wearing the dress from before, but had pinned her hair so that it fell to one side of her head.

"Oh good," she said with a smile. "I'm glad you decided not to eat alone."

Katniss glanced at the other people at the table. They all looked mildly surprised, and Gloss, who had been speaking, looked annoyed that his sister had interrupted him. Meanwhile, Johanna narrowed her eyes at Katniss.

Katniss dragged a metal chair from a nearby table and sat at the corner, between Blight and Peeta. Cashmere was on the other side of him. Katniss felt a spiteful, silly pleasure that Johanna was on the other side of the table, where she couldn't be so "all right" on Peeta's arm.

"Where is everyone?" Katniss asked, uncomfortable with the silence that had fallen over the group. She felt distinctly like an intruder, the new kid.

"No clue," said Blight next to her. "We were wondering that too."

Katniss saw that Blight was smiling at her.

"Weird," she said, and stood up again. The chair made a loud scraping noise as it slid backwards, which only made her feel more self-conscious. "I'm going to get some food."

Peeta made a move to join her, but she snatched his plate and told him she would take care of it. She knew what he liked, she said.

He gave the smallest of confused frowns but didn't protest as she slid away. Nobody would pay attention to her if he could get them talking, and then the two of them could get out quickly. Peeta had always been good at charming people – unlike Katniss — and there was a chance Cashmere had invited them out of a predatory sort of curiosity. Maybe she'd be judging them the whole time, storing up things to laugh about for later.

Katniss had a hard time balancing the plates as she heaped pasta onto both and perused the sides. She would not take salad, she decided, because her mother wasn't here and couldn't make her. Peeta would want salad, though, so she used the tongs to place some on his plate.

As Katniss turned and approached the table again, she could feel the change in atmosphere. The tense silence from a moment ago was gone; Blight was even laughing now, easily and naturally. She'd only been gone for a moment, and she felt a rush of affection for Peeta. He was damn good at this.

Each Victor was paying Peeta close attention, none looking bored or irritated, as he told a story from when he was young, about a time his father had taken him and his brothers sledding. There was something about the story that made Katniss uncomfortable, though she didn't know why.

When Peeta got to the end, about how he'd tumbled off the sled at the top of the hill and rolled to the bottom, the Victors laughed, and Katniss realized what had disturbed her. She'd never heard this story before, but here he was sharing it with these new people.

"You know, unlike some people, you don't seem all that different on TV," Johanna said, her head tilted to the side. "In his interviews, Finnick here seems like just the biggest Casanova, but he's really just a dumbass." She elbowed Finnick, who was sitting next to her.
Peeta's humble smile looked perfectly natural. Katniss bit her lip to keep from smirking and giving him away; nobody but she could tell he was playing them.

"He could just be faking right now, as well," said Cashmere, as if she'd read Katniss's mind. "Are you, Peeta?" She put a hand on Peeta's arm and gazed at him, her chin tilted down. It did not escape Katniss's notice.

Peeta opened his mouth, but Johanna answered Cashmere's question instead. "No, Cashmere, because all he talks about on TV is Miss Girl on Fire here."

The spotlight had landed on Katniss again, and she couldn't think of how to respond. Peeta turned away from Cashmere to look at her and smiled in the theatrical way he always did when they were kissing for the camera. It was a wide smile, brazen, quite unlike the shyer grins he gave her when they were alone. Leaning into her, he kissed her on the temple, and the spot seemed to burn when his lips left it.

"That reminds me," said Finnick, looking at Katniss. "You owe me money, Jo."

Johanna leaned forward, placing her folded hands on the table. "Are you sure? Because I'm not," she said.

Katniss looked down, against her will, but when she looked up again, Johanna was looking at Finnick. Gloss's eyes, however, were boring into her, and she felt the urge to look away again. She couldn't though, not twice, because that would imply that she felt shame about something. Why couldn't they just change the subject?

Then Johanna gave her an easy way out. "Why don't we stop beating around the bush? Can we talk about what we're really thinking about?"

Blight groaned and Finnick, who had chuckled at Johanna's joke a moment earlier, suddenly turned serious. "I don't know if we're supposed to."

"So?"

Finnick looked exasperated, but Katniss was trying to contain her excitement. If there was ever a time she needed a poker face, it was now. She glanced at Peeta, but he only looked mildly, politely curious. Of course he did.

"Well?" said Johanna, when nobody answered her, "It's got to be a Victor right? Doesn't that interest any of you?"

"Joha—"

"I'm suspicious of Chaff, personally," she said, ignoring Finnick as Blight let out a groan. Katniss saw her chance and took it.

"How come?"

Johanna looked at her with surprise and distaste. "Oh, so you want to know what I think now that your pet Peacekeeper cleared me?"

"I'm just curious," said Katniss, taking a bite of pasta and trying to resist the urge to say something cutting. "I don't see why you jumped to him. That's all."

Johanna eyed her suspiciously. "I don't know. He's too... put it this way: he's got to be messier than
he looks, plus—"

"We shouldn't go throwing accusations around, Jo," said Blight, sounding uncomfortable. "It's not very nice, is it?"

Johanna made a face and looked him up and down as if he were an insect. "But you—"

"Enough," Finnick said.

This time Katniss frowned at him too.

"Huh. Fine," said Johanna. "What about the extra, secret entrance to the train-

"Johanna!" cried Finnick, really losing his cool now.

Katniss looked at Peeta and caught his eye. He winked at her; this was what they had been hoping for. Cashmere cleared her throat.

"What are you talking about, Johanna? I got a bit lost there," she said.

Johanna looked at Finnick, who shook his head furiously, before turning back to Cashmere. "Apparently I can't talk about that either." She turned back to Finnick. "I'm not five years old. I'd appreciate it if you talked to me like an adult. G'night Gloss. Cashmere."

Johanna got up and shoved her chair into the table, making the plates and glasses rattle. Then she marched away and banged through the café door.

"That's our Johanna," said Blight, sending Katniss a good-natured smile.

Little as she liked her, Katniss still found herself a bit offended on Johanna's behalf. She made a point not to answer him and addressed Cashmere, who would neither know anything nor shush her.

"Why would she think it's Chaff?" asked Katniss, twirling spaghetti around her fork, pretending to be oblivious to Blight's discomfort and Finnick's sudden bad temper.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Cashmere, with a shrewd smile. "Chaff is lovely. What do you think, Gloss?" She turned to her brother, who only grunted that he had no idea.

After that, the subject died, but Finnick was sullen and responded little throughout the rest of the meal. Meanwhile, Katniss and Peeta made a bit more small-talk. Peeta did most of the work, though. When finally they could use the excuse that both he and Katniss were full and sleepy, the other Victors decided the same and rose to leave as well.

The ostensibly short distance between the café and the elevator felt miles long to Katniss. She didn't know what to say to anyone and was unable to say goodbye because all six of them were heading in the same direction.

Upon arrival, Katniss lagged behind to avoid being in the very back of the elevator, where she thought she might feel a bit of claustrophobia. Getting on last made Katniss responsible for pushing the buttons, and she noted the floor numbers of all the Victors. Blight was on three, and Finnick was on five, the same as Peeta. Gloss was on eight and Cashmere, as Katniss already knew, on ten, where she herself was.

The elevator started and slowed almost immediately on the second floor. A sour-faced Enobaria got on wordlessly, though she clearly wasn't happy about how many people were already on the
"Wait!" called a voice, and Katniss saw Cressida running towards them from the hall. Enobaria let out a groan and hit the door-close button. Annoyed by Enobaria's rudeness and pretending not to have seen her hit the button, Katniss stuck her foot out to stop the doors closing.

A second later, Cressida got to the elevator, thanked Katniss and asked Enobaria to hit the five button for her. The Victor from District Two mumbled that it was already pressed and turned away.

The camera girl panted heavily as she tried to catch her breath.

"Hey," she said to Katniss. "How about that interview we were discussing earlier?"

Katniss was grateful for a break in the silence. "Yeah, no problem, when?"

Cressida beamed at her. "I'm in my office every day from 1:00 to 3:00. It's the door on the back wall on the second floor? You can't miss it; the only other door is a janitorial closet."

"Sounds good."

"Every day," Cressida repeated, "from 1:00 to 3:00, right by the janitorial closet. Tomorrow good? 2:30?"

"Yup, got it, sure." said Katniss, and wondered why Cressida felt she had to tell her twice. It also occurred to her suddenly that the last time she had seen Cressida, she had been wailing and red-faced. "Did you get your tape back?"

It was a tactless remark, and Katniss felt like kicking herself, but Cressida gave her a big smile. "Nope, and I doubt I'll be getting it back. But I don't think I need it, I remember plenty."

Katniss thought that answer was strangely vague and specific at the same time. Before she could ask for clarification, the bell dinged, and Cressida and Finnick got off.

The pressure in the elevator dropped as the Victors got off, and suddenly Katniss and Peeta were alone with Cashmere.

Cashmere made a comment about being on the same floor when the elevator got there, and she pointed out her room and invited them to pop by for a chat whenever they felt like it.

"Anything to relieve this boredom," she said. "I should have made a different excuse and just not come at all."

"You can do that?" asked Katniss.

Cashmere laughed, as if Katniss had asked a stupid but endearing question.

"Why do you think I got here late?" she said pointedly, her hand on the doorknob to her room. "I made up something about my boyfriend's mother being sick and then I went and spent the whole day at his family's. It got us out of the fika — or it was supposed to — because they don't check the things I say. I got Gloss to pack for me, so I didn't have to worry about that." She had the look on her face of someone who gets away with something they know is wrong, and Katniss suddenly found Gloss, who was eternally in his sister's shadow despite winning his Games a year before her, extremely sympathetic.

"Let's go look for it," said Peeta, the door to Katniss's room having just swung shut.
"Look for what? The door Johanna was talking about?" Katniss said. "Tonight?"

"Why not?"

"There are still plenty of Peacekeepers around," said Katniss, flopping down onto the bed. "It'll look awfully suspicious."

"You just want to go to sleep," Peeta said playfully before jumping on the bed himself. Katniss rolled at the same time, and he landed on top of her.

"Argh," she grunted, though she was smiling. "Get off of me."

Peeta smiled at her and pushed a strand of hair out of her face. This kind of close physical contact was nothing new, but suddenly, with Peeta's face so close to hers, she felt her heart beat a bit faster. He was looking at her the way she hated, the way he'd looked at her in the cave and sometimes still, when he thought she wasn't paying attention. She thought of the feeling that had arisen in her chest that one time he'd kissed her and wriggled out from under him; it was too much, and she could imagine Gale's eyes on her. She stood.

"Where are we going to look if we do this?" she asked, facing away from him and hoping she hadn't hurt his feelings. "What are we looking for?"

Katniss turned back around, and Peeta looked perfectly normal. He had his arms behind his head.

"First floor," he said. "A door to the outside's probably going to be on the bottom floors, right?"

Katniss agreed and changed into the pants she had worn the day before. They decided they would wait a few hours, at least until the Victors they'd eaten with had fallen asleep. Just in case, Peeta convinced Katniss to bring her bow with her when they went down, so that if they ran into anyone they could say they couldn't sleep and were on their way to the gymnasium.

Though Katniss found this excuse dubious at best, she didn't grumble about the logistics but slung her bag over her shoulder. At one in the morning she and Peeta tiptoed through her door and shut it as quietly as they could.

Katniss and Peeta tried to make as little noise as possible. At the end of the hall, Katniss told Peeta to stay back as she scanned the open room. A pair of Peacekeepers were sitting on the white leather couch, clearly both asleep.

"Well they're not doing their jobs," Katniss muttered. "I bet they're supposed to be watching so that nobody sneaks into my room in the middle of the night."

"Probably," said Peeta, taking a step into the room. "We can stay at mine tonight."

The Peacekeepers did not stir, and Peeta and Katniss got to the elevator without trouble. Katniss pushed the button for the first floor.

"Lazy shits," she said, and Peeta's laugh surprised her a moment later. "What's so funny?"

"'Lazy shits'" he said. "I bet that's the first time you've been angry that a Peacekeeper hasn't done the job they were supposed to do.

Katniss sniffed. The elevator made a soft whoosh as it moved down the building. When the doors opened, she and Peeta braced themselves to meet more Peacekeepers, but there were none there.
"Did they give up the whole surveillance thing, then?" Katniss asked no one in particular. "There were tons of them around this morning. Snow's guard can't be that big."

"Maybe they're all hiding," Peeta said.

"Wasn't this supposed to be a serious thing we're doing, here?"

"I am serious," Peeta said. "They're trying to lure the killer out, give them a false sense of security. Lucky for us."

Still, they were careful. There were no other Peacekeepers to be seen, not at the ballroom or the café. They spent two hours looking for hidden levers and secret doors, but came up with nothing.

Yawning and impatient, they agreed there was nothing to be found here, and they would come back later to inspect the second floor. With relief, then, they rode the elevator back up to floor five, tiptoed across the sitting room to get to Peeta's, and fell into bed, asleep almost before they hit it.
Katniss woke up in her underwear. It wasn't the practical kind she had at home in District Twelve but rather the lacy, skimpy stuff.

In her exquisite state of exhaustion the night before, she had completely forgotten about modesty. Embarrassment washed over her. Hopefully, she thought, Peeta wouldn't have noticed either, and she hurried to clothe herself before he woke up.

She was pulling on her pants when she heard him stir and then groan and stretch. From across the room, he blinked bleary blue eyes at her.

"Don't look at me!" she said, turning away. She still wasn't wearing a shirt.

Peeta didn't comment. Modesty was of no great value in the Mellark household. According to what he had once told her, none of his family members bothered much with it.

Prim and Katniss's mother, too, looked at the body as purely biological, not inherently sexual or embarrassing. For some reason, this view had never rubbed off on Katniss. She turned back to Peeta once fully dressed.

"I forgot to ask," he said, stifling a yawn. "What did Thread say about the note?"

Katniss hadn't decided beforehand whether to lie to him about it, and she took too much time standing there to decide. He caught it immediately.

"You didn't take it to him."

Katniss felt a strange shame creep over her.

"No," she said, "I didn't take it to him."

Peeta sighed heavily and closed his eyes. The embarrassment Katniss felt was irritating her, making her feel like she needed to defend herself. She wondered why she would need to. It was perfectly acceptable for her to make decisions on her own.

"Why not?" asked Peeta.

"Because I didn't want to."

He sat up. "You don't have any other reason? You just left the room and pretended to give the note to Thread to shut me up?"

"I didn't pretend anything," Katniss said, forcing herself to stop playing with the hem of her shirt. "I just didn't give it to him."

Peeta sighed again, and Katniss ignited.

"It's a terrible idea, Peeta! Thread's a pompous old bully, probably taking orders from Snow. And—"

"He's still the only help we've got, though," said Peeta, his voice even.

"It doesn't matter!" she said. Giving the note to Thread would be a bad idea; of that she was sure. "I don't think he'll do the right things with it."

A Blight on the Land
"So what do you want to do then?" Peeta asked, standing up from the bed. He pulled on his own pair of pants, unmoved by her glare.

Never having fought with him before, she found herself irritated that he was keeping so calm.

"I don't know. Not that."

"So we just sit here and wait for someone to try to kill you again? Because I don't think—"

"That's not what I said!" Katniss cried. "I just think we should take care of this ourselves."

"Yeah, all right," said Peeta, and she could tell he was getting annoyed now. "Because Johanna's theory about Chaff is a great lead. Excellent idea, Katniss."

Peeta's dig was infuriating. In her anger, Katniss could not distinguish what was smart to say from what she should keep to herself.

"Everything else darling Johanna says seems to be wonderful," she said. "Why don't you go do some plotting with her and Thread?"

She regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth. Peeta stared at her in bewilderment, and she could see the gears grinding in his head. Opening his mouth, closing it again, and then venturing once more, he said:

"Are you jeal—?"

"NO!" Katniss shouted, red in the face. "No, I'm not, and that's not what we were talking about."

She crossed the room and picked up her bow bag.

"I'll see you later," Katniss said, marching to the door and slamming it on her way out. Peeta had never inspired this in her before.

Gale's insistence that Katniss take her bow along had proved to be a good thing. She would take it to the Gymnasium and shoot until she cooled off. Yes, she was angry that Peeta didn't trust her decision-making, but she was painfully aware that her reaction had also had a lot to do with guilt. She knew she had no right to Peeta's continued attention or affection when he got so little in return. The suggestion that she was jealous made her feel like a spoiled brat, and she didn't want Peeta to see her that way.

The Gymnasium felt different to her now. The last time she'd been here Peeta had been a stranger, and she had been sure she was going to die. Now it was just a place to pass the time.

Katniss nodded at the small, petulant looking Peacekeeper who sat at a desk by the entrance. He waved her through, yawning and looking bored out of his mind.

The stations were all present and open, exactly where Katniss remembered them, but most were unoccupied. The old lady, who Haymitch had told her was called Mags, was making a fishhook at a station with rope. Brutus and Gloss were at the station at the back of the room, throwing knives at dummies. Katniss rolled her eyes at the grunts Brutus was producing as he threw.

Blight was using the throwing weights a few feet away from Brutus and Gloss, but he was lifting them like dumbbells rather than throwing them. He waved to Katniss when he saw her.

She smiled mildly and walked past him to the archery station, where there were three targets arranged something like twenty, thirty, and forty feet away. In unpacking her bow she remembered
Gale saying he'd restrung it for her. She'd been annoyed, then, because she had already done so herself. Why hadn't she been appreciative of the gesture? What was wrong with her? Why was it so hard for her to accept help?

Thankfully, Katniss's aim was unaffected by her bad mood. She hit the near bull's-eye on her first shot; the middle bull's-eye, on her second. On her third shot, she aimed for the far target. After double-checking that her elbow was correctly positioned, she pulled back the string, exhaled, and—

"Holy crap!" Blight's voice said. Katniss lost her focus but was too late to stop herself from letting the arrow fly. It zoomed through the air and missed the target altogether.

"Damn it," she said under her breath. Blight was standing right beside her, apparently aware but unconcerned that he'd made her miss her target.

"Whoa," he said. "My fault. Sorry about that. Those first two shots were amazing though."

"Thank you," said Katniss flatly.

"I heard a rumor," Blight said, lowering his voice. "I heard last year you shot an arrow at the Gamemakers. Knocked an apple out of the roast pig's mouth?"

"Yep."

"That's incredible!"

The response to this story was usually a kind of shock, but never praise. Katniss herself had always thought it a bit unfair; she'd known she wouldn't hit any of the Gamemakers, and there had been no Blights around to throw her off the mark. Softened by his admiration, she felt her annoyance fade.

"I'm going to go get my arrows," Katniss said.

Blight nodded and disappeared as she approached the targets. A moment later, he reappeared holding an apple.

"I brought it to eat," he said, gesturing to the apple, "but I've got to see this. If I throw this in the air, could you hit it?"

"I could try."

She pulled an arrow from her sheath and loaded her bow. With the string pulled taut, she was ready to go in an instant. Blight wound up and threw the apple towards the back target in an elegant arc. Katniss followed the apple's path with her eye, tilted her bow down an inch, and released. It hit its mark easily, perfectly, and Katniss thought fleetingly of Gale's face. If he'd seen her do that, he'd have taken back all of his teasing from the past five years.

Blight was beside himself, and Katniss decided she liked him after all. His earnest, boyish excitement was charming as well as flattering, unfettered by the characteristic aloofness of the other Victors.

"You shot that thing straight out of the air, while it was falling," Blight said. "No wonder you got an eleven. I can't do anything that well."

"Thanks," she said. She didn't want to seem bigheaded, so she added, "I bet you've got some skills on me, though."

Blight shook his head vehemently. "I only got a four."
"A four?"

"Yeah. I wasn't exactly a favorite to win."

Katniss set off to retrieve the apple and gestured for Blight to follow her. "So how'd you do it?"

"Luck," he said, as Katniss picked the evidence of her sharpshooting up off the ground. "The other Tributes all forgot I existed."

"Hm," said Katniss.

In the background, they heard Brutus grunting loudly as he threw a knife that hit his dummy in the shoulder and knocked it down. After glancing at him in distaste, Gloss spun and released his own knife, which lodged deep in the dummy's chest.

"What's Brutus's problem?" Katniss asked Blight in a whisper.

Looking murderous, Brutus was stalking across the knife throwing station to restore his dummy to standing position. He held up his hand and barked at Gloss to stop throwing.

"He's just an ass," Blight whispered back. "Looks like he's going to throw a tantrum in a minute. He always huffs and puffs for a while first."

Gloss twirled his knife through his fingers, visibly impatient. When the other Victor clearly made no attempt to hurry, Gloss threw a sideways look at the Peacekeeper by the door, who looked like he was falling asleep.

"Does he throw tantrums regularly?" said Katniss.

"Oh yeah," said Blight. "You should have seen him last year when that Thresh kid killed his girl Clove. He was furious. Especially because Thresh let you go after that. Brutus got all in Chaff's face about it, like it was his fault."

Brutus set up his dummy, but he was too hasty trying to balance it, and it clattered to the floor again at once. Gloss rolled his eyes. Again Brutus tried, and again the dummy fell.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"DAMN IT!" he bellowed. "WHY WON'T THESE DAMN THINGS STAND?"

He stomped across the room to the Peacekeeper's desk and started yelling at him. The Peacekeeper looked at him with dazed, sleepy eyes.

"Poor Bender," said Blight, indicating the Peacekeeper. "Brutus is going to make this all his problem."

"Please calm down, Mr. Kanakaris," drawled Bender in a bored voice. "I am sure the dummies are perfectly fine.

Brutus's face had turned a shade of purple. "DON'T YOU TELL ME TO CALM DOWN YOU LAZY PIECE OF SHIT. GO OVER THERE AND TRY THEM YOURSELF."

As if to make a point, Gloss threw his knife and hit his dummy in the center of the chest again. The dummy stayed upright. Brutus did not notice but rather kept ranting.

"He's going to get himself in trouble because of a practice dummy." said Katniss.
Blight chuckled. "That's our man."

"IF WE'VE GOT TO BE LOCKED IN HERE THEN THE LEAST YOU CAN DO—"

"That's enough, Mr. Kanakaris," said Bender, rising from his chair. "Please go back to what you were doing. You also have the option to leave, if you like."

"LEAVE? LEAVE?" Brutus snarled, his face now an even deeper shade of purple. "I CAN'T FUCKING LEAVE, BECAUSE YOUR LOT THINKS IT'S OKAY TO KEEP US IN HERE TRAPPED LIKE RATS—"

"That's not what I'm referring to, Mr. Kanakaris!" Bender was yelling now, though he maintained his composure much better than Brutus did. "Now I will have to ask you to—"

Brutus grabbed the smaller man around the throat, and Katniss gasped. Blight's amused expression vanished. He and Katniss watched as Brutus lifted the Peackeeper up off the ground. For a moment, it looked like Bender would be thrown across the room.

Katniss saw Bender struggle and wrestle with Brutus, trying to get the larger man off of him. Then, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a rectangular device, and jabbed it into Brutus's side.

Brutus shook, electrocuted, and fell to the ground, on top of Bender. The Peacekeeper wriggled out of the large man's grasp and stood up, dusting himself off. Katniss saw him bring his wrist to his mouth and say something she couldn't catch. Meanwhile, Brutus lay unconscious on the ground.

"What?" Bender snapped at the three Victors openly staring at him. Mags hadn't looked up from her fishhook making once while Brutus had been screaming. "Go back to doing what you were doing!"

Hesitantly, Katniss turned back to the archery station. A few minutes later, more Peacekeepers came and carried Brutus out of the room. Bender had returned to his desk as if nothing had happened.

Katniss went back to making conversation with Blight, though more reservedly. Brutus's outburst had reminded her of the circumstances of the meeting, that they weren't allowed to leave the Training Center, and that one of the Victors in the building was a murderer. It could be Blight just as easily as anyone else.

In reality, all of the Victors were murderers, Katniss included. Hadn't she ended Glimmer with the tracker jacker nest? And more personally, shot Marvel in the neck? Of course, she had been fighting for her own life then, and that context seemed important.

Katniss eventually excused herself and moved to the fishhook station, where she asked Mags to help her. It was a good excuse to get rid of Blight. When he left the gymnasium some time later, Katniss waved to him. She didn't want him to realize that her guard was up.

The fishhook was not easy, and Katniss cut herself four times trying to get it to stick together. Mags could produce them at a rate of one every fifteen minutes or so, but Katniss was still unable to wrangle hers into shape after an hour and a half. Katniss's interest in the subject seemed to make the old lady happy, though. She kept patiently undoing fishhooks she had already made, trying to demonstrate slowly so Katniss could follow along, with limited success. It didn't help that Mags's speech was very garbled, and Katniss could only make out every fifth word or so.

When she finally succeeded in making a fishhook that stayed together, Katniss remembered that she had agreed to meet up with Cressida at two thirty. She glanced at the large clock hanging on the wall. _Crap._ It was three forty-five, and she was over an hour late. How she had managed to spend such a long time in the Gymnasium, she didn't know. She said goodbye to Mags and hurried out,
almost forgetting her bow in her haste.

Of course she would forget her only appointment on an otherwise schedule-free day. Katniss berated herself as she made her way to the second floor. Remembering Cressida's directions, she passed the janitorial closet and found herself in front of an engraved glass door. This was probably Cressida's office. She knocked, but there was no answer.

She tried the doorknob and found the room unlocked but empty of people. The office was tiny, and the walls an almost blinding white. An ancient looking wooden desk took up almost all the space, and a small wooden chair was wedged behind it. There were also several shelves on which there were at least twenty cassette tapes standing neatly side-by-side.

Katniss had missed Cressida, as expected. Hopefully, she wouldn't consider it a big deal. Hadn't she made a point about being in her office every day from 1:00 to 3:00? They could probably reschedule for tomorrow. Katniss certainly had an abundance of time; she wasn't going anywhere, thanks to Thread. She closed the door and turned around.

Suddenly, Katniss was aware of how alone she was, and it felt as if the walls were closing in on her. Storming off from Peeta's room this morning suddenly seemed very foolish. Now she was by herself, somebody in the building wanted her dead, and they were willing to go to extreme measures to make it happen. For the first time, she hoped there were cameras watching her every move.

The halls were long enough that she'd see anyone approaching. She'd be safe from ambush, unless someone was hiding in a doorway, waiting for the right moment.

*What are you thinking?* She thought to herself. Her bow was with her. Nobody could get close enough to harm her. She marched towards the elevator, making a point of not looking over her shoulder. There wouldn't be anything there, anyway.

With her renewed feeling of security, she resented the part of herself that had wished for Peeta a moment ago. Katniss could deal with dangerous situations. When she was thirteen, she'd had a run-in with a bear. Peeta would have been holed up in his bakery then, kneading dough or something.

She thought of how she'd revealed the Johanna thing and winced. No, Peeta was actually the last person she wanted to see right now.

Her thoughts turned to Brutus and his tantrum. She wondered how it was possible that someone could get so wound up over something as silly as a practice dummy falling over. She got on the elevator and pushed the button for the tenth floor.

There was that other thing he'd said, though, about being trapped like a rat.

The elevator dinged, having arrived at the destination.

A strange thought popped into Katniss's head. Peeta and Haymitch were certain that the Capitol was confused and thrown off, but she had never known Snow to be anything other than a step ahead of her. The only time she'd bested him was when she'd used a handful of berries to take advantage of the Capitol's need for a Victor.

If it was bigger than one person trying to get at Katniss, why the elaborate scheme? Why go through the trouble of leaving notes and trying to take her out publicly? Then there was the issue of the mugs at the fika. What kind of assassin would be foolish enough to poison the only cup she would definitely not drink out of?

The sitting room was empty; the Peacekeepers had probably been called off once they realized
Katniss was not there. She continued through the hall and opened the door to her room.

The metallic, salty odor of blood hit her in the face as if she'd collided with a wall. The bed was drenched with it, looking black in the bright sunlight spilling through the window. There was a body on the bed.

Cressida McGregor lay crumpled, her limbs sprawled out at unnatural angles. Her face was deathly pale, a stark contrast to the blood on the sheets. Her eyes peered at the ceiling, glinting dully but seeing no more.

It was plain to see what had killed her. Cressida's head was tilted upwards, her throat cut. The blood around the wound was still red, not yet congealing.

Katniss was back in the Games again. Back were Glimmer's screams and Cato's moans, and the fear and the blood and the chasing. The mutts were on her again. Her bow and sheath clattered to the ground, and she fell, hitting her head with a thunk on the thinly carpeted floor. She felt like she was going to choke on the stench of blood.

She saw Cressida's empty, dead eyes before her and tumbled into darkness.
Katniss found herself in horrible dreams. She was in the Games and sprinting towards the cornucopia when she tripped over something.

Haymitch’s body lay before her, bloody and mangled. Suddenly, he awoke and began screaming. As he wailed, mutts appeared and jumped over Katniss, and she shut her eyes.

“Katniss!” screeched Haymitch, but when she opened her eyes, the screaming man was Peeta, and the mutts were tearing him apart, bit by bit. The dogs had the face of Cressida McGregor.

“Marry me,” said Peeta, as one of the dogs bit into his shoulder.

“Okay! Okay!” she cried, sobbing, but the Cressida-dogs didn’t let him go. He gazed at her sadly, as if oblivious, now, to the dogs that were ripping him apart.

“Prim,” he said, and the birds above Katniss shrieked with her sister’s voice. Katniss looked up. Prim screamed and screamed, and tears were streaming down Katniss’s face as a bow materialized in her hands. There wasn’t much time to figure out which Jabberjay had Prim.

That one! It had to be that one, the one high above her. She took aim and fired. Her arrow pierced the Jabberjay through its breast, and Katniss heard Blight whooping and cheering behind her.

The bird fell and thumped onto the ground, but it wasn’t a bird anymore. It was Katniss’s sister now, her throat ripped open and bleeding everywhere.

Katniss dropped to her knees and sobbed, and she saw Cashmere standing over Prim’s body, dressed all in white like an angel.

“One of ours always dies too, Katniss,” she said sadly, and finally Katniss woke with a jolt.

“Prim!” she cried. “Peeta!”

And suddenly he was there, whole and safe, his arms around her. She reacted instinctually, burying her face in his shirt and bursting into tears. He rocked her back and forth, trying to calm her down. Slowly, the nightmare receded and lost some of its sharp edges.

When Katniss finally calmed down, she felt a hand on her back and realized that she and Peeta were not alone in the room. She turned her head and saw Effie wearing an expression Katniss had never seen on her before. Effie looked afraid, and there was a rawness to the fear that made Katniss want to hide. She turned back to Peeta, who smiled at her weakly.

Katniss extricated herself from Peeta and fell back on the bed, a bit embarrassed. She was in Peeta’s room, wearing lacy underwear under a large shirt that belonged to him, with no recollection of how she got that way. Haymitch was in a chair by the dresser; Effie, standing next to the bed. When Katniss spoke, her voice was hoarse.

“What happened?”

She saw Peeta and Effie exchange worried glances.

As if reminded by Peeta’s words, Katniss’ head started pounding.

“Concussion, huh.”

“Yeah. We don’t know how long you were on the floor there. Blight said—“

“Blight?”

“Yeah,” said Peeta. He looked down as he said it, not meeting Katniss’s eyes. “Blight’s the one who found you.”

“You left the door open, dear,” said Effie gently. “Thank God, or it might have been hours. The killer could have very easily come back—”

Peeta cut her off. “Blight said he just walked by and saw you lying on the floor, and Cressida...” Katniss saw that he had large shadows under his eyes.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Haymitch looked very drunk and possibly incapable of speech.

“What was Blight doing on the tenth floor?” asked Katniss, staring at the ceiling.

Effie and Peeta glanced at each other again, evidently confused.

“Isn’t he on the tenth floor?” Effie asked, looking at Peeta.

“No,” Katniss said. “He’s on the third. I remember because he took the elevator with us after dinner the other day.”

Effie waved her hand in dismissal, but Katniss met Peeta’s gaze. He knew what she was getting at, and they would talk about it later, when they were alone.

“How long was I out?” asked Katniss, trying to sound matter-of-fact. She sat up, determined to not be a patient anymore.

“At least forty hours,” said Peeta.

“Forty hours?!?”

“Yeah. The nurse wanted to keep you in the infirmary, but I didn’t think you’d want to wake up in a hospital bed when all you needed was sleep.”

Katniss and Peeta both shivered. Being hospitalized in the Capitol carried a very ugly connotation for them. Indeed, Katniss was glad that she had woken up here, where Peeta and Haymitch were. Even if she’d woken to Effie’s face alone, it would have been infinitely preferable to waking up in the company of a cold Capitol doctor.

“I also thought—” began Peeta. He tried again. “I also thought it might be safer here, with one of us watching you all the time.”

“Safer?”

“Katniss,” said Peeta, “somebody murdered Cressida and left her in your room.”

Katniss stared at him.

“I convinced Thread to turn on the locking feature to this room,” Peeta said. “Your key is on the
“I'm sure she’d be perfectly safe in the infirmary,” said Effie, though she sounded doubtful.

“So what happens now?” asked Katniss. She wanted to put on her clothes, to feel less helpless. Peeta and Effie looked at each other for the third time, and Peeta sighed heavily.

“Inspector Thread said to send you down to him as soon as you were awake,” he said.

Katniss threw down the covers and maneuvered to the edge of the bed, trying to ignore her headache. She prayed her feet would hold her. She felt oddly jiggly and unsteady.

“You don’t have to go now,” said Peeta. “You can wait until you feel up to it.” He rose and put a hand on her shoulder.

Katniss found that she could stand quite well, and with a quick glance at the mirror she decided that it was not too obvious that she felt weak and slightly nauseated. She shrugged off Peeta’s hand.

“Don’t be silly,” she said, trying to sound normal. She started braiding her hair, tangled and dirty though it was. “I feel up to it right now.”

Peeta frowned at her, but she knew he knew better than to challenge her. He waited as she dressed, the large shirt lending her at least some coverage.

“Let me walk you down, at least.”

She assented. Effie gave her a tight hug and told her all of the escorts were being sent away from the Tribute center for the remainder of the investigation. After assuring her she was all right and giving an unacknowledged wave to Haymitch, Katniss and Peeta set off again for the second floor and Thread’s office.

“I bet Haymitch will still be there when I get back to the room,” said Peeta. “He’ll be passed out and drooling on the bed.”

Katniss laughed, but briefly, because her head was pounding again and a violent jolt of pain went down her spine. She gritted her teeth.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” said Peeta.

“Yeah. Fine,” said Katniss, trying to keep her face neutral.

Peeta frowned. She was sure he didn’t believe her at all. She didn’t want him to worry, but more urgently, she didn’t want to be holed up in her room. She was a Victor, for crying out loud.

Cressida had been murdered in Katniss’s room, and Katniss had fainted, gotten a concussion, and then proceeded to sleep for over a day. It was like a bad joke. She was supposed to be stronger than this, and she refused to let Thread see that she wasn’t.

Peeta took hold of her hand in the elevator and gave it a squeeze. He was looking at the floor. It bothered her, seeing how down he looked, so she turned to face him and hugged him. It seemed like Peeta had been waiting for permission, because suddenly his arms were wrapped tightly around her waist and he was holding her close. His forehead fell onto her shoulder.

“When they came to get me, I thought you’d been attacked,” he said, taking a breath. “I kept thinking how the last time we’d talked I’d yelled at you and—“
“I yelled a bit more than you did.”

Peeta lifted his head from her shoulder and smiled at her. “Yeah, but isn’t that always the way?”

“Shut up,” said Katniss, but she was smiling.

He looked thoughtfully at her for a moment before releasing her. It had been a while since they’d shared this sort of closeness in daylight, both of them fully awake.

When they arrived at Thread’s office, they heard muffled yelling inside.

“I told you!” insisted the voice. “I’ve never met her before!”

Katniss winked at Peeta, and they pressed their ears against the door. The low rumble of Thread’s voice came next.

“Are you sure? I seem to remember—”

“You’re wrong,” said the other voice, sounding breathless. “And you don’t have any proof or evidence of anything.”

There was a clatter of a chair being pushed in.

“Yes, by all means,” said Thread drily. “You may go.”

Katniss and Peeta were unprepared for the door to swing into the office as someone jerked it open. They found themselves face to face with Enobaria, who wore a scowl that emphasized her ugly shark’s teeth. She stumbled but quickly regained her faculties.

“Out of my way,” she said. She pushed past Katniss and disappeared down the hallway.

Peeta raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll see you later,” said Katniss. “Go take care of Haymitch, make sure he’s not drooling on the bed.”

“Sure you don’t want me to wait for you?” Peeta asked.

“Positive,” said Katniss. “I have a feeling Thread’s going to keep me a while anyway.”

Peeta nodded and began heading back down the hall to the elevator. Katniss waited until he was gone before going in. She could hear Thread in the room, shuffling papers, so she allowed herself a second to let her headache overtake her for a moment before steeling herself against it. Shortly after, she was in front of Thread, full of gusto.

She pulled out the chair to the table without invitation and sat opposite him. He stared at her quizzically.

“You wanted to see me?” she said.

Thread shoveled up the papers and tapped them into a neat stack before placing them down on the desk. Opening a desk drawer, he drew out a notebook.

“You’re up and about, I see,” he said.

She nodded. Thread leaned back in his chair and surveyed her the way someone watched an animal
at a zoo. It was uncomfortable, but Katniss did not want to be the one to cave and break the silence.

“So, Miss Everdeen, here we are again,” he said finally. “Here we are again.”

“Yup.”

She wondered if his silence was a strategy to force information out of her. If she was going to change her mind about the note, she was getting her chance now, but she still had the nagging thought that it was a bad idea. There was something bigger at play here.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened,” said Thread. Katniss counted it as a victory. She told him the story in frank terms: she came in, saw the body, and fainted.

“Why were you talking to Enobaria?” she asked when she had finished.

Thread laughed at her, seeming genuinely amused.

“I am interested in the part about you fainting,” he said, ignoring her question.

“What about it?”

“Well, Miss Everdeen, I have a problem with liars. Are you a liar?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you tell me,” said Thread, “how you actually got that concussion.” He leaned forward again and began tapping the desk with a pen.

Oftentimes when Katniss was speaking to someone from the Capitol who disliked her or mistrusted her, she had the disadvantage of needing to find a way to cover for her lies. This time, she had no such disadvantage, and Thread’s assumption had revealed how little he knew. Enobaria’s outburst made more sense now; Thread was just bluffing.

She smiled brightly, as if he’d told her a joke.

“That’s actually how I got the concussion, Mr. Thread. I came in, saw Cressida, and fell down. You can check your cameras or bugs or whatever. Then you’ll see exactly who murderer is too, probably.”

Thread frowned. He shuffled through a few of his other papers. It was at least a minute before he spoke.

“I don’t know where you got the idea that the rooms in the Tribute center are bugged, but it is misguided at any rate.”

Katniss had to stifle a laugh at the obvious lie.

“Funny, is it?” said Thread, narrowing his eyes. “I assure you, if we had cameras in your room, I would have no need for this interview. I suspect you knew as much, though.”

That gave Katniss pause.

“Explain to me this,” Thread said, a hint of vitriol sneaking into his speech. “We now have a situation in which a Victor has been poisoned from your cup, and a Capitol employee, killed in your room, Only—“
“Have you—?”

“Quiet please,” said Thread, holding up a hand. His voice was rising with every second he spoke, losing composure. “When I want you to speak, I will ask you. The body of Miss McGregor shows no evidence of any struggle. I’m wondering if you can explain to me what exactly a camera worker and Capitol employee was doing in your room, and why there is no evidence of any fighting at all.” He stopped speaking for a moment, probably to calm himself. His lip was curled in a firm expression of dislike.

“And additionally, I would like to know what exactly you are playing at,” he said, more quietly now. “Victors don’t faint at the sight of blood. I should remind you that everyone in the country has seen you take life callously and efficiently, so I do not believe for a moment in your supposed sensitivity.”

The atmosphere held a strange, tense silence, like the crackling static before a thunderclap. Katniss was taken aback, and her head was pounding viciously, making it hard for her to think.

“Speak!” said Thread.

“I was supposed to meet Cressida at two thirty, in her office,” said Katniss, suppressing the urge to tell Thread she was not his dog. “I missed it. I don’t know why she was in my room. I didn’t even know she knew where it was—”

“Easy to find out,” said Thread dismissively.

“Okay then,” said Katniss, annoyed by the interruption. “I don’t know why she went to my room. She could’ve been looking for me.”

“What was this meeting supposed to be about?” Thread asked, clicking the pen and pulling the notebook closer to him.

“I don’t know. Interview or something

Thread looked up from his notebook and narrowed his eyes at her again. She stared back at him, unintimidated. It was only a half-lie, and he hadn’t believed anything she’d said up until now anyway.

“Go on then,” said Thread. “You made arrangements to meet Miss McGregor at two thirty. And then?”

“I missed it, and when I got to my room she was—“

“Not that,” said Thread through gritted teeth. “What do you think happened, Miss Everdeen? What would motivate this person—who is apparently after you—to kill her instead? Surely nobody could mistake Cressida McGregor for you.”

Another chance. The notes, she could reveal them now, if she wanted to, but she wouldn’t. Her own theory was forming in the back of her mind.

“Beats me. You’d have to ask the killer that.”

Thread slammed the pen down on the notebook and shoved both away from himself.

“So what’s so special about you, then, huh?” he sneered, gesticulating in a mocking, exaggerated manner. “Why does everyone want to kill Katniss fucking Everdeen, huh?”
“Seems to me like you’re figuring it—”

“QUIET!” Thread roared, picking up his notebook again and throwing it at the wall in frustration. He took several minutes to calm down, breathing heavily. Katniss was glued to her chair. When Thread spoke again, he looked at the table instead of her. “Why do they want you dead so bad they took out a sympathizer?”

“Excuse me?” she said, wondering if she had heard him correctly. Thread looked up with wide eyes; he’d lost control of himself, said something he wasn’t supposed to. She could tell that much.

“Get out of my sight,” he said.

“What did you just—?”

“OUT!”

Katniss did as she was told.

***

A sympathizer. That’s what Thread had said: they’d taken out a sympathizer. Katniss stared down at her coffee in its porcelain mug, trying to will her headache away, to no avail.

The pounding was making it hard to think. After Thread’s interview, she’d headed straight to the café on the first floor. The caffeine was supposed to help her head, but it was taking its time kicking in. She was having a difficult time stringing her thoughts together into cogency. She would remember something, suddenly, like the symbol Cressida had flashed at her, and then the other things she’d noticed would fade into fog.

The café was empty except for Beetee, who sat typing away on his laptop. Katniss picked up a cup of coffee at the beverage table, and then Brutus and Enobaria came in and sank down into chairs across the room, paying her no attention.

Thread’s interrogation of Enobaria had sparked curiosity in Katniss, though she could not tell why. She remembered very clearly the way that Enobaria had hit the door-close button when she saw Cressida running towards the elevator. And the way Enobaria had laughed when Cressida’s tape went missing.

When Katniss had seen the body, she’d thought somebody had slit Cressida’s throat, but she hadn’t actually looked very closely. Maybe it hadn’t been a clean cut. Maybe the way the girl’s throat had been torn open was the result of shark-like teeth...

The woman in question was facing away from her, talking animatedly, but Katniss was too far away to hear what she was saying. Brutus, who apparently had been set free to roam the Training Center once more, was nodding, sporting (as Katniss noted with amusement) two black eyes.

The pounding in her head was still there, but less violent now. She got up to refill her coffee cup, approached a table an innocent distance away from them, and leaned in, trying to hear what they were saying. It was all ruined a moment later when someone sat down opposite her with a thunk.

It was Johanna Mason.
“So, it looks like you’re awake again,” she noted, as Katniss jerked herself upright. “You could be a bit smoother,” she said. “There are better ways to eavesdrop.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Katniss hoping Johanna would stand up and leave. She took a sip of her coffee, and Johanna only stared at her, her elbow hanging off the back off the chair.

“May I help you?” said Katniss after a while. Johanna smirked at her.

“What’s the matter Twelve, am I making you uncomfortable?”

“Is there something you need?” Katniss asked.

Another moment passed and Katniss glanced at Brutus and Enobaria. They were leaning in towards each other, speaking much more quietly. Katniss mentally cursed Johanna for ruining a perfect opportunity.

“My head hurts,” said Katniss. “So if you’re just going to sit there—”

“Oh, poor baby,” said Johanna, her grin widening. She took her elbow off the chair and leaned forward. “Like I said, they’re on to you over there.” She made a careless and obvious gesture in Brutus and Enobaria’s direction. “Might as well announce that you’re a sneak, though I bet they think you’re just nosy.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Katniss. The words sounded thin and unconvincing.

“Knock knock,” said Johanna, knocking on the table as she said it. “What idiot is going to talk about their murder plot in a common area when they have private rooms?”

“They could be bugged,” said Katniss, before she could stop herself.

Johanna nodded slowly as though pondering. Katniss could see the victory in her eyes. “Fair enough.”

Katniss drained her cup and started to stand up.

“I think I’m going to—”

“Oh, sit down, Everdeen, I don’t give a rat’s ass about whether you like me or not. I have a proposition for you. Or do you not want to find the killer?”

Katniss frowned and considered ignoring Johanna and walking away. She wouldn’t trust Johanna as far as she could throw her, even if a Peacekeeper had watched her the whole first night. After a moment, she sat back down, looking expectantly at Johanna. Five minutes, she told herself. You can handle it for five minutes.

“All right then,” Katniss said. “What do you have?” And it better be good, she added silently.

“Me first,” said Johanna. “You owe me for that night I got hounded.”

“Fine,” said Katniss, annoyed. She tapped absently on the porcelain mug.

“Why snaggletooth and blockhead?” Johanna asked, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms now. “Don’t they seem a bit too obvious to you? Plus their combined IQ is about the same as a loaf of bread’s.”
Katniss studied Johanna’s face, unable to decide if she was joking. Regardless, Katniss was not going to share any theory or non-theory she had with Johanna; she had yet even to figure out what they were for herself. She glanced at Enobaria quickly and made a snap decision. She leaned forward as though she was going to confide something.

“Cressida’s throat got ripped out. I have no other leads,” she said. It was the truth, at least almost. She told Johanna about the elevator.

“So it’s not even both of them,” Johanna said, nodding and throwing the pair a sideways look. “Well, it’s not much, but I’ll help you.”

“Help me what?”

“Investigate her, dumbass.”

Katniss ignored the insult, though she felt her blood pressure rise slightly. Johanna was already making a habit of talking to her like she was stupid.

“How so?” she asked, keeping her voice even and tapping more loudly on the porcelain cup. She could tell it was irking Johanna.

“They follow a very strict schedule over there, those two,” said Johanna. “They’ve been in here from around three to at least four, every day we’ve been here. Yesterday they were here until about four-thirty,” she said, and she seemed to drop her guard for a second.

Johanna looked at Katniss as if expecting her to supply the next part of the plan. When she didn’t, Johanna gave an exasperated sigh.

“And that means,” she said pointedly, “that Enobaria’s room is empty for at least an hour every day. We could—”

“What do you expect to find in there?” said Katniss, glad to be the one to interrupt for once. Johanna looked mildly affronted and glanced down at the porcelain cup Katniss was still tapping on.

“That tape Cressida was going off about,” Johanna said. “I have a feeling it’s the key to the whole thing. She was so adamant that it was stolen and not just lost, and what better reason to steal a tape besides someone catching you doing something you shouldn’t?”

It was something Katniss had considered as well. Said aloud, the theory seemed to carry much more authority, as though Katniss was silly not to have recognized it at once.

“What do you get out of this?” Katniss asked, narrowing her eyes.

Johanna grinned. “Fair’s fair. Once we go through Enobaria’s stuff, and you’re convinced that all the thoughts she’s ever had wouldn’t fill a thimble, we look at Chaff.”

Katniss had immediate objections to that, but she reminded herself that as long as he was innocent, it didn’t matter how much they searched Chaff’s room.

“Why me?” asked Katniss. “There’s got to be about a thousand people here you trust more than me.”

A line appeared between Johanna’s eyebrows. She appeared to be deliberating something. At last, she spoke.

“Because you’ve got the most to lose,” said Johanna. “And Finnick keeps telling me to leave it
alone.”

So Finnick was trying to act like nothing was happening. Katniss eyed the girl across from her, wondering if she’d been the whisperer Peeta couldn’t identify.

“All right then, I’m in.”

“Great,” said Johanna, rising from her chair and stretching out. “We’re doing this tomorrow. Meet me here at ten till three.”

“Johanna,” said Katniss. “Why are you doing this, really?”

Johanna raised her eyebrows at her. “It’s not out of the goodness out of my heart, I’ll tell you that much. But just because they’re targeting you doesn’t mean I don’t want to get back to real life, too.”

“So why not just wait until they take me out?”

Johanna laughed.

“I’m not very patient. That’s plan B though.”

She set off in the direction of the doors and Katniss sat, frowning. A moment later Johanna was back again.

“One more thing,” she said. “I’m curious and since I lost that bet with Finnick I might as well ask you. How exclusive is your arrangement with bread-boy?”


“I’m asking how casually you’re banging.”

Katniss flushed a brilliant bright red, and her eyes widened. She tried to speak but seemed to have forgotten all her words. Johanna laughed at her, apparently deriving great pleasure from her embarrassment. She wiped tears from her eyes.

“Oh, I see,” she said, smirking. “In that case, feel free to lend him to me any time. I’ll give you a full report. I knew Finnick was wrong.”

She winked wickedly at Katniss and disappeared again, laughing her head off.
“Enobaria, though? Not Finnick?”

Katniss gave an exasperated sigh.

“No. Not Finnick. He and Johanna are friends,” she said. “Besides, her whole reason for recruiting me was that he wouldn’t tell her anything.”

Peeta rolled over onto his stomach and studied her from the bed. Katniss sat in the chair that Haymitch had occupied earlier that day as he’d fallen deeper into inebriation. When Peeta had returned from walking Katniss to Thread’s office, Haymitch had been so incoherent that Peeta figured he’d need to carry him back to his room. Luckily, an Avox had happened to come by on her rounds, and she’d immediately gone to get help. The two male Avoxes who’d appeared shortly after picked Haymitch up like a sack of flour and carried him out of the room. They’d declined Peeta’s offer to help.

“I’m surprised you said anything to Johanna at all,” said Peeta. “What makes you think we couldn’t do the same thing without her?”

“You’re the one who got all excited when she started talking about that door,” said Katniss.

“Did you ask her about that?”

“No,” said Katniss, reddening slightly. Peeta chuckled.

In the café, Katniss had been exhausted from the encounter with Thread and her head had still been aching. Johanna’s proposition had seemed like a good one then, but now Peeta was poking holes in it. She had thought having close contact with someone who knew the other Victors so well would give her some kind of insight, and as Peeta had already pointed out, Johanna definitely was not the one who killed Lavinia.

“I will though,” said Katniss. “I’ll slip it in casually, like it doesn’t really matter.”

Peeta nodded thoughtfully. Though his skepticism irritated her, a part of her (one that she was continuously trying to ignore) felt satisfaction that Peeta was reluctant to join confidences with Johanna.

He stood up from the bed and walked to the dresser, grabbing the remote. Clicking a few buttons, he made the window go from transparent to white. A few moments later the words WHAT WE KNOW appeared onscreen.

“Good to have it down somewhere. Help us think it all through,” he said, when Katniss looked at him quizzically.

She nodded and turned her chair to face the window as Peeta returned to the bed.

“Start with the chef’s stuff,” she said. “From the first night. Mug was alone between five and fifteen minutes when the chef went to get Keval root.”
“Like from Keval vine?” said Peeta, scrunching his nose. “I read about that in school. It actually strangles people and stuff.”

“I don’t remember that,” said Katniss. “There were Peacekeepers guarding the door to the kitchen,” Katniss said. “So unless they were in on it, someone came into the kitchen through the ballroom entrance.”

Peeta jotted down “pk guard” and “ballroom entrance”

“There’s something fishy about that, though,” said Peeta. “It would take a lot of luck to just happen to get down there in the few minutes that the mug was unattended.”

“I know,” Katniss said with a shrug. “But I don’t have an explanation. Do you?”

Peeta chewed his lip for a moment. “I only see that happening if someone was watching her, waiting for their moment.”

“But how would they know that Ada was going to leave the room, or that Lavinia would be late?”

“I don’t know,” said Peeta, shaking his head. “Let’s move on.”

“Wait. Lavinia probably caught them there and...”

“And didn’t realize what she’d seen until afterwards,” Peeta finished. “That’s why she ran away.”

Katniss met Peeta’s gaze briefly and then turned back to the screen. She felt a pang for Lavinia, who was so tragically unlucky.

“What next?” she said. “Finnick and his conversation with mystery person?”

In response, Peeta wrote down “mystery convo.”

“I don’t have anything else on him,” said Peeta. “Just that and the way he reacted to Johanna at dinner. No idea who the other person in that conversation could be.”

“Let’s just skip ahead,” said Katniss, with a wave of her hand. “I’ll see if I can get anything out of Johanna.”

“All right. Blight, then.”

“Nothing,” said Katniss, frustration starting to build inside her. “Just that he was on the tenth floor and able to find me.”

“That’s not nothing,” said Peeta, though she could tell he was getting frustrated as well.

“It’s not much.”

“I’m sure he didn’t just happen to be on the tenth floor, Katniss.”

“Yeah,” said Katniss, not looking at him. “But if Blight was behind the whole thing, why wouldn’t he just kill me then?”

The silence told her Peeta was considering that scenario.

“Well, I guess we got lucky,” he said, not being clear whether he meant Blight or in general.
Neither of them said anything for a while. Peeta was scribbling words about Cressida, “throat,” and “missed appointment.” He also wrote “missing tape,” and circled it.

“So you think the tape is a big deal too, huh?” observed Katniss.

“Everything is a big deal until we prove that it’s not.”

Katniss suddenly felt very tired. She felt like she was watching a movie, except the whole screen was covered except the corner. She could feel something stirring, just beneath the surface. It was infuriating that it wasn’t coming together.

She stood from the chair and flopped on her back on the bed, letting out a groan.

“Do you want to save Enobaria for tomorrow?” asked Peeta.

“Yes please,” she said quietly. Optimism about the next day was out of the question. She was suddenly very sure that they would find nothing in Enobaria’s room. Something else was bound to go wrong, as well. For all she knew, her co-conspirator could be in on the murder plot herself. It was still possible.

“Oh,” said Katniss, then, not realizing she uttered anything aloud. “Oh.”

“What?” said Peeta, frowning and placing the remote on the dresser. The window turned clear again.

“Thread said that the killer wanted me dead so bad that they took out a sympathizer!” said Katniss. Neither of them spoke for a few moments, as Katniss’s words sunk in, but Peeta’s eyes widened more and more by the second.

“That’s important!” he said finally. He scrambled to pick up the remote again and make a note of what she’d said. He kept mumbling and shaking his head. “Why didn’t you tell me that first?”

“I forgot,” said Katniss sheepishly.

“A sympathizer...” he said, trailing off.

“I wonder who,” said Katniss, thinking aloud. Peeta turned off the windowscreen again and set the remote down.

“I think...” he said, “I think I know.”

“Who?”

Peeta too fell backwards on to the bed and lay beside her, looking up at the ceiling. “Those terrorists, right? I mean that would make sense, he said.”

“Right. But what would they want with me?” said Katniss. “Why kill me? And if Cressida was part of it then I agree with Thread; why would they take her out?”

Peeta turned on to his side and looked at her. He seemed to look through her skin and inside her; it made her feel exposed, like she couldn’t hide anything if she tried.

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “But you’re going through with this thing with Johanna tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I think so.”

He nodded. “All right, I’ll see if I can get into Cressida’s office, see what I can find.”
Katniss nodded at him and yawned, her eyelids already getting heavy. She didn’t have the energy to change into pajamas. She let her eyes close.

“I think it’s good that you didn’t bring the note to Thread,” said Peeta’s voice, somewhere above her.

“Huh?” she said.

“It’s good that you trusted your gut. If this is anything like I think it is, you did the right thing. I’m sorry for yelling at you about it.”

She opened her eyes, rubbed them, and saw Peeta’s small smile. She rolled over and slung her arm over him.

“Tell me I was right again.”

“You were right, Katniss.”

“Again, please.”

“You were right.”

***

Katniss waited outside the café for Johanna to show up. At two fifty-five, Johanna sauntered up to her, dressed in a black t-shirt and black pants. Katniss considered making a joke about black clothes and burglary, but decided against it.

“Snaggletooth should be here any second,” said Johanna. “It’s always on the dot, three o’clock.”

Sure enough, Katniss heard the elevator ding and Enobaria appeared in the hall a few moments later. She glanced at Johanna and Katniss suspiciously, but disappeared into the café on time.

“It’s go time,” said Johanna.

As they got into the elevator, Katniss tried to calm her nerves. She had no idea how Johanna could be so calm about their impending mission.

Johanna hit the button for the tenth floor.

“That’s my floor,” said Katniss.

“It’s also Enobaria’s,” said Johanna. “I’ve got Cashmere looking out, just in case.” The elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

“Cashmere?” asked Katniss.

“She wasn’t here when Seeder and Lavinia died,” Johanna said, rolling her eyes.

“I know that.” Katniss snapped, sounding testier than she meant to. “I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

“What’s so surprising?” Johanna asked, leading Katniss easily through the hallways. Katniss didn’t answer Johanna’s question.

To Katniss’s surprise, Enobaria’s room was just down the corridor from her own, around the corner and about thirty feet away. Johanna knocked on the door and mouthed the word Avox. It only took a split second to deduce that the room was empty, and Katniss and Johanna hurried in, shutting the
door behind them. They were careful to check that there was nobody in the hall.

The room had the same layout as the other three Katniss had been in since arriving at the Capitol: bathroom immediately to the right, Queen bed facing a dresser topped with a television.

In Peeta’s room (Avoxes had moved her things from her room on the tenth floor when it became clear she would not be returning to it) Katniss’s suitcase and bow lay on the floor; Peeta’s modest suitcase, by his side of the bed. Enobaria’s room was spotless. The only sign that it was inhabited at all was a small picture frame on the nightstand.

Johanna sighed heavily and moved straight to the dresser, which Enobaria had apparently filled, and Katniss went to the nightstand. She picked up the picture frame. It held a photo of Enobaria and a little girl, both reclining in a grassy field. The girl was the spitting image of Enobaria, though her smile was sweeter. Enobaria’s teeth ruined any chance of looking anything but menacing.

“Does Enobaria have a daughter?” Katniss asked.

“No idea,” said Johanna, ripping savagely through the drawers in the dresser. Katniss saw the flash of pink undergarments and felt a twinge of guilt in her stomach. “Are you just going to stand there?” Johanna added. “Because I could have done this alone.”

“Sorry,” said Katniss, setting down the picture and opening the top drawer on the nightstand. She was terrified of the other personal things she might find.

The top drawer held nothing but a blue piece of plastic. Katniss picked it up only to set it down again in disgust when she recognized it.

“She’s got a mouth guard,” said Katniss, wiping her hand on her pants. “I touched all over her mouth guard.”

“You’d have one too if you had teeth like her,” said Johanna, laughing. “I bet she’d bite her tongue off otherwise.”

Katniss closed the drawer, more uncomfortable than before. The second drawer was empty, so Katniss joined Johanna at the dresser. Johanna had already pored over the contents of three of the eight drawers without result, and Katniss was starting to think that the day’s only discoveries would be whatever she could convince Johanna to tell her.

“Hey Johanna?” said Katniss. Johanna continued to rummage and didn’t look up.

“What?”

“I’m sorry about putting Thread on your back.”

Johanna paused, looked straight out in front of her for a moment, and then went back to searching the drawer.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Katniss was quiet for a moment more. She finished going through the shirts in her own drawer and moved on to the next one.

“What were you talking about that day in the dining hall?” she asked, deciding that the direct approach was best. “You said something about a door, and Finnick shushed you.”
Johanna closed her drawer hard and yanked open the next one.

“If that’s all you wanted to know, you could’ve just asked me that first. I don’t need a fake apology,” Johanna said matter-of-factly. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t bullshit me.”

“Fine. I’m asking you about it now,” said Katniss.

They were still not looking at each other, and Katniss’s drawer of pants was not proving particularly promising. She was irritated with the assumptions that Johanna made, the way she always spoke as if she knew what the other person was thinking and feeling.

“I don’t know much,” said Johanna. “I just know he implied that he was getting out of the building whenever he wanted. I thought he was talking about a literal door at the time but—”

She’d stopped and fallen abruptly silent.

“But now you think differently?” Katniss said, shuffling through the second stack of pants in the drawer. Why on earth Enobaria had brought so many of her own clothes, Katniss could not understand.

“Let’s just say you got a really good deal, compared to Finnick,” Johanna said. She closed the drawer she was working on and shoved Katniss to the side to get at one of the last two. “Getting forced into marriage is far from the worst thing that can happen to a Victor. Especially when the boy is as smitten and gorgeous as yours is.”

Katniss moved on to the third and last stack in her drawer and tried to come up with something to say. The suggestion that Peeta was unrequitedly in love with her both angered and embarrassed Katniss, regardless of what the truth was. It had never been her intention to lead Peeta on, and she was only trying to do what Snow required of her, so why did she feel criticized? She got to the end of her stack and shoved it back into the drawer. A deep thud emitted; the drawer itself had clearly not made the noise.

Johanna and Katniss looked at each other with wide eyes, their conversation forgotten. Reaching in behind the pants, Katniss groped blindly in the drawer until her hand closed around something plastic and rectangular. Both she and Johanna gasped when she pulled it from the drawer. It was definitely a tape.

“Shit,” said Johanna, grabbing the tape out of Katniss’s hands. “I wasn’t actually expecting—”

“Wait. There’s still something there.”

Katniss reached into the drawer again, felt around in the back of it, and drew out another tape. Again she tried and again she found a tape, and then another, and then another. There were six altogether.

“I thought Cressida said she only lost one tape,” said Katniss.

“She did,” said Johanna with disappointment. “These aren’t Cressida’s tapes, I don’t think. They’re labeled, look.”

She handed Katniss one of the tapes. It was labeled BLIGHT TAYLOR in large block letters. Johanna held up another one, labeled CASHMERE CARMICHAEL.

“I bet I know what they are,” said Johanna, pointing to a tape labeled KATNISS EVERDEEN/PEETA MELLARK. “Check that last drawer, I bet there’s more in there.”
Sure enough, a moment later Katniss drew five more tapes out of the one drawer they hadn’t yet checked. These were labeled MAGARITY FLANAGAN and HAYMITCH ABERNATHY, along with three other names she recognized.

“There’s one for each of us,” said Katniss. “All of us here.”

“Yes,” said Johanna, frowning. She walked over to the television set. There was no place to put a cassette tape that Katniss saw, but Johanna lay the Cashmere tape on a black mat in front of the TV, and it glowed blue. “Capitol technology,” she said. “They moved past cassette tapes ages ago, but these systems still take them because the Districts all use them, and most camera workers.”

“We all have one,” said Katniss, looking back at the tapes. “Well, except Enobaria. She lived through her own Games, though—” Johanna shushed her.

A teenaged Cashmere appeared on the screen in a skimpy, strappy blue dress. She was talking to a Caesar Flickerman, in the days before long hair had been fashionable. His electric blue buzzcut and eyebrows matched Cashmere’s dress.

“So Miss Carmichael,” he was saying. “What’s your strategy going forward? I don’t know how much your loveliness will help. In fact, I think it’ll make the girls want to get rid of you earlier.”

The audience in the video recording laughed, and Katniss and Johanna shared a look of disgust.

“Oh Caesar,” said Cashmere brightly, smacking him lightly on the shoulder, “don’t be ridiculous. I’m going to win.”

The audience gasped and clapped, and Cashmere beamed at them and tossed her gold hair.

“So brazen you are, dear, I love it! Don’t you love it, folks?”

More roars from the crowd. When they finally quieted, Caesar took a quieter tone.

“You are such a brave, lovely girl,” said Caesar, “I’m sure your brother must adore you. I know the rest of us do. Has he been helping you a lot?”

“Gloss has been a total stick-in-the-mud actually,” Cashmere said, tossing her hair again. “He’s so bossy. But I guess he’s trying to help me a lot, yeah. Caprice is being such a little baby about it, too. Crying about favoritism, and all that.”

The picture froze, and Katniss saw that Johanna had found the remote and paused the tape. She looked angry.

“Who’s Caprice? I don’t remember that name,” said Katniss.

“Caprice Pennywell. He was Cashmere’s District partner the year of her Games,” said Johanna. Katniss noted the discomfort in her voice. This truth was ugly. “He didn’t volunteer. It was one of the only years District One didn’t have two volunteers. Nobody wanted to go up against Gloss’s sister.”

Katniss drew a short, loud breath, and Johanna nodded, looking pained.

“He was the sweetest kid too, apparently. Maybe a little spoiled, but really nice, soft-spoken. He’d been head-over-heels for Cashmere before they got reaped. Then of course he saw how self-obsessed she was, and Gloss didn’t even try to pretend—”
She broke off, and it was just as well. Katniss didn’t want to hear any more. Johanna fast-forwarded through the tape now, mumbling she wanted to confirm that it was just a Hunger Games tape.

“Cashmere’s not like that anymore, you know,” she said, as the machine whirred. “She knows she was a nightmare back then. Maybe she’s a bit silly still, yeah, but she’s not that girl.”

Katniss nodded and found herself moved by Johanna’s words. Ten minutes before, Katniss could have been sworn that Johanna was the most callous person she’d ever met, yet here was a completely different side of her. Johanna was suddenly full of apologies and excuses because even she could not handle this self-centered teenaged girl, who was so unconcerned about a boy who had cared for her.

Katniss thought back to the conversation she’d had with Cashmere on the night of her arrival, all about dresses and boredom; then suddenly, out of nowhere: *We always lose one, Katniss.*

“‘Weird, huh,’” said Johanna. “‘Never would have thought I’d be defending a Career.’”

Neither of them said anything for a while.

“I get it,” said Katniss. “Not even Careers know what the Games are like before they go in.”

Johanna nodded and looked at the screen for a moment, then turned to Katniss with narrowed eyes.

“This doesn’t mean we’re friends, Twelve.”

Despite herself, Katniss laughed, and Johanna cracked a tiny smirk. After several minutes, they turned their attention back to the screen.

In the warp speed of fast forward, Katniss saw Cashmere, only she didn’t look like Cashmere. She had so much mud in her hair that it was brown and stiff instead of blond, and her face was painted gray with something.

“She’s almost as good at that as Peeta is,” said Katniss.

Just then, Katniss and Johanna heard the clicking of a turning door handle.

“*Snaggletooth’s early,*” hissed Johanna. She hit a button on the remote and disappeared into the closet, shutting the door quickly and quietly behind her. Katniss started, fell to the floor, and rolled under the bed.

Katniss heard the door hinges squeaking as Enobaria entered the room. Through the tiny gap between the floor and the bed skirt, Katniss could see the outline of feet.

There had been no time to hide the tapes. Enobaria would know that someone had been in her room. Katniss heard the sharp intake of breath above her and prayed that Enobaria wouldn’t realize the perpetrator was still there.

Katniss couldn’t see the feet anymore. Enobaria was in front of the bed now, and Katniss could hear her yanking drawers open, presumably to replace the tapes. They thumped and thunked loudly against the wood as Enobaria shoved them inside.

Katniss tried adjusting herself so she could see.

*Crunch.* She had rolled over onto a piece of paper.

Enobaria stopped. There was no way she hadn’t heard the noise.
“Who’s in here?” said Enobaria, in a low growl, and Katniss was reminded of the way the Careers had kept her treed and trapped. She held her breath.

Why hadn’t she run into the closet with Johanna? There were no noises coming from there, though Enobaria was bound to check now anyway. Please go away, she begged silently, unable to imagine what would happen if Enobaria found her. Please...

Katniss saw skin through the gap. A hand, she realized, inches from her foot. The hand reached down and grabbed hold of the bed skirt—

“Knock knock.” Cashmere’s voice broke through the silence. The hand disappeared, and relief flooded over Katniss.

“What is it?” said Enobaria, the hoarseness of her voice clashing with Cashmere’s light tone.

“Brutus was asking for you,” she said.

“Why didn’t he come himself?”

“You’ll have to ask him that,” Cashmere said. “I just said I’d see if you were in your room.”

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“No. Just something about stacks of sugar?”

Katniss heard Enobaria’s knee crack as she stood.

“All right,” Enobaria said. With that she marched away.

Katniss heard the door close. A second later she heard it reopen.

“You can come out of your hiding spots now,” said Cashmere.

Katniss heard Johanna throw open the closet door as she herself tried to adjust to get out from under the bed. Turning her head, she saw the crumpled piece of paper that had almost given her away. She grabbed hold of it as she wriggled under the bedskirt.

Johanna was standing above her, arms crossed, looking murderous.

“Well?” she demanded.

“Sorry,” said Katniss, holding up the paper. “I rolled over on this by mistake.”

Johanna stared at the paper as if it had spit in her food.

“Just be glad Cashmere got here in time,” she said, turning away. Katniss nodded and pocketed the piece of paper.

***

Meanwhile on the second floor, Peeta looked to both sides before opening the engraved glass door and slipping behind it. He left it open a few inches so he’d be able to hear anyone coming.

The small size of the office surprised him, though Katniss had already described it for him: the white walls, the shelf with all the ancient cassette tapes, and the desk that absolutely did not fit in the room.
To his dismay, most of the drawers were empty, and the single one that had things in it was filled with blank notebooks. If Cressida had left any clues for them, they did not seem to be in the office.

He went through the drawers again, careful to make sure he felt every inch of them. Nothing.

Someone had been through here, he was sure of it. There was no way that Cressida had kept an office this impersonal. Moving on to the shelves behind the desk, he wondered if Cressida’s stolen tape had been as obviously displayed as these.

The tapes were labeled things like “Arrival montage” and “Past Quell overview.” There was one that was labeled “Prelim interviews” and then, in parentheses, the names Blight Taylor, Johanna Mason, and Finnick Odair. The last one Peeta picked up said “A goodbye to Woof.”

At that moment, he heard footsteps outside the door and froze. He placed the tapes neatly where they’d been, tiptoed to the door, and glanced out through the crack.

Peeta didn’t see anyone coming towards him. Instead, an auburn head vanished into the janitorial closet that Peeta himself had hidden in the day he’d been eavesdropping.

A janitorial closet seemed like a strange place to go, and Peeta found it especially odd because he didn’t see or hear anybody else. After several minutes, Finnick still hadn’t reemerged from it.

Peeta was unsure about what to do. It was unlikely that he was going to find anything of use in Cressida’s office, but if he went to inspect the janitorial closet and found Finnick there, he’d have to quickly come up with an explanation for why he was snooping around in cleaning supplies. Still, he had a suspicion...

It was worth it, he decided. Necessary.

He entered the hall and closed the office door as silently as he could. Creeping towards the janitorial closet, he made sure nobody else was around before reaching for the doorknob. He threw the door open quickly, but the closet was empty, and Finnick was nowhere to be seen.

A less thorough person might have turned and left, assuming that they had imagined the man who had disappeared into the janitorial closet moments before, but Peeta was not that person. He shoved his hand into the room and felt around for a light switch.

The room was definitely empty, but Peeta had the feeling that he knew what had happened. Hours of searching had gone unrewarded, but here it was, right in front of him, where he’d hidden just days before.

With the light on, he walked straight to the back of the closet and put his hands on the wall. Solid. He slid his hand along the cool stone, but suddenly he wasn’t touching stone anymore. The wall had swallowed his hand.

It was a hologram.

Peeta stepped a few paces to the right and took one step forward.

He passed through the wall that was not a wall and found himself outside, in the crisp spring air. The wind was giving Peeta goosebumps, but it didn’t bother him in the slightest.

He had found the door.
Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to everyone reading this! I got a huge bump in traffic last week and I could not be more grateful!
“You know, Cashmere,” said Johanna, “when I said to keep an eye out for Enobaria, I meant for you to stop her before she got back to the room.”

“I got the job done, didn’t I?” said Cashmere, waving her off.

“I think she had perfect timing,” said Katniss from a few steps behind them.

“Thank you, Katniss, I agree,” said Cashmere, opening her door and holding it for them. “So did you find anything?” she asked once they’d gone in, shutting the door behind her.

Johanna jumped into the air and landed on Cashmere’s bed. It made a loud creak, and Katniss saw Cashmere’s lips purse. Katniss sat down in the armchair, feeling slightly out of place.

“Not much,” said Johanna, looking bored. “She’s got tapes of all our Games, which is weird.”

“Except her own,” said Katniss.

“The Games?” said Cashmere, who either had not heard Katniss or did not care to respond. “That’s it?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” said Johanna. “But it doesn’t matter, I knew it wasn’t her. It was just ticking off a box.”

Katniss was slightly offended, even as she acknowledged how ridiculous it was to take such a thing personally.

“I did think she was acting strange though,” said Cashmere. “Rolling her eyes whenever Cressida was around, getting angry whenever she was asked for an interview!” she added, as though wanting to avoid the spotlight was a suspicious and improbable motivation. “Excuse me.”

Cashmere reached around Katniss and drew out a folding chair that had been leaning against the wall. After moving the TV over to make room, Cashmere unfolded the chair and sat in front of the mirror. She examined herself in it for a few moments, reached into a drawer in the dresser, and pulled out a large make-up case reminiscent of the one Octavia owned.

“I’m going to go shower,” said Johanna, evidently uninterested in watching Cashmere paint her face. “Same time tomorrow, Twelve.” She stood from the bed and glided to the exit.

“Bye, Jo. Oh, don’t get up, Katniss” said Cashmere. Katniss had risen and made to follow Johanna, but now she sat back down in the chair, albeit reluctantly. She felt like a captive as the door swung shut.

“So tell me,” said Cashmere, drawing on her eyelid with some sort of pencil. “Tell me the part Johanna didn’t.”

“Huh?” said Katniss. When Cashmere didn’t laugh, Katniss realized the question had been serious. “I don’t know what there is to tell.”

“Oh, come on,” Cashmere said, and Katniss wondered if anyone had ever refused her so much as a cough drop. “If it was just Hunger Games tapes, Enobaria wouldn’t have been so scared.”

Katniss, who hadn’t seen Enobaria’s face, was surprised.
“She was scared?”

Cashmere nodded deeply but didn’t take her eyes off of her reflection.

“Terrified. Pale as a sheet.”

“Well,” said Katniss hesitantly, if only to make Cashmere think she was getting something out of her. “Like I said, Enobaria’s tape was missing.”

This was enough to make Cashmere glance away from the mirror.

“Really?”

“I said it earlier.”

“Hmm,” said Cashmere. She opened a tray of green powder and began applying it to her eyelid. “That doesn’t have to mean anything, though. What else?”

“We watched your tape,” said Katniss, eyeing Cashmere carefully.

Cashmere flinched so slightly that Katniss almost missed it; a moment later she was back to applying makeup. It was silent as she finished with her right eye and moved on to her left. When she clicked the tray closed, it seemed to echo. Katniss kept waiting, and finally Cashmere turned her chair so that the two of them faced each other.

“What you must think of me,” Cashmere said, her expression somber.

At first, Katniss said nothing at all. She didn’t know what exactly she thought of Cashmere. Though Katniss would never have admitted it, Johanna’s statements from Enobaria’s room made sense, and she had said Cashmere was different now.

“I try not to judge people based on what the Capitol shows me,” Katniss said, after a while.

“Smart girl,” said Cashmere, turning. She opened another drawer, pulled out a hairband, and put her hair up in a ponytail. The soft slope of her neck was fully visible now, and Katniss was struck by a feeling of inadequacy.

She’d once overheard some of the sillier girls at school talking about what boys did or didn’t like. 

Show your neck. They love a nice collarbone, one of the girls had said. Don’t ask me why. They love it. It had sounded ridiculous to Katniss then, but now she thought she understood. Maintaining any sense of self-awareness had to be difficult for Cashmere since her allure was so undeniable.

“I wonder,” Cashmere said slowly. “Do you remember what I said to you-?”

“The first night?” Katniss finished for her. “Yeah. You put me in my place.”

Cashmere rested her chin on her hand and studied her.

“Oh,” she said. “That wasn’t my intention.”

“It’s fine. I was out of line.”

Cashmere folded her arms across her chest and let her chin fall forward a bit.

“I probably don’t need to tell you what the Games were like for me,” she said. “It’s the same for all
of us, no matter what happens. Caesar says the Games knit us together. In our case I think he’s right.”

Katniss nodded.

“Young Games were very interesting to me,” Cashmere continued. “There were a lot of parallels, if you didn’t notice.”

“Parallels?”

“We both volunteered,” said Cashmere, with a wry smile. “We both had a District partner who loved us and a Mentor who favored us.”

Katniss shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She hadn’t thought of it that way, but it didn’t matter. It wasn’t the same. Volunteering for Prim had to be different from volunteering for glory’s sake after a lifetime of training. Of course, Katniss knew better than to say any of this aloud.

“My District partner was a very gentle person,” Cashmere said, her smile vanishing. “I was vain and callous and spoiled, yet I’m the one sitting here, and he’s been dead long enough that I bet you don’t even know his name.”

“Caprice Pennywell,” said Katniss. “Johanna told me.”

“Ah, yes, Johanna,” Cashmere said, opening her makeup case and digging through it.

“What makes you say my Mentor favored me?” said Katniss.

Cashmere shot her a sideways look.

“Please. When you’ve been around as long as Haymitch has, you can see who’s a survivor and who’s... well, not. You’ve got to lay your bets carefully.”

“Peeta’s a survivor!” said Katniss immediately. If she sounded childish, she didn’t care.

“Maybe,” said Cashmere, not looking up from her makeup. “If you hadn’t been around, he may have been. He didn’t even flinch when he killed that girl from Eight.”

That stung. Suddenly, Katniss was disgusted. Cashmere could sit here and reminisce about Caprice all she wanted; it didn’t mean she knew anything about Peeta. Or Katniss.

“Please don’t be angry,” said Cashmere, reading her mood like a book. “You’ll go to pieces if you don’t face up to reality. Your fiancé understood that when he took that girl’s life. You were always his priority. We don’t always have the capacity to care about everyone.”

“So why is Caprice any different?” said Katniss after a moment, thrown off balance and aware of the heat in her voice. “It doesn’t sound like he was much of a ‘survivor’ either.”

Cashmere said nothing but stopped rummaging through the makeup case. She didn’t look up.

Katniss felt sure that Cashmere would ask her to leave after what she’d said, but when Cashmere finally met her gaze, she was smiling sadly. When she spoke, it was without an ounce of reproach.

“I don’t know,” she said. “That’s what I mean about parallels. You have no idea how much I wish I could go back and play the Games like you did. I never knew Caprice really. What could I possibly have owed him? Only one tribute survives. That’s how it works.”

Katniss opened her mouth to speak but could find no words.
“I never cared that he was a widow’s only child,” Cashmere went on. “I never cared that I was the reason he was in the Games. It never occurred to me that when Gloss told me to stay away from the Games, he was saying it because he loved me and not because he wanted all the fame and fortune to himself. Caprice loved me too, and I as good as killed him. I don’t have the luxury of looking back and knowing I acted with honor, Katniss. Not like you.”

Cashmere fell silent, and Katniss could tell that she was expecting a response.

“I thought—“ she began, but Cashmere was speaking again after all.

“I know what you thought. You thought that because I’m from One, life doesn’t mean anything to me. So much for not judging,” Cashmere said. “I don’t have enough tears to cry for a no-name I’ve never met from a District across the country, Katniss, but I can mourn the Glimmers and the Marvels. Even if you don’t think Careers are worth mourning.”

It was a punch to the gut. Soft-spoken Cashmere, who Katniss had thought shallow as a puddle and dumb as a post, had just made her feel like a hypocrite where a moment ago she had felt righteous. It didn’t help that Katniss had been responsible for both Glimmer’s and Marvel’s deaths.

“I’m sorry,” Katniss said, and it sounded thin and weak. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Cashmere started back on the makeup case and gave Katniss a small smile.

“That’s quite all right. They were idiots anyway, those two,” she said. She found what she had been looking for and drew out a bottle of red nail polish.

“You know, Peeta said something like that to me once, about playing the Games with honor,” said Katniss. “He said he didn’t want to be just a piece in the Games.”

Cashmere didn’t look at Katniss; her attention was on her nails, but she nodded to show she was listening.

“And what did you say to him?”

“I said—“ Katniss began. “I said he was being silly and that it was more important to survive. I told him he was a piece in the Games no matter what.”

To Katniss’s surprise, Cashmere chuckled.

“I don’t think you have ever been just a piece in anyone’s game.”

The tangy scent of the nail polish hung in the air. Before her prep team had gotten ahold of her, Katniss had never encountered it. Nobody in District Twelve, not even the merchant class, had that kind of excess.

“So what’s the deal there anyway?” Cashmere asked, looking up. She was giving Katniss the look she so often saw in pictures, her head tilted slightly, wearing the ghost of a smile. “With Peeta, I mean. I bet it’s a bit confusing, no?”

 Mostly, people made assumptions about Katniss and Peeta. Finnick and Johanna had, and even Gale had his own ideas about what their relationship was. There was something refreshing about someone asking her instead.

“I don’t know,” Katniss said, and Cashmere nodded sagely. It was delicious to let someone — who had no stake in the matter— rest in her uncertainty. “Why do you ask?”
“Just my voyeuristic nature,” said Cashmere, waggling her eyebrows. Katniss laughed and was surprised with herself. Cashmere lifted her hand to the light to inspect it, and Katniss saw the glint of scarlet.

“Lavinia had nail polish that color,” said Katniss. “The day she and Seeder died.”

Cashmere raised her eyebrows.

“That’s strange. I didn’t think Avoxes used nail polish,” she said, starting on her other hand. “Plus it’s very expensive.”

Katniss nodded and watched Cashmere paint her thumbnail bright red.

“I should go tell Peeta about what we found,” Katniss said, standing up from the armchair and heading towards the door.

“Katniss,” said Cashmere, and Katniss turned, her hand on the doorknob. “Let’s meet for coffee or something sometime in the next few days, I’m sure we’ll be here ages.”

“Sure.”

As she closed the door behind her, Katniss wondered if she’d just made friends with a Career.

Peeta almost collided with her on her way out the door. He was breathless and flushed. He’d been running around looking for her.

“Hi,” she said. “What’s up?”

“I have to show you something,” he said, grabbing her hand and running off, dragging her to the elevator.

“Just tell me what it is,” she said, as they got off on the second floor. However ridiculous she found it, Peeta insisted on revealing nothing until he could show her.

“It’s just around the corner here.”

Peeta flew around the corner and Katniss followed, underwhelmed when the goal was revealed to be a janitorial closet. Once he’d shown her the hologram, however, her enthusiasm shot up.

“You saw Finnick go out this thing?” she asked, for the fourth time.

“Yeah.”

“But you didn’t follow him?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“He was already gone,” said Peeta impatiently. “But that’s not important right now. What’s important is that we can catch him next time, see where he goes, see where it leads.”

Katniss and Peeta repeated variations of this dialogue as they paced back and forth inside the closet, trying to figure out what they could actually do with the knowledge they had. For the life of them, they could not imagine how best to proceed. Finnick was breaking rules, yes, but what could they do about it? What did that prove?
Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps and creaking hinges, and Katniss heard Peeta breathe in sharply. The next thing she knew, he’d pulled her to him and was kissing her hard.

This kiss was desperate and urgent, as though Peeta were a man dying of thirst; and she, a cool glass of ice-water. The kiss dazed her, mixed up all her thoughts. In that moment she could neither fathom why he’d done it nor decide how she felt about it.

Katniss didn’t have enough time to recover before Peeta broke away. His arms were still linked around her waist, but he was gazing at something over her shoulder, looking breathless and embarrassed. Katniss turned her head, saw Beetee standing in the doorframe, and understood. Kissing was the perfect excuse for sneaking around a janitorial closet.

“You know,” said Beetee, “if you’re trying to keep secrets, you should probably keep your voices down. Especially this close to Inspector Thread’s office.” He smiled at them.

“We were just—” said a flustered Katniss. “We’ve only—”

She broke off, unable to produce a satisfactory answer. She hoped Beetee would just think she was embarrassed about being caught in a moment of passion. He narrowed his eyes and looked from Katniss to Peeta and back again. His laptop was tucked under his arm, as always.

“Is there something funny about this janitorial closet?” asked Beetee frankly.

“Of course not!” said Katniss. How could he have known just by where they were standing?

Beetee said nothing but gave her a reproachful look. She didn’t bother trying to stop him as he walked into the janitorial closet and past them. She glared at Peeta, though she knew none of this was his fault.

“So I take it this is new to you?” said Beetee, facing the wall. “You’ve only just found it then?”

“Yes,” said Peeta, though Katniss groaned in exasperation. “Stop it, Katniss, give it up,” he said as he went to stand next to Beetee.

“If it’s any consolation,” said Beetee, with a note of humor. “I already knew the hologram was here.”

“What?” snapped Katniss.

“I’ve programmed a thousand holos. I know what to look for.”

“And what do you look for?” asked Katniss, her arms crossed.

“Beetee’s right. We should talk more quietly,” said Peeta. “Someone else might show up all of a sudden.”

That got Katniss’s attention. She closed the door to the closet, and the three of them were plunged into darkness.

“I can’t see,” said Beetee. “Would you mind turning on the light?”

Katniss opened the door an inch so that she could find the lights switch. Having flipped it, she closed the closet door again and turned to face Peeta and Beetee. She could see them clearly now, illuminated beneath a single, naked bulb.

Beetee sat down on the floor, sticking his legs out in different directions. He looked like a small boy. The computer sat in front of him, open and connected to a black contraption that looked like nothing
more than a bundle of wire. Beetee was licking the ends of these wires and leaning over to stick them various places on the wall.

“What are you doing?” said Katniss.

Beetee shot her a grin.

“I’m trying to figure something out about the holo. That’s the projector by the way, not the actual hologram itself. You’d think they’d come up with a more distinctive name, one that didn’t cause confusion. I’m sure that had to be someone from the Capitol. In Three we learn the importance of clarity when it comes to these things…”

He babbled on for several more minutes about holograms, and Katniss was left no more the wiser about what exactly he was doing.

“… seeing as I can’t attach them directly to the hologram, because there’s no force field. That is a strange touch…”

Peeta and Katniss locked eyes, and the last of her trepidation faded away. There was something endearing about Beetee’s apparent lack of self-awareness, his certainty that everything he found interesting was equally so to the people around him.

“Seriously though,” said Katniss, cutting him off when she realized it could be a while until he finished of his own accord (“I was just thinking it’s a bit strange to not have a barrier at all—”).

“How did you figure the hologram thing out?”

Beetee smiled warmly at her, probably mistaking her question for enthusiasm.

“There’s a lamp opposite the door,” said Beetee. “The hall has recess lighting, what does it need a lamp for? Not a stylistic choice, either, it’s the only one down this corridor.”

Intrigued, Katniss took a step in the direction of the door and opened it enough so she could see the lamp Beetee was talking about. Sure enough, it was the only one in sight.

“I swear those are everywhere,” said Katniss, as she shut the closet door once more.

“Oh yes,” said Beetee. “They’re every five feet on floors four and above, but not here. You’ve got to notice the little things.”

“What’s special about this lamp.”

“It’s not a lamp. It’s probably what’s projecting this thing.”

“Is that all?” said Katniss, slightly annoyed.

“The lights flicker,” said Peeta, “Once every ten minutes or so. You barely—”

“There we are!” said Beetee, reaching from his seated position to clap Peeta on the back but reaching only his calf. He turned back to his computer and gave a sigh that told them his analyzer wasn’t working so well. “Quite right. You barely notice it,” he said, his tone less jovial. “It would have to be so, or the Capitol would have already found out about it.”

Katniss and Peeta locked eyes again.

“Surely the Capitol has to know about this?” said Katniss in disbelief.
Beetee shrugged, chewing his lip.

“I don’t see why they would.”

“If you figured it out so fast someone had to have—” but Beetee was shaking his head already.

“Do you know what we do in Three, Miss Everdeen?”

“No.”

“Three sets up most of the Capitol’s infrastructure, and a project like this one—especially in the Tribute Center—would be pretty high profile, yet I’ve never heard of it,” said Beetee. “A well-designed hologram by a knowledgeable engineer would not divert the electricity to power it in a way that made the lights flicker—”

“Hey,” interrupted Peeta. “You guys notice something about this bulb?”

Katniss and Beetee blinked at Peeta as he grabbed hold of the string hanging by the naked bulb. It hadn’t crossed Katniss’s mind once.

“Why is there a string on the light if there’s also a lightswitch?”

Beetee smiled widely as Peeta tugged on the string. Nothing visible happened, but when Beetee pawed at the hologram now, his hand met what looked like a stone wall.

“Excellent,” he said. “I knew nobody would put up a holographic wall and forget the force field. Good job, son.”

He tugged on his wire contraption and the ends sprang free from the wall. He muttered to himself under his breath as he attached them to a spot on the force field.

“I wonder,” he said, more loudly, “why the force field was down at all.”

He let the phrase hang in the air, as though expecting Katniss or Peeta to volunteer a solution. If that had indeed been his intention, he dropped it when neither of them spoke.

She didn’t have to tell Peeta not to say anything about Finnick; she knew they were thinking the same thing. In fact, it occurred to her then that if they were to have any chance at all of figuring out what Finnick Odair was up to, they would need to get Beetee away from the hologram and turn the force field back off. Sooner rather than later.

Of course, a lot depended on how long Finnick would risk being away. If the force field was blocked when he returned, closing it was the equivalent of handing him to Thread.

Luckily Beetee did not spend much more time doing what he was doing. He continued to mutter and mumble while his computer took diagnostics, after which he removed his wires, bade Katniss and Peeta a cheery goodbye, and exited the closet, leaving them alone.

“That was—” began Peeta, but the door to the closet opened again and Beetee’s head appeared.

“By the way, you may already know, but Haymitch was looking pretty bad at breakfast this morning.”

“That’s normal,” said Katniss.

“No,” said Beetee, shaking his head vigorously. “You don’t get it. I’ve known Haymitch for almost
thirty years, and this was bad, even by his standards. Just thought someone ought to know.”

He disappeared again, and Katniss cast a frown after him.

“He’s the second person to say that to me today,” said Peeta, reaching up and tugging on the lamp string. “Chaff came up to me earlier.”

Katniss tugged double-checked that the force field was in fact off.

“He chose a pretty bad time to lose it,” she said. “I haven’t seen him since Cressida.”

They decided to stop by Haymitch’s room and see for themselves. Katniss was antsy to tell someone about what they’d found, but she guessed that if he was as bad as the others had said, he wouldn’t be in the state to absorb it. She didn’t get it. He’d been in control of himself the night Seeder had died. Angry maybe, but clearheaded.

When Peeta turned the doorknob and threw Haymitch’s door open, Katniss was greeted by the sharp odor of white liquor mixed with that of puke. She glanced around the room, expecting to see Haymitch passed out in a pile of it, but to her relief, the inert form on the bed looked puke-free. A brief foray into the bathroom confirmed that Haymitch had at least made it to the toilet.

Peeta approached him and rolled him over so they could see his face. He looked deathly pale, and his snores were coming out in harsh snorts, but he was clearly still alive. Still, his pallor was concerning.

“He’ll be fine,” said Katniss, walking over to the bed and sitting on Haymitch’s other side. The alcohol smell seemed to roll off of him in waves. “He just has to sleep it off,” she said, but she wasn’t sure.

Peeta frowned and looked thoughtfully down at the older man.

“He certainly has plenty of experience drinking too much.”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“I haven’t seen him pass out this early before, though,” said Peeta, checking his watch. He caught Katniss’s eye, and she saw genuine concern. Apparently he too had the sense that this was unusual, even for Haymitch.

“Should we do something about it?” she asked him.

Peeta shrugged.

“I don’t know. His lips aren’t blue, at least right now.”

“Maybe...” she began. Peeta looked at her expectantly. Haymitch would probably be angry with her when he woke up if they did what she was thinking of suggesting, especially if she was totally wrong. “Maybe we should call the infirmary.”

She expected raised eyebrows, but Peeta’s eyes darted to Haymitch’s face, and he gave a nod.

“Yeah, I was thinking that too.”

“He’s probably just drunk,” Katniss said.

“Yeah. Probably.”
They were silent a moment, and Katniss felt her resolve harden. Both Seeder and Lavinia had been poisoned, if in totally different ways.

“Let’s call them,” said Katniss. Peeta agreed. They hit the button behind the nightstand to call the Avoxes, and ten minutes later a group of them carried Haymitch out of the room for the second time in less than a week.

“He’s going to be annoyed when he wakes up,” said Katniss.


It was such a silly phrase, such an understatement, that Katniss began to laugh. Peeta joined her after a moment, and they fell back on Haymitch’s bed, looking up at the ceiling.

“This reminds me of when we first got reaped,” she said, when the laughter subsided.

Peeta didn’t say anything, and she couldn’t see his expression.

“Haymitch, I mean.”

“Yeah,” said Peeta then. “Yeah, the whole this-is-hopeless-no-point-in-trying-might-as-well-drink thing.”

“Why all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know,” said Peeta. “He’s a severe alcoholic. Maybe he does this twice a month. I don’t know.”

Katniss frowned at the ceiling.

“You’d think he’d want to keep his wits about him, given what’s been happening.”

Peeta said nothing.

She lay there staring at the ceiling for several more minutes, thinking about the boy next to her. He seemed to read her mind lately; their thoughts followed the same patterns.

“Good thinking back there,” said Katniss. “When Beetee showed up, I mean. The...” She didn’t finish her sentence.

“Kissing?” said Peeta lightly. “I’ll use any excuse I can get away with.”

Katniss swallowed hard. He was only flirting with her, joking around really, but she didn’t know how to respond. She already knew how he felt about her, and he knew she knew. To her it felt like big and serious matter. He’d kissed her so fiercely in the janitorial closet. And she...

“Ugh,” said Katniss. “I have to help Johanna dig through Chaff’s stuff tomorrow.”

“She still hasn’t let that go?”

“Nope.”

Peeta chuckled.

“You never know, I guess. It could be him.”
“Don’t be stupid,” said Katniss, though she knew her biggest complaint with the Chaff argument was that it had been Johanna’s idea.

“Like I said,” said Peeta with a sigh. “You never know.”

“No,” said Katniss, the kiss still on her mind. “I guess you don’t.”
“I don’t believe it,” said Katniss, staring down at the black cassette tape. “I never thought...”

Johanna looked up at her, and Katniss could tell from her wide eyes that she had had no real expectation of this either. Katniss shut the drawer she’d found the tape in.

“How long do you think we’ve got before Chaff gets back?” asked Johanna, glancing at the clock on the wall. “It’s eight thirty,” she added.

Katniss sat down on the bed, her brain churning. Could it be possible? She’d dismissed Chaff as a suspect so easily, yet in her hands she held a cassette tape with the name Cressida McGregor scribbled on the corner of its label. The rest of the label was conveniently ripped away.

“How’s that?” said Johanna. “Hello!?”

“Sorry,” said Katniss, not looking up from the tape. “I don’t know how long we have. We should probably hurry, anyway.” She didn’t want a repeat of the day before. “We should see what’s on this,” she added.

Johanna took the tape from her and placed it on the mat beside the tv, which roared to life at once. It hummed and the screen turned blue, but nothing else appeared. After a minute or so, the humming died down.

*Reading error. Please try again.*

Katniss saw Johanna frown as she picked the tape up off the mat, waited a moment, and placed it down again.

The tv hummed and whirred, but nothing appeared.

*Reading error, please try again.*

Johanna made a noise of frustration and picked up the tape again. She examined it, pushing back the plastic tape guard.

“Found the problem,” Johanna said, voice dripping disappointment. “This tape is all scratched and corroded. Damn it!” she cried, pegging the tape down on the bed.

“Makes sense,” said Katniss. “Who wouldn’t destroy a tape with incriminating evidence on it.” She was having a hard time getting her thoughts in order. Why would Chaff steal Cressida’s tape? How could he, Haymitch’s friend and fellow outlying district citizen, be after her?

“What I don’t get is why it’s still here,” said Johanna. Katniss looked at her in puzzlement. Johanna rolled her eyes and sighed impatiently. “Why not just get rid of the tape?” she said. “Why bother destroying it and then leaving it in his room for us to find?”

That struck Katniss as odd, as well. The tape could obviously not be used for anything, but it was still a suspicious thing to have at the back of your pants drawer.

“That is strange,” said Katniss.

Johanna sighed again and slid down the dresser, rubbing her eyes.
“But what else did you think we would find?” asked Katniss.

“Not sure,” said Johanna, chewing her lip. “Something better than this, though.”

Katniss turned to the tape and picked it up to inspect the damage. Behind the plastic guard, the silvery tape had clear, deliberate grooves, like it had been scratched with a key. There were holes in it too, probably.

“Maybe Beetee can fix it,” she said. “He’s really good at this technology stuff.”

Johanna rolled her eyes again.

“I don’t think you can unscratch that,” she said. “But I guess it’s worth a try.”

Impatience bubbled up in Katniss.

“So we take it with us?” Katniss said. “If we do that, the evidence is gone. Then we could get caught with it.”

“Unless we’re the ones to bring it to Thread,” said Johanna, standing up and glancing at the clock. They were pushing it, every minute they stayed here.

“That won’t convince him of anything,” said Katniss, shaking her head. “Not if we just say we found it in Chaff’s room. We didn’t even have a real reason to be in here in the first place. Just your stupid hunch.” She stood up as well, ignoring Johanna’s glare. “But if we leave it here we’ll have no chance of figuring out what’s on it.”

“I say take it,” said Johanna, glancing up and down the hall to make sure they were alone. “Worst case scenario, we put it back.”

“I agree,” said Katniss, nodding and stepping out into the hall. She thought Johanna still looked a bit defeated. “I’ll hold onto it, and I’ll let you know if anything happens.”

Peeta’s room was just a few doors over. Provided nobody searched him...

“Sounds good,” said Johanna, and she walked away.

Katniss had missed breakfast that morning and suddenly realized she was starving. Johanna had shown up at Peeta’s door at ten till six, banging on it loudly. Katniss had come to the door and Johanna had lunged at her, furious that Katniss hadn’t done what she’d been told and shown up earlier. Johanna had berated her all the while she’d gotten dressed.

Katniss, in her foggy state of half-sleep, had paid very little attention to what Johanna had been saying. Mostly she felt bad for Peeta, who had groaned and rolled over, a pillow over his head to block Johanna out. Katniss had seen, with the particularly biting annoyance of early morning, Johanna’s frequent glances at him, his bare upper body visible where he lay trying to sleep. It hadn’t put her in a particularly helpful mood.

As she sat at a table alone at breakfast, an idea occurred to her. It was perhaps not the smartest thing she’d ever thought of; Peeta would hate it. But maybe it would work to just ask Chaff about the tape. There was something fishy about it, the way the tape had just been there in the drawer, not particularly well hidden or concealed. Also, the name Cressida McGregor had been very clearly printed in the top left corner.

If the label had been all the way destroyed, Chaff could have reasonably claimed ignorance. It could
have been any other tape, like the ones Enobaria had had.

Still though, a moment Katniss had practically forgotten rose up in her mind again. When Seeder died, she had told Chaff to get away from her before falling and vomiting. Katniss had assumed at the time that Seeder was in a state of rabid confusion, but now the moment bothered her.

She got back to the room to find Peeta still dozing, which was unusual for him. She picked up a pillow and threw it at him. He groaned and rolled towards her

“Hey you,” he said, smiling groggily. “Find anything?”

In response, Katniss picked the tape up from where she’d left it on her nightstand. She could see Peeta didn’t understand what he was looking at, at first. Then he gasped.

“In Chaff’s room?” he cried, sitting up at once. “What was on it?”

“I don’t know. The tape is ruined. It’s nothing, as far as we know.”

Peeta was silent for a moment.

“So what are we going to do about it?”

Katniss put the tape back down on the nightstand and turned back to Peeta. His hair was mussed from the pillow. She noted absently that it was cute.

“I have an idea,” she said, getting back to the task at hand. “But you’re not going to like it.”

Peeta ran his hand through his messy hair, pushing down some of the stray curls.

“Spill,” he said.

“I think we should ask him about it directly,” she said. She saw Peeta’s eyes go wide at once. “In a common area, like the café, where he’ll be caught off guard...”

Katniss chewed her lip. Peeta was studying her intently, but he had surprisingly not raised an objection yet.

“I get why you want to do that,” he said. “But it’s a huge risk. If he is a part of this, you’ll be tipping him off that you know.”

“And putting myself in the line of fire,” said Katniss, nodding. “I know.”

She could see in Peeta’s eyes that he was weighing the options, turning things over. She knew he was thinking along the same lines as she. The letter she’d gotten, and the subsequent note, had made it clear that this person’s anonymity was paramount to them. Yet it was, of course, strange that they had then bothered to contact Katniss at all. This person probably wouldn’t expect a direct confrontation. Katniss’s gut told her something was off, anyway.

But if Chaff was a part of this, Katniss had – so easily and by pure chance – stumbled upon a piece of evidence that implied almost no attempt to cover his tracks.

“I have a feeling that whoever is behind this... isn’t Chaff,” said Peeta, as Katniss was thinking it. “It’s too — neat this way. Or something. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“I think Johanna’s still convinced—“
“I’m not saying he definitely has nothing to do with this,” said Peeta. “He’s certainly in the person of interest category. But why would you steal a tape, destroy it, and then not get rid of it?”

“I thought that was strange too,” said Katniss.

Peeta sighed heavily, then threw aside the covers and stood, going to the dresser to pick out clothes.

“If we do talk to him,” said Peeta, his back to her, “we should still get some kind of insurance in case it... you know... goes wrong.”

“I’m not asking Thread for help,” said Katniss to Peeta’s back. “He’d probably arrest me right there. He knows about Cressida’s missing tape and he already suspects me. I’m not giving him any excuse.”

“What other option do we have?” Peeta asked her, turning around, a pile of clothes in his arms. “If you give him the tape, he’s going to lock someone up for it, regardless of guilt. If Chaff isn’t in on this, we lose.”

“So...” said Katniss.

“So, why don’t we put ourselves between Thread and Chaff. If Chaff is up to something, we’ll get out of the way. And maybe we don’t ask him directly.”

Their idea loosely formed, Katniss and Peeta spent the morning ironing out the details. They went back and forth on including Johanna in it, and eventually came to the conclusion they should.

Johanna, however, was skeptical. It seemed to Katniss that all of Johanna’s investigatory enthusiasm had drained out of her once they’d found the tape. She wrinkled her nose when Katniss told her what she wanted to do, and Katniss thought, with a bit of frustration, how annoying Johanna’s reaction was when she’d been the one so suspicious of Chaff to begin with. When Katniss pressed her on it, she gave only vague answers and had made an excuse to leave.

That evening, Peeta and Katniss ate dinner on the roof. They’d brought blankets from Peeta’s room downstairs so that sitting on the concrete would be less uncomfortable. They sat and munched on shrimp sandwiches as the sky above them darkened. Staring at the sky made it easier to pretend they were anywhere else. That they would be going home soon.

“You know what’s weird?” asked Katniss, lying down on her back, now that she had finished her sandwich. “No matter where you are, you’re under the same sky. The same sun.”

Peeta didn’t speak, but she heard him shuffling, lying down next to her. She stared up at the sky, which was growing darker by the minute, and wondered if the stars were in the same places.

“Maybe that’s silly,” said Katniss, realizing how little she’d explained herself. “I just-“

“No, no,” said Peeta. “I get it. It’s like—you feel so far from home and then you look up and think ‘well I can’t be that far.’”

“Yeah exactly,” said Katniss. “Though I guess no matter how far away you are you’re always under the same sun.”

“Right. But I’m with you on the feeling.”

Katniss stole a glance at Peeta, expecting him to be looking up at the sky as she was, but instead met his gaze. She looked away, embarrassed.
Sitting up again, she felt a crunching in her left back pocket, and, remembering the piece of paper she’d taken from Enobaria’s room, drew the paper out, doing her best to flatten it. She froze.

It was the ripped corner of a note, not unlike the one Katniss had received in her room. It was smudged, but she managed to make out most of it.

--help me, I understand
--know that you probably have no idea
--ever asked you to do
--escaping, I’ve got
--rumors of an agent of Snow’s, if you

--ressida

“Peeta,” she gasped. “Peeta, look at this!”

She yanked him into a sitting position and gave him the torn scrap of paper. She saw him go wide eyed.

“Where?” he said breathlessly. “Where did you find this?”

“It was under Enobaria’s bed-- when I was hiding under there!”

“Oh?” said Peeta, raising his eyebrows. “After all that about never seeing Cressida before, hmm.”

“Right!” said Katniss. “And I got the feeling Cressida was pestering her about something, too.”

She was getting excited now. This had to be movement, more so than finding the tape in Chaff’s room. Her and Johanna’s excursion had not been so useless after all.

“But we’re not sure,” said Peeta, popping her bubble. “This is... something, definitely, but this note doesn’t give us much to go on.”

“Yes it does!” Katniss protested. “There’s the thing about ‘help me’ and the other part about an agent of Snow’s. Cressida knew something about an agent of Snow’s or-- or was afraid of one.”

“But then why go to Enobaria?” said Peeta, “Why ask her for help? We don’t even know for sure that she was asking for help. And you said she was acting weird with you, too.”

“She was,” said Katniss. She grabbed the hem of one of the blankets she was sitting on and wrapped it around herself. It was getting chilly now. “She was. But clearly she was in contact with Enobaria, who wanted no part of whatever this is. Doesn’t that make you think...?”

Peeta looked at her for a moment, frowning.

“So you jump from half of a note to ‘Enobaria killed her’?”

“Or the agent did, if there is an agent,” said Katniss, pointing at that line in the note for emphasis.
She was getting frustrated now, though she could not tell if it was because Peeta was the one being difficult or if she was.

“Right,” said Peeta. “If. But there’s still the Finnick thing. And the fact that we don’t know who he was talking to that day, or where he goes when he uses the hologram, or how the hologram even got there! Plus you’ve got that tape now from Chaff’s room.”

Katniss glared at him. She wanted enthusiasm and confirmation, not for Peeta to poke holes in every theory she had. Suddenly, an idea occurred to her.

“It was planted!” she said. “The tape must have been planted! That’s why Chaff didn’t get rid of it! Somebody else put it there and he didn’t know.”

She looked at Peeta, expecting him to raise more objections, but he didn’t.

“That would make sense,” he said slowly, looking at her intently.

All of Katniss’s reservations about Chaff evaporated. She stood, gathering the blankets, and walked away from Peeta towards the stairwell. Her excitement made it hard to stay still.

The next morning Katniss met Johanna outside of the café at nine o’clock. Pushing open the door slightly, she spotted Chaff, sitting alone at his table.

“I think the tape was planted,” she told Johanna, lowering her voice. “So I don’t think we need to be as careful. He might know something, though, and that’s what we’re after.”

Johanna raised an eyebrow.

“Planted, huh?” she asked. “And you’re convinced of that?”

Katniss sighed. She should have seen this coming. It was odd, Johanna’s preoccupation with Chaff, but Katniss didn’t want to get into an argument, either.

The tape was tucked into a canvas bag Johanna had found at the weaving station in the gymnasium. Johanna had filled the bag otherwise with books and weapons, so that she had the excuse should she run into a curious Peacekeeper.

Katniss took a deep breath and entered the café, Johanna right behind her. The pair of them wasted no time getting chairs and placing them at the table opposite Chaff, who looked up in mild surprise at their decision to join him. Johanna plopped the canvas bag on the floor by her chair.

Once seated, Katniss glanced at the table nearest the door, where Peeta was sitting, eating breakfast and pretending to mind his own business. She caught his eye and he winked at her.

“What a pleasant surprise,” said Chaff good-naturedly.

Johanna had already abandoned all pretense of friendliness. She was leaning back in her chair, arms and legs crossed. Her eyes were narrowed.

“Anything I can do for you? Or are you just keeping me company?” asked Chaff with a big smile.

“Shame about Seeder,” said Johanna, before Katniss could say a word. “Tragic.”

Chaff’s smile faltered and he looked down into his bowl of cereal.

“Yes, it is,” he said. “Horrible. Like I said, I knew her for a long time.”
“Poor Cressida too,” said Johanna, in mock sympathy. “She didn’t deserve to die, either.” She kicked her leg out, almost playfully, and Katniss felt her temper rise. This wasn’t supposed to be grill Chaff hour.

Chaff looked up again, looking confused and melancholy. He put down his spoon.

“I agree,” he said, entwining his hands and leaning on them. “It’s horrible what happened to her. And the Avox, too. In the wrong place at the wrong time, I guess.”

Katniss looked from Chaff to Johanna and back again. Johanna was glaring at Chaff, still kicking her leg out aggressively, while Chaff looked wistfully off into the distance. If this was an act, it was a good one.

“We were wondering if you knew anything about that tape that Cressida lost,” said Katniss softly. “You know, the one she was looking for when she flipped out on Flickerman.”

Chaff was still looking past her and for a moment Katniss thought he had not heard her.

“Her tape,” said Chaff, chewing his lip and still looking past her. “I can’t say I do. Why do you ask?”

“Are you sure?” asked Johanna, ignoring his question. She leaned forward now and glared at him. Chaff sat up and took his arms from the table, surprise on his face.

“Yes,” he said, his eyes going from Katniss to Johanna and back again. “Again... Why do you ask?”

“We were just—“ began Katniss, but Johanna cut her off.

“We found it,” said Johanna. “We found it in your room.”

Chaff’s eyebrows shot upwards, and his jaw dropped open. In this moment, Katniss became convinced: Chaff was not their man.

“What?” he asked Johanna, bewildered. “You found it in my-?”

But then he broke off and looked away, as though something was clicking together in his brain, and he turned back to them.

“Of course!” he said breathlessly. “Of course you found it there.”

Johanna faltered. She had clearly not expected this. Chaff leaned closer to them and scanned the room around them, though they were alone save for Peeta. Then he addressed Katniss directly.

“Look,” he said. “I didn’t have anything to do with this, and I don’t know who did. All I can tell you is—and you’ve got to understand—Tamra, my wife, she’s... sickly... And Snow’s agent--”

“So there is an agent!” said Katniss. Chaff looked wildly around again, and stood up from the table, towering over Katniss and Johanna.

“This isn’t a good place,” he said. “We’ve got to go somewhere more private.”

At that moment, out of the corner of her eye, Katniss saw Peeta’s head swivel around and gaze at her, eyes wide and forehead tensed. She knew before she saw them that something was wrong.

Three Peacekeepers and Romulus Thread marched into the room. Thread was wearing a triumphant expression that made Katniss’s skin crawl.
“Chaff Etheridge,” he said, a slick smile across his face. “I hereby place you under arrest for the murders of Seeder Agyeman, Cressida McGregor, and the Avox Lavinia.

Two of the Peacekeepers approached Chaff with Tasers. Chaff, who looked despondent but not surprised, complied as they cuffed him around the elbows, hanging his head in shame.

“And you, Johanna Mason, for the obstruction of investigation—"

“What?” shrieked Johanna, jumping up from her seat. “But I didn’t—I’m the one who brought you —"

“Yes,” said Thread “I’m sure you thought you were the key player who brought Mr. Etheridge to us. All you did, however, was openly admit that you were in possession of a tape that belonged to the deceased Miss McGregor.” He snapped his fingers, and a Peacekeeper walked around the table and picked up Johanna’s canvas bag. “In fact,” Thread went on, “I’m sure I’ll find it soon enough if I—ah yes.”

The Peacekeeper with Johanna’s bag now held the tape in his hands, waving it at Johanna. He’d dumped the rest of the contents out on the floor.


Thread’s smile was replaced by a slight frown.

“Oh really,” he said, and waited.

Katniss’s head was spinning. So much had happened at once. Johanna said she’d brought Chaff to Thread, which meant she’d betrayed her. Katniss felt anger bubble to the surface again. Johanna, meanwhile, stood bristling a few feet away, looking surprisingly pale as Chaff took the fall for her.

“Yes,” said Chaff, with a tone of finality. Then he turned to Katniss. “Remember what I said, Everdeen.”

“What’s this?” said Thread, looking at Katniss. “I demand you tell me what you are talking about.”

“Nothing,” said Chaff quickly, as Katniss opened her mouth to speak. “It’s nothing.”

“I demand you repeat yourself, Mr. Etheridge.”

Chaff shook his head. Thread looked at the Peacekeepers and nodded to them. A second later, they’d pulled out their Tasers and turned them on Chaff. Katniss winced as he shuddered and slumped to the floor.

“How about now?” said Thread through gritted teeth. He’d lost a bit of his triumphant air now. Chaff shook his head again. Seeing him on the floor, Katniss felt desperate to help him, to get him out of there, but dared not try anything. Thread most definitely had backup. They were trapped.

“No matter,” said Thread after a moment. “We have ways of making him talk. Get him out of here, please.”

The Peacekeepers half dragged Chaff, who looked to be barely conscious, out of the room. Thread turned on his heal, but said to Johanna over his shoulder:

“Well, Miss Mason, it looks like you got lucky this time.”

Then he laughed cruelly and glided out of the room, leaving a deafening silence in his wake.
Peeta stood silently by the door, but Katniss was staring at Johanna, who looked pale and much younger than she was. Katniss was so angry she didn’t know where to begin.

Johanna had betrayed her, betrayed Chaff. She’d managed to get a source of information locked up and accused. That Chaff had protected her, also, infuriated Katniss.

Johanna gulped and wouldn’t meet Katniss’s eye. Peeta began to speak from behind her.

“Katniss, I think we should—“

But she didn’t hear the rest, because before he’d finished his sentence Katniss turned and swept from the room, passing Peeta and barely looking at him. She didn’t have time for his patience right now. She only wanted to get away from Johanna, and the longer she stayed there the bigger the chance she was going to blow up.

Glancing over her shoulder one last time, she caught a glimpse of Peeta bending down to help Johanna pick up her things from the floor, and turned away in disgust as the door swung shut.

***

“Wake up Haymitch, wake up!”

Haymitch was either deeply asleep or ignoring them on purpose. Katniss had predicted that he might be annoyed with them for having put him in the infirmary, but she’d never thought he’d be so insistent as to refuse to open the door. He’d been released that morning, but they hadn’t seen him since.

“He’s definitely just ignoring us,” said Katniss. “There’s no way I haven’t woken him up by now.”

“Got that right,” croaked Haymitch, opening the door at last. He was wearing sweatpants and a plain white undershirt, and was rubbing red, swollen eyes. “What the hell do you need so damn urgently.”

“We thought we’d update you on what’s been happening,” said Peeta gently, cutting across Katniss, whose face was burning with annoyance. “I don’t know if you heard about—“

“Chaff, yeah,” said Haymitch with a yawn, turning away from them and walking into the room. They followed him in. Haymitch sat down on the bed and shook his head, looking at the floor. “They told me at the infirmary that the ‘danger was over’ and that Chaff was suspected of the murders,” he said bitterly. “If you want to tell me how that happened, I’m really not interested,” he added, holding up a hand in Katniss’s face.

Katniss bit back an insult. This was a side of Haymitch she had never cared for: the weary, jaded mentor. She had expected him, now, to muster a bit more anger on behalf of his supposed friend of many years.

“Well, we’re allowed to leave the Tribute Center now,” Peeta said. “Thread just announced it. Only an hour a day, though. Brutus freaked out about that. But anyway, they’ll be keeping us here until Chaff is...”

“Executed,” Katniss finished for him. “The only thing holding them up is Chaff’s lack of confession.”

Haymitch sighed heavily. He looked older than Katniss had ever seen him. He didn’t look surprised though. Katniss and Peeta waited for him to say something.
“Oh, Chaff...” said Haymitch finally, putting his head in his hands. “And Tamra...”

“Chaff mentioned her,” said Peeta.

“Yeah,” said Haymitch. “I just don’t know how she’ll...”

“We’ve got to help him,” said Katniss. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the paper she’d found underneath Enobaria’s bed. “And before he got arrested he said something about ‘Snow’s agent.’”

Haymitch looked at her blankly. She held out the note for him to take.

“Read this. There’s a mention of Snow’s agent on here as well.”

Hesitantly, Haymitch took the note from her and scanned it. Katniss sat down on the bed next to him, and Peeta plopped down on the other side.

“I found it in Enobaria’s room,” said Katniss excitedly. “I think she might have something to do with this if Cressida thought she could say—”

“You can’t draw that conclusion,” said Haymitch, cutting her off. “This is nothing, Katniss. There are so many things this could be.”

“But you agree it implies that Enobaria...” She didn’t know exactly what she thought.

“Katniss,” said Haymitch heavily, closing his eyes. “I don’t think you should keep poking around this thing. Tap out. It’s done.”

“But you can’t think that Chaff—”

“Of course I don’t think Chaff had anything to do with this!” said Haymitch. “But you need to stay out of it now. Didn’t that letter you got say exactly that?”

“So?” said Katniss, incensed. She glanced over Haymitch’s shoulder to see Peeta’s expression, but his face was unreadable.

“We’ve been working under the assumption that someone is trying to get at you,” Haymitch said. “But maybe—” He shook the note again for emphasis “—there’s something else going on, too. A Capitol agent is going to know enough about Capitol traditions to know that you pass the cups at a fika. And here, in the Capitol, it seems kind of strange that they bungle every attempt to get to you. Especially when this is a person who managed to find and kill Lavinia even with all that security that night.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that maybe that letter you got had some good advice. Maybe it’s time to butt out.”

“Butt out!” cried Katniss. “So just sit on my ass and wait for somebody to maybe try to kill me? To leave Chaff locked up?” She stood up now and started pacing. She was trying to keep her temper somewhat in check. If she lost it, Haymitch wouldn’t hear anything she was trying to say.

“Chaff gives the killer an excuse to stop, Katniss” said Haymitch calmly. “Thread has his explanation, anything the killer does now would undermine the Capitol’s story. If this is Snow’s agent doing this, they would be smart to stop. But if you keep pushing it, poking holes in this, I don’t think they’ll hesitate to get rid of you. They’ll come up with a new story. Maybe Chaff will have had
a ‘co-conspirator.’"

Katniss stopped pacing and gaped at Haymitch. It was like she’d never seen him before.

“I thought Chaff was your friend,” said Katniss quietly.

Now Haymitch jumped up too, his face murderous.

“He is,” Haymitch said, glaring. “You think I don’t hate this as much as you do? You think It doesn’t kill me how they can throw my friend in prison and execute him without any real evidence? Of course it does! But this is what it’s like when the Capitol owns you, sweetheart. This is how it is. Stomp around if you want, but it doesn’t change the fact that this is your life now. I didn’t get you out of that arena so you could throw your life away right after.”

Swearing, Haymitch walked past Katniss to the dresser, and she heard the clink of a bottle being pulled out of a drawer and placed on the dresser’s top.

Katniss whirled around, ready to scream at him for going back to the liquor so quickly, but when she saw him, Haymitch seemed to reconsider, and he put the bottle back into the drawer. She turned to face Peeta.

She opened her mouth to plead with him, to make Haymitch understand but she shut it again at once, realizing it was no use. Peeta met her eyes with determination, and she knew what he would say. He was going to agree with Haymitch. He would never willingly put her in danger. At that moment, she hated him for it.

“Whatever,” she said, turning on the spot and storming out of the room.

***

Peeta caught up to her as she reached the doorway to their bedroom. She shoved him away as he reached to touch her arm.

“Don’t speak to me,” she hissed at him. “Don’t even look at me—you—“

“I agree with you,” he said, and she stopped, confused.

“What?”

“I agree with you. I have no intention of giving up.”

“You don’t?” she asked.

“No.”

“Oh,” she said, looking at the floor. “Never mind then.”

She opened the door and they entered the room, Katniss feeling her cheeks burning from leftover anger and embarrassment.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” asked Katniss, going into the bathroom to wash her face. She felt a slight twinge of annoyance again; he would have been much better at convincing Haymitch than she had been.

“Haymitch just made it clear that he doesn’t want us involved,” came Peeta’s voice from the bedroom. “He wants us to stop looking for the killer, and I think if he knew... He’d just try to get in
“That doesn’t sound like Haymitch to me,” said Katniss, drying off and going back into the room. She lay down beside Peeta, who was on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

“A Haymitch who says quit when a friend’s in trouble, or a Haymitch who actually believes that you would stop just because he told you to, doesn’t sound like Haymitch to me.”

That caught Katniss slightly off guard.

“You’re right,” she said after a moment’s thought. “He’s been so weird lately.”

Peeta nodded solemnly.

“There’s more to it, I’m sure of it.” He took a breath before adding, “I think it’s something to do with Chaff.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t buy Haymitch’s whole ‘Chaff’s a goner’ routine. I think he has his own plan, and he wants us to stay safe in the background in the meantime.”

He twisted so that he was lying on his side, facing her.

“But that’s never been my style,” said Katniss.

“No,” said Peeta with a wry smile. “Never.”

“So we’re not quitting.”

“No,” said Peeta, and the word had an unexpected effect on Katniss. She tackled him in a hug, and when she came away her arms stayed on his shoulders.

“I won’t risk Haymitch being wrong. If the killer comes for you...”

And the way he trailed off said more than he could have said in words, even for someone who was usually so eloquent. For an instant she was touched, surprised, and she began to lean in—

But then she remembered that friends didn’t kiss each other, and in their private lives—their real lives—they were friends and not lovers, so she pulled slightly away from him.

“So, Enobaria?” she asked.

“I think we should figure out what Finnick’s up to first,” said Peeta. “He definitely knows something.”
The next week passed with very little development. For an hour a day, the Victors were free to roam the Capitol, but Katniss had no delusions. The Victors were still all prisoners.

Johanna seemed to wilt, losing some of her sharpness but none of her anger. Katniss and Peeta rarely saw her, and Blight mentioned to Peeta that Johanna had been spending most of her time in her room since Chaff’s arrest.

The rest of the Victors seemed unwilling to discuss what had happened. Apparently, everyone thought it better to ignore the situation, just as Haymitch had suggested Peeta and Katniss do. Cashmere was the one exception; she’d been making comments here and there and unsettling everyone, usually just by mentioning Chaff’s name or something he’d said. Katniss found herself liking Cashmere more and more. Her quiet, composed form of defiance was so unlike Katniss’s own habit of flying off the handle.

Meanwhile, Peeta had been keeping an eye on the hologram, but if Finnick was using it to sneak out, he was proving very elusive. No matter how long he sat there, Peeta never saw Finnick in the vicinity.

After the seventh fruitless morning, Peeta decided he needed a new plan of action. Today he’d follow Finnick during the excursion hour. There was, after all, a chance that he spent his permitted trips in the same way as his illegal ones.

He pushed the door open on the fifth floor and saw Katniss sitting on the bed, waiting for him. He smiled at her for a moment before he saw the look on her face: grim, regretful, morbid.

“There’s another one,” she said.

“Another what?” he asked, shutting the door behind him.

In answer, Katniss held up a piece of carefully folded paper.

“Didn’t you lock the door?” asked Peeta. “Did Thread take the key away?

“No, I’ve got it,” said Katniss. “I wasn’t in here, there was no reason to lock the door.”

“Can I see the note?” he asked, and she handed it to him.

**Just in case you haven’t got the message yet: It’s not over. Watching your back, are you?**

It was the shortest one yet. The first had been so ominous, its existence real tangible proof that the killer had been in Katniss’s room, where she slept. It had made Peeta’s skin crawl. But this one was just... confusing. What was the point of the taunting, of the communication?

He mentioned his thoughts aloud to Katniss and she shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she said, ripping up the note. “Trying to keep me scared and always looking over my shoulder.”
“That doesn’t sound like very good espionage to me,” said Peeta. “More like someone with a score to settle.”

Katniss threw the paper shreds in the trash.

***

Ten minutes later they were on the first floor, waiting for the Peacekeepers to tell them they could leave. They had to be checked out like schoolchildren. Finnick was the only one there before them.

_Perfect,_ thought Peeta, _he’s eager, he won’t notice us._

Peeta leaned against the wall and began to tell Katniss about his plan to follow Finnick. Katniss was nodding along seriously when suddenly Cashmere appeared, breathless and with cheeks slightly pink.

“There you are!” said Cashmere. “I was looking for you, Katniss. There was a little place I wanted to take you today.

“Oh,” said Katniss, and Peeta smiled at the flattered surprise on her face. “I’m actually going to go with—”

“It’s okay,” said Peeta. “Go with Cashmere. I can manage by myself today.”

“But—” said Katniss, frowning. She couldn’t seem to find the right words. From beside them, Cashmere looked back and forth between Katniss and Peeta, wearing a look of mild amusement.

“You don’t have to,” she said pleasantly. “I just thought it might be fun.”

“Seriously, Katniss,” said Peeta. “I’ve got it. I’ll see you in an hour,” and he walked away from them before Katniss could protest again.

He glanced over his shoulder and couldn’t suppress his grin. Betrayal, that was the look on her face; but she’d just have to get over it.

The Peacekeeper walked to the door and opened it brusquely. Finnick, who was first in line, shot off as soon as the he could, but Peeta waited patiently. He was confident that he’d be able to catch up, provided check out didn’t take too long.

Katniss would be annoyed with him when they next saw each other, but Peeta didn’t think it was necessary for her to come along this time. He thought it was nice that Cashmere was showing an interest in Katniss — apparently a genuine one. Cashmere was at least confident enough to withstand the inevitable brush-offs.

Also, Peeta thought that the risk of being either seen by Finnick or recognized by a Capitol citizen was considerably lower without the girl on fire herself. Katniss and Peeta had been stopped in the street the first day they’d gone into the Capitol.
As Peeta stepped out the door of the Training Center, he could just make out Finnick disappearing down a wide alley. The streets were usually busy at this time of day, but Peeta thought he’d be able to escape notice. He’d just have to keep his head down.

Sure enough, he reached the alley unrecognized and found it empty of citizens. Narrow and with no space for vehicles, it was paved with old-fashioned stone. The height of the surrounding buildings made the sky look very far away.

Peeta tripped, stumbled, and swore. A loose stone. He’d stubbed his toe badly, but he knew that if he stopped, Finnick would get away. Impressive, Finnick’s pace.

Whenever Finnick wasn’t playing the Casanova routine, Peeta actually found him very pleasant. He was self-deprecating and charming, and he laughed at everyone’s jokes. Somehow he managed to make everybody feel hilarious and clever while never letting on that he was merely being polite.

Still, there remained the simple fact that Finnick was up to something. There was no point in leaving any stone unturned, and Peeta had a feeling that Finnick’s wanderings were related to the deaths.

The conversation he’d overheard still kept him up at night. He had to figure it out, what with all the talk of a target on Katniss’s chest.

Even though Katniss didn’t return his feelings and maybe never would, Peeta felt an involuntary and indomitable pull to protect her at all costs. It was his habit, his duty, ever since he’d faced Cato’s sword. As natural as breathing.

Peeta quickened his pace as Finnick turned left ahead of him. His mind was drifting towards a place of great personal pain for him, of flowers and white dresses and vows.

He was only seventeen, a bit early to be married, though he felt that maybe under other circumstances...

When he was younger, Peeta had been fascinated by Seam folk. There was something different about the way they moved, a look about them that had nothing to do with dark hair or olive skin.

Sometimes they fainted in gym class or stole from merchant children’s lunches. Sometimes they got aggressive and picked fights. Sometimes they looked at Peeta, and he could suddenly tell that nobody had ever told them to smile for the customer even if you’d just burnt yourself. Seam folk never said that life was peachy keen dandy fine. They never smiled.

But Katniss was not just an ordinary Seam girl, either.

Her gaze held every misery she’d ever endured, every piece of her heart the world had ever hardened; and still, Peeta would never look away, not for the rest of his life. Beneath the pain and cynicism in her eyes, there was a sweetness that felt out of place. She cared about things: about her family, about life, about right and wrong. It made Peeta feel oddly empty.

She was a shock to his system, making him want to dance and sob all at once. He would be a better person, a kinder person. The kind Katniss would want him to be. The kind who, maybe, maybe, could one day make her smile.

Peeta had been able to make her smile. He’d even made her laugh, and he was ready to give her
everything just to see it again. She was so honest, so herself no matter what. There was only one Katniss whether she was scowling or laughing or furious. There were so many versions of Peeta that they got tied up in knots.

Silly, so silly, to think she could ever be his. Katniss was not the type of girl who could ever be anybody's. Of course Peeta loved her. Anyone would. *Everything* she touched roared to life in agony. His heart was only one example.

His name, spoken in her voice, could kill him. He’d take it from between her lips and wear it proudly because the word had been in her throat, her mouth. A piece of him inside her. He dreamt of it taking root and growing there, springing forth in rasps and then shouts, dancing through air thick with sweat and heat, gasps and silk sheets. Promising and pleading to be his, only his, forever his--

*Get a grip*, Peeta told himself, sliding back into the present. There was no point to this line of thinking. Katniss didn’t want him the way he wanted her. He had to remember that.

He could remember the taste of that manic joy, far too intense to last. For two shining days he’d thought he’d won the jackpot. Surviving the Hunger Games was unlikely enough, but Peeta had gotten more. Katniss was whole, healed, and alive, and she’d seemed to have fallen for him, too, somehow. He should’ve realized that fate was not so kind.

How pathetic he’d felt later, standing there and listening to her say she didn’t love him.

He snapped out of his reverie as he realized that he had stopped paying attention to where Finnick was going. Turning left out of the alley himself, Peeta saw Finnick’s silhouette in the distance, much farther away than before. This area was more open, too. The stone road was wide and bright. He jogged to close the gap a bit.

Haymitch always said Katniss was a terrible actress, yet Peeta had believed what he wanted to believe and suffered for it. He’d come home and found himself more alone than he’d ever felt in the Games.

For months, he’d stayed away from Katniss in the hopes of curing himself of his heartbreak. The plan was to let her go back to her life, back to Gale, while he let time and distance erode his feelings for her. That was what his father had done when he’d been lovesick for Katniss’s mother.

But Peeta could not remember a life where Katniss had not played a role. Her hold on him did not slacken but rather increased with time and distance. In fact, he always ended up checking his window, morning and night, to see if he could see light in her room. He would regularly fall asleep wondering if she ever thought of him.

He hadn’t been able to get over her, and he couldn’t conveniently avoid her once the Victory Tour had started, so they’d agreed to be friends.

Mostly, keeping up the act was all right. Peeta got to spend lots of time with her, and he could tell she liked him and trusted him. It was fine so long as he didn’t ask about Gale.

Sometimes, he even had moments where he forgot who he was and who *they* were. Sometimes, in the emptiness between seconds, he believed that she had lied and that she did love him. There were even some nights he felt really brave, nervous nights he considered kissing her after the bedroom door closed.

He never got that far. Katniss had suggested marriage, and all his delusions had crumbled. Peeta knew he would never escape her, and Katniss would never want him. He would always be the one
who’d stolen her freedom.

Finnick vanished in between two buildings, and Peeta cursed himself for his lack of focus. There was still far too much space between them. He picked up the pace, but it was too late. Finnick was gone.

Peeta kicked the ground. He’d been so careless, allowing himself to get distracted like that! If he hadn’t let himself slip into self-pity, there was a good chance he could have followed Finnick all the way to his destination. Making a 180, Peeta started back towards the alley, one last, sad thought bubbling up in his brain.

If only he had something to offer Katniss; something more than his heart and a handful of wildflowers.

***

Annoyed though she was at Peeta’s abandonment, Katniss didn’t take it out on Cashmere. The two of them chatted idly while Katniss wondered how Peeta was faring.

A few minutes into their walk, a Capitol citizen with long electric blue hair stopped and stared at them. She’d recognized them. Both the woman and Cashmere gasped, and Katniss cursed inwardly.

The woman ran towards them like a rabid animal, and Cashmere’s reaction was instantaneous. Katniss saw her step forward, swinging her purse around. Blue-hair stopped, confused, as the purse connected squarely with her face, and Katniss saw her put her hands to her nose.

“Ow!” she cried. Cashmere turned to Katniss.

“Go!” she said, and Katniss recovered herself and sprinted down the road. Cashmere followed a second later, leaving the blue-haired woman in the dust, still clutching at her nose.

“Did you just hit her with your bag?” asked Katniss a moment later, breathing heavily.

“Of course,” said Cashmere. “Sometimes you’ve got to. I haven’t got time for everyone who wants to ogle.” She frowned. “Ugh. And now I’m sweating.”

Katniss found the last part so ridiculous that she burst into a fit of laughter, which soon grew so hysterical that she had to bend over to contain herself.

“What is it?” asked Cashmere. Her tone was severe, but Katniss could hear a smile in her voice. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” breathed Katniss as she gasped for air. “All of it.”

When she finally straightened up, she saw Cashmere studying her, head tilted slightly to the side.

“What?” said Katniss.

Cashmere shook her head and looked down the road.

“Nothing, I just forget sometimes.”
“Forget what?” asked Katniss. They started walking again.

“That you’re seventeen,” said Cashmere.

Ordinarily, Katniss might have been offended, but she saw Cashmere’s smile. She was a tad embarrassed about her laughter now, though.

“What do you mean?” she asked. Cashmere shrugged.

“It’s not important, really,” said Cashmere, frowning. “Just that I talk to you and forget how young you are. Peeta too. Of course, everyone’s like that when they come out of the arena.”

Five minutes later, they arrived at their destination, and Cashmere squealed with glee and forgot her seriousness.

It was a tiny shop with a bright pink door and a sign that announced its name: Pink Lady. The door opened into a small white room with pink ribbon and doilies plastering the walls. Several large, pink plush chairs lined the far wall, and beside them stood two enormous, fragrant, flowerpots. A handful of waifish women with very long necks and short, bright pink hair were bustling about like a flock of angry flamingoes.

It wasn’t Katniss’s type of place at all, but Cashmere was delighted.

“Oh, it’s so cute!” she said. “It’s just like my friend said.” Cashmere ran up to the nearest server, and though Katniss couldn’t hear what they said, she saw the shop woman gesture towards the plush chairs. Cashmere nodded at her graciously and set off in the direction of the chairs while Katniss followed.

Sitting down in the large pink chair was like being swallowed by a gigantic cotton ball. It was so soft that she immediately felt a bit sleepy. Then something began to move behind her back.

“They’re massage chairs,” said Katniss, closing her eyes in pleasure. “Oh this... this is wonderful.”

Cashmere laughed lightly beside her.

“Yeah,” she said. “I thought we’d like these.”

“What is this place?” asked Katniss, opening her eyes and looking over at Cashmere, who looked dignified even half swallowed by the chair, closing her eyes and leaning to the left.

“A beauty parlor,” said Cashmere, eyes still closed. “But I can do my make-up myself. The drinks are what I came for. Nobody knows how they’re made. Pink Lady’s secret,” she said, her eyes on one of the workers carrying a tray of bright pink beverages. “Plus it’s the perfect place for girl talk.”

“Girl talk?”

Cashmere rolled her eyes.

“I need to have a conversation, a silly one, or I’ll explode,” she said. “I’m so bored cooped up in that stupid building all day. There’s nothing to do.”

“There’s the Gymnasium,” said Katniss.

Cashmere laughed briefly before apparently realizing that Katniss had been serious.

“Are you kidding?” said Cashmere, raising her eyebrows. “I gave up knife throwing and archery
ages ago.”

“How come?”

“There’s no point, nowadays, is there?” She said, looking away from Katniss again.

Katniss could not relate. She’d never even considered giving up archery. It was part of who she was.


“Yes, but Gloss is a show off.”

“Okay then,” Katniss said with a chuckle. “What do you want to talk about?”

Cashmere laughed again, but she could laugh at you without it seeming mean-spirited. Though she would be hard-pressed to admit it, Katniss was very much in awe of Cashmere’s social skills.

“Anything, everything,” said Cashmere, as her laughter died down. “See where the topics lead us. We’re getting to know each other better.” Her face took on a worried expression. “How have you been making friends?”

Katniss thought of how she’d met Gale, and how their mutual need had brought them together. She’d never stopped to think how they’d become friends, it had just happened. Peeta, too. She’d never sat down with the express intention to exchange personal facts with him.

“Yes, spring is my favorite season as well. Oh dear, the forest is shooting fireballs at us.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Katniss, still unsure. “Why don’t you start?”

“Oh, I’m not very interesting,” said Cashmere, though Katniss could tell this line was both practiced and a complete lie. Cashmere would surely like nothing better than to talk about herself at length. “I want to hear about the great Katniss Everdeen.”

“What do you want to know?” said Katniss, leaning back into her massage chair as it worked her shoulder blades.

Cashmere narrowed her eyes and studied Katniss for a long minute, biting her lip as though trying to decide whether she could get away with something.

“Oh, I’m the worst for this, but I want to hear more about you and Peeta,” Cashmere said finally, with a touch of shame and a guilty smile.

“Peeta?”

Katniss felt blood rush to her cheeks. That was one of the last things she wanted to tell Cashmere about.

“I know, it’s cliché.” she said, “Talking about men. But I’m curious—even if it means I fail the Bechdel test.”

“The Bechdel test?” said Katniss, feeling like a parrot but eager to grab hold of anything that might distract Cashmere, who was now closing her eyes and leaning her head back, her gold hair gleaming.

“It’s this ancient idea, pre-collapse,” said Cashmere. “Nobody remembers it exactly anymore, but it’s something about how women shouldn’t have conversations about men.”
“Why can’t they talk about whatever they want to talk about?”

“I dunno. I guess they thought the danger was that they might start talking only about men.”

“That sounds stupid to me,” said Katniss, and Cashmere chuckled.

“How?” she said. “We have plenty of interesting things to talk about that have nothing to do with men. You could tell me about those things instead.”

One of the flamingoes appeared in front of them and offered them drinks: something likewise bright pink, served in a highball glass with a tiny blue umbrella. Cashmere thanked her, taking a drink for herself and one for Katniss, then shooed the woman away.

“But I told you I wanted a silly conversation,” said Cashmere. “And anyway, gossip is a guilty pleasure and you, my dear—” She paused to take a sip. “are probably the best thing to happen to gossip all decade.”

Shifting in her chair, Katniss picked up her own drink and took a gulp to put off talking for as long as possible. It was wonderful. The minute the pink liquid passed her lips, she felt warmth spread through her, a kind of comfortable daze.

“Johanna told me...” began Cashmere, but she trailed off with a devilish grin. Katniss stirred her drink with the straw.

“I think that waitress just drugged me,” said Katniss. “I feel all tingly.”

“It’s supposed to do that. Don’t change the subject.”

“What did Johanna say to you?” asked Katniss.

“She just said she made a stupid joke and you blushed like a schoolgirl.”

“So?”

“And Finnick told me he saw you half dressed, outside of your room in the hallway one morning.”

“I could have just been getting ice or something,” said Katniss, grinning. She felt extremely relaxed, not to mention clever, and was amused by her own observation of the clever feeling. She was suddenly aware of her selfness, though she wasn’t sure if that was a word and wondered if there was a dictionary about, so she could check. Her anxiousness from a few minutes before was completely forgotten.

“There are ice dispensers in every room,” said Cashmere, wagging her finger at Katniss and grinning. “No. Finnick, of all people, knows a walk of shame when he sees one.”

“Walk of shame,” said Katniss. “Hm. I don’t know what’s supposed to be shameful about it,” said Katniss. “I’m going to be married soon.”

“Aha!” said Cashmere triumphantly. Then, noticing Katniss’s wide eyes: “Go on, don’t let me interrupt—”

“No, no,” said Katniss vaguely, thrown slightly off. She’d felt a surge of something at Cashmere’s words, but while she was aware it would normally be anger, or embarrassment, it was like a new wave of contentment washing over her instead. “It’s fine. Why does this interest you, anyway?” she asked. “Why would you be interested in my relationship with Peeta? I thought you got that it’s a
television program.”

Cashmere snorted in a very un-Cashmere-like way. Probably the drink was affecting her, too.

“I dunno,” said Cashmere. “I just...”

A long period of silence followed, the two Victors sipping their pink drinks and enjoying their massage chairs. Various Capitol women walked by, attended closely by the flamingoes, and Katniss and Cashmere watched them, occasionally turning to each other with raised eyebrows if a passerby was particularly outrageous.

“In all seriousness,” said Cashmere. “I think it’s good if you two are happy together. Sometimes you’ve just got to learn to love your cage.”

Katniss said nothing. Her brain was far too jumbled to process Cashmere’s words, anyway.

“Tell me about something else, then” said Cashmere. “And fast, because we’ve got to be back at the Training Center soon.”

“Well...” said Katniss easily. “I do have something...”

“I’m listening,” said Cashmere, emptying her drink and waving it out in front of her to catch the attention of the waitress.

“I don’t know,” said Katniss. She emptied her drink as well but felt no explosion of good humor like before, just numbness. “I’ve been left notes. In my room.”

“Oh,” said Cashmere, in the high voice that people used when they were only pretending to be interested.

“By the killer!” Katniss hissed.

Cashmere turned to her, wide-eyed. She was definitely paying attention now.

“What?”

“Yeah,” said Katniss, dimly aware that she’d probably just revealed privileged information. Not a good idea. Especially when Cashmere was a self-confessed gossip.

“But—why?”

“You’ll have to ask them that,” said Katniss

“What do they say?”

“Just about how I should watch out and I’m dead and stupid and blah blah.”

“What are you talking about?” said Cashmere, grabbing Katniss’s wrist and yanking her from her seat. “You don’t even sound concerned!”

The flamingoes shot them disapproving looks as Cashmere bolted from the shop, Katniss flapping like a kite behind her. It was a bit unnerving, the amount of power in Cashmere’s body. She was a Victor, after all.

“There’s not much to be concerned about, really,” said Katniss, as the door to Pink Lady swung closed. “It’s just a lot of vague threats and warnings about how he or she is still around,” she said,
rolling her shoulders and stretching now that she was out of the massage chairs. “Why’d we have to come outside?”

Cashmere was recovering her composure. She seemed to have surprised herself at her own reaction.

“I guess we didn’t,” she said. “I just thought we might be overheard in there. But I guess it doesn’t matter if it’s like you say.”

Katniss shrugged.

“I’m flattered that you felt you could share that with me,” said Cashmere, and Katniss bit her lip. Peeta would probably not be pleased. Out here in the open air, she was amazed at her own stupidity.

“I already thought it was someone other than Chaff,” said Katniss.

“Did you, now?” said Cashmere, her expression one of mild surprise. “How come?”

“I just don’t see it.”

“Me neither,” said Cashmere. “Come one, we don’t want to be late.”
Peeta's Triumph

After breakfast the next day, Katniss and Peeta found themselves at the Gymnasium. Katniss was at the archery station, and Peeta was painting.

Both of them had had bad news for each other when they’d come home from their free hour yesterday, though of the two of them Katniss considered herself the far stupider. Under the influence of some kind of drug, she had let slip an important secret as if it was nothing. Peeta assured her that it was no big deal, that he wasn’t sure how crucial that information was, anyway. Katniss prayed she’d only imagined his patient look of defeat. Hopefully, Cashmere wouldn’t blab.

On Katniss’s third shot, Blight Taylor popped into her field of vision from her left side. Katniss released and hit her mark perfectly.

“Thought I’d try not to mess you up this time,” said Blight, grinning as always.

“I appreciate that.”

“I’ve got a loaner bow here from Bender,” he said, holding a shiny, metallic weapon. It made Katniss’s bow look like it was a thousand years old and had been built by a monkey. “Got inspired. I’ve been practicing a bit.”

“Oh,” said Katniss, balking. As flattering as it was, the idea that she could inspire anyone, especially Blight, was absurd to her. “Let’s see then.”

Blight winked at her and got in position. It wasn’t bad, actually. His feet were in the right place. Of course, once you got really good, it wasn’t necessary to be nit-picky about that stuff; good habits stayed habits.

“Lower your elbow a little,” said Katniss when Blight raised the bow. He did as he was told.

Once Katniss had adjusted his stance, she gave him the okay to shoot, taking a step back. Blight pulled the string taut, exhaled, and released.

“Not bad,” she said, as the arrow hit the target, on the upper left corner. “You hit it.”

“Psh,” said Blight. “It’s shit compared to yours.”

“I’ve been using a bow since I was four years old.”

“Maybe so,” he said. “But it still takes talent. I doubt you can teach someone to hit every time.”

“I don’t hit every time.”

“Every time I’ve seen.”

Katniss stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say. It was embarrassing to be so thoroughly complimented.

“What have you been up to?” she asked him, to change the subject.

Blight shrugged.

“Not much,” he said. “There’s not much to do around here. I talked to Cecilia in town yesterday,
though.”

“Cecilia?”

“You know, District Eight?” said Blight, setting down his bow. He shook his head and added, “Oh wait, I’m an idiot. You don’t know Cecilia. She’s a Victor.”

Katniss tried to remember a Victor called Cecilia but struggled. Among all those faces, year after year, the names of any Games participants tended to fall away for her. Even the Victors’. Vaguely, Katniss thought she remembered a short, plain girl with straw colored hair. She’d won the Games one of the first years Katniss had been old enough to understand what was going on.

“You talked to her?” said Katniss.

“Yeah, she hadn’t heard about Seeder. I don’t think they’ve let the Districts know what’s going on yet, since it’s not all settled. She kept going on and on about how she’d seen Seeder just before Woof died; she’d come to visit him in Eight. They were good fr—“

“No,” said Katniss, cutting him off for fear that the original subject would get lost. “You talked to her, but she’s in the Districts?”

“Oh,” said Blight. “Yeah. There’s a telescreen center in town. You can call anyone you want.”

“Can you show me?” asked Katniss, excitement blossoming in her stomach.

“Course,” said Blight. “I’m busy today, but sometime in the next few days I’ll take you down there and show you.”

“Hey Blight, how’s it going?” said Peeta’s voice as he appeared on Katniss’s left side. She turned to him and answered before Blight could.

“He’s going to take us to a place where we can call home!” she said, and she saw that there was a large spot of blue paint on Peeta’s left cheek. Pulling down her sleeve and moistening it with her mouth, she dabbed at his cheekbone until the spot was gone. He smiled at her.

“Sounds good to me,” said Peeta, turning back to Blight. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Katniss was just in the middle of making me look like an idiot. What an aim!”

“Definitely,” said Peeta, shooting Katniss a look that was so warm she had to look away. “It’s saved my life a few times.”

***

The knowledge that she would shortly be able to talk to Prim made Katniss buzz with excitement for the rest of the day. Peeta even saw her approach Johanna in the café at lunchtime and invite her to sit with them.

Johanna, however, looked uncharacteristically down, and Katniss had come back over to him without her. Apparently Johanna was so down that she couldn’t even muster up the will to insult Katniss.
“She feels guilty,” he’d told her. “Doesn’t want to talk to anyone, especially us.” Katniss had shot a quick glance in Johanna’s direction before resuming the conversation they’d been having before.

Haymitch was nowhere to be found.

That night, for some reason, Peeta had trouble sleeping. Katniss fell asleep right away without issue. Now she lay up against him, her face mere inches from his.

She was beautiful, even with the drool dripping out of the corner of her mouth; she was snoring. In the pale, bluish light of night, she looked nothing like her waking self. Every worry and fear was absent from her face when she slept, and Peeta felt like he was stealing a glimpse at the girl who’d sung the valley song in class all those years ago. That girl wasn’t completely gone after all.

He wondered what she thought about this, about sharing a bed with him. Of course she now said she needed him there, to keep nightmares away, but he wasn’t so sure she wouldn’t tire of it. Eventually, she would get better. Eventually, his company would be a yoke and not a support.

He could picture her sitting in a window, like a princess locked in a dragon-guarded tower, gazing longingly out of the Mellark household, yearning for—what? Gale? Or just her own independence?

But he wasn’t to think about that. Horse before the cart.

It was too hot under the blanket, and Katniss was like a furnace; there was no way he’d fall asleep like this. He’d tried adjusting the blanket so that his feet were sticking out, but Katniss stirred in her sleep and pulled the cover tighter over herself. It was impossible to maneuver his way out of it without getting out of bed.

Unable to calm his mind, he decided that he would get up and walk around. He dressed quickly, tiptoed out, and locked the door quietly so as not to wake Katniss. He didn’t want to leave her for too long anyway, in case she had a nightmare.

The hallways looked different at night, with all the lights off. It was strangely comforting, the silence and the dark. A pleasant chilliness hung in the air as well, and Peeta cooled down within three steps.

He rounded the corner, already feeling his brain quiet as he focused on his breathing and the rhythm of his footsteps. The end of the hall here was a dead end, so he turned to walk the other way.

Suddenly, he thought he heard the sound of more footsteps joining his own.

Stopping and standing as still as he could, Peeta listened hard. They were definitely footsteps, and they were coming from the hall leading to the elevator: the hall with his and Katniss’s room.

Rushing forward as quietly as he could, Peeta stuck his head around the corner. He could just make out the silhouette of a tall person walking down the hall; he or she had clearly already passed Peeta and Katniss’s room.

Finnick. He was the only other person on this floor besides Mags. It had to be him.

Not quite believing his luck, Peeta let Finnick get a bit ahead of him before following. He paused as he passed his door, behind which Katniss was sleeping unawares.

Should he risk it, now in the middle of the night, when there were no excuses and nobody else around? He stood there for a moment as Finnick got farther and farther away from him; he’d be at the elevator soon if Peeta didn’t make a decision. His intuition was screaming at him to go, to check, reminding him that Katniss was safe as long as the door stayed locked.
Quickly, he told himself. *See where he’s going, and then come back.*

For a moment he was sure he’d decided too late and lost Finnick already, but a moment later Peeta saw him turn right and head into the stairwell.

Of course. Finnick would use the stairs, not the elevator. The elevator made noise.

Peeta moved forward as quickly as he could without making a sound, grateful for the soft carpets and Finnick’s lack of attention.

In the stairwell, the dark provided excellent cover, but Peeta had to keep close behind Finnick. It would be impossible to tell where he exited otherwise.

Finnick kept a brisk pace, but he too had to be careful. When he pushed the second-floor stairwell door open, Peeta was exhilarated. Of course Finnick was heading to the second floor. Where the hologram was.

Five minutes later, Peeta stood outside in the Capitol night. He’d passed through the hologram with no trouble at all, and he could still easily see Finnick, who was walking up the hill towards the road.

As Peeta followed, he was surprised to note the pleasant scent of grass on the hill. There was very little nature in the Capitol, and even such a small piece of it was comforting. The air, meanwhile, was heavy and wet with condensation that clung to Peeta’s clothes and made him shiver.

Finnick had made his way up the road. He was going the opposite direction from the one Peeta had seen him take the day before. Here the lights were bright, but there were not many people around. Peeta heard dull thrumming coming from somewhere nearby: probably some Capitol holiday he’d never heard of.

Paying close attention to the twists and turns in the road, Peeta tailed Finnick until saw him stop in front of a short, grubby-looking wooden building. It was the first time Peeta had seen anything made from wood in the Capitol. He guessed that they were in one of the more questionable neighborhoods.

Peeta slid into the space between two buildings on his left, wanting to make sure that Finnick went inside before he went any closer.

But Finnick didn’t go inside.

“There’s no point in hiding,” he said.

Peeta’s blood went cold. Had he been caught, or was this a bluff? He pulled himself farther into his hiding spot. Maybe he could wait it out.

“Seriously, Mellark, I know you’re there.”

Peeta stayed put, though his faith in the bluff theory was waning. He couldn’t hear footsteps, and from this distance he was sure they’d be audible. No, Finnick was standing still, too.

“Dude,” said Finnick. “I don’t know where you’re hiding, but I know you’re there. You’ve followed me all the way from the Training Center. I caught on a while ago. Do you wanna come or not?”

That got Peeta’s attention, so he made a split-second decision and emerged from his hiding place. Finnick didn’t look remotely surprised.

“You know,” he said, “if you wanted to know what I was up to, you could have just asked.”
“How did you know I was there?” Peeta said.

“Please. You ought to cover that blond head of yours. Even in pitch black, anybody could see you. You practically glow.”

“Fine then,” said Peeta. “What are you up to?”

Finnick gave a crooked smile.

“Why don’t you join me and see for yourself.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Peeta.

He soon learned that the grubby building was a bar called Morrison’s, and it was proud to be one of the last old and grubby places in Panem’s Capitol. Inside, the place was full of shady-looking characters, none of whom had the fashionable brightly-colored skin or hair. Peeta saw one exceedingly strange person in the corner who appeared to have fur, whiskers, and orange and black stripes.

Peeta and Finnick sat at the bar. It was wooden and recently shined, but Peeta found that it was also unpleasantly sticky, so he put his hands in his lap.

“Carl,” said Finnick. “Two of something strong, please. Whatever you’ve got.”

A straggly gray-haired man in a black shirt looked up from the bar and nodded. He looked like half the old men Peeta knew in Twelve: haggard, tired, and serious.

“So...” said Peeta, as Carl slid them two large, full mugs. Finnick attacked his mug immediately and with Haymitch-like enthusiasm.

“Just wait and don’t talk,” Finnick said to Peeta.

Another man approached them and sat beside Finnick. This man was short and dark. His old-fashioned overcoat looked far too large for him.

“Good evening, Pat—“ said Finnick.

“I only have a half hour,” the small man snapped. “You’re lucky her ladyship is so fond of you, or I never would have come at all— what’s he doing here?” he said, looking at Peeta as though he were a stain on an expensive shirt.

“Don’t worry about him. How is Lady Aurora, anyway?”

“I don’t have time for small talk,” said the man sharply, turning his glare from Peeta to Finnick. “Do you want what I’ve got or not?”

“Have a drink, Patrick.”

“No, I don’t have time—I said no, thank you!” Patrick said, waving Carl away. The bartender had drifted over like a ghost when Finnick had said the word drink. “Seriously, Odair. You can play around, or you can have what you came for.”

“All right,” said Finnick, his tone shifting suddenly to serious. “Let’s hear it then. I’d appreciate it if you weren’t so rude to Carl, as well.”

Patrick blinked his black, beady eyes.
“Tox report was as expected,” he said, ignoring the Carl comment. “It wasn’t the one you thought, though, it was nightlock—”

“Nightlock?” said Finnick, looking surprised. “Weird. That limits things a bit, then—”

“You didn’t let me finish. Just Agyeman was nightlock. The Avox got a big fat dose of Olvidia.”

Peeta thought of the large, delicate blue flower he’d drawn on the train. It seemed misplaced in such a conversation. Now Finnick was looking puzzled.

“That’s weird,” he said, staring deeply into his drink before taking a swig of it. “Seems like a waste of Olvidia if you ask me.”

“Uh huh,” said Patrick, with some impatience. “The other thing you asked was—what again?”

“Tamra Etheridge.”

“Right,” Patrick said. “About that. I got word this morning that she’s gone.”

“Dead?” said Finnick, frowning.

“No,” said Patrick. “Gone like poof. Vanished.”

“Poor bastard, Chaff,” said Finnick, shaking his head sadly.

Patrick stood from his bar chair. It was a comical sight: he was so short that it was more of a controlled falling. He checked his watch.

“Look at that,” he said. “It only took seven minutes. I’m off then,” he said, and started to walk away from them without farewells.

“See you, Patrick,” said Finnick.

“I hope not,” said Patrick, hardly deigning to look over his shoulder.

“Don’t hope then. I’ll see you in a few days, if I know Lady Aurora. Huge appetite, that one. And not for food,” he added, his voice low.

Peeta saw Patrick’s lip curl, and he seemed to need a moment to compose himself.

“Say thanks for me, will you, Pat?” said Finnick, and then he turned his back to the small man, who opened and closed his mouth as though trying to decide whether or not he should say what he was thinking. Finally, he too turned his head away, and a moment later he’d left the bar.

“He’s great, isn’t he?” said Finnick slyly. “Totally in love with his boss, but she couldn’t give less of a shit. It’s not like she’s such a prize either, but she does have her uses.”

Peeta took a sip from his mug to be polite, seeing how Finnick had emptied half of his own already.

“So who is she?” he asked.

Finnick gave a sad little smile.

“She’s a—a business associate. But that’s not important. What is important is what she’s found out for me. She’s got connections.”
“All right,” said Peeta, taking another sip of his drink. He wasn’t used to alcohol. Haymitch’s overuse had scared him away from it. Someone (he couldn’t remember who) had told him once that lots of Victors turned to substance abuse in the wake of the Games, and he hadn’t wanted to tempt fate.

“How much of all that did you get?” asked Finnick.

“Very little,” said Peeta. “I heard something about Olvidia though.”

“Yep,” said Finnick, giving a slow and exaggerated nod. “They killed the Avox with Olvidia flower serum overdose, but Seeder died from nightlock poisoning.”

“Why?” asked Peeta, taking a sip of his drink. He felt a warmth spreading through his body that felt like it was emanating from his esophagus. “Why use two different poisons, I mean,” he clarified.

Finnick shrugged. “No clue, it’s weird.”

“I didn’t even know Olvidia was a poison,” said Peeta.

“That’s because it’s not a very efficient one,” said Finnick, tapping on the wooden bar. “In low doses all it does is knock you out. When you wake up, you can’t remember what happened to you for a few hours before. It’s not so easy to overdose either; you need quite a bit of it.”

“Strange,” said Peeta, making a mental note to put that on the list he and Katniss had made a little while ago. “The second part then. About Chaff’s wife going missing.”

“Oh, wait,” said Finnick, snapping his fingers as though he were realizing something important for the first time. “You don’t know about the disappearances, do you?”

“Disappearances? There’s more than Mrs. Etheridge?”

“Yeah. A few people have just vanished over the past year. For example, Cinna’s not on vacation —”

“What?” said Peeta. “Cinna’s gone? Why are they pretending he’s—”

“Let me finish,” said Finnick, though good-naturedly. “Yeah. Cinna vanished into thin air about a month ago; he’d been suspected of ‘supporting rebel behavior’ or something. I heard whispers about an opening investigation—but then he disappeared, and I haven’t heard a peep.”

Peeta heard a gentle thrumming from above him: rain on the old wood roof.

“That never happens,” said Finnick, setting down his mug emphatically. “Someone always knows. But not lately. A Victor called Wiress from District Three disappeared about a month and a half before Cinna—and there too, not a peep.”

“How exactly are you getting this information, though?” said Peeta. “Who is ‘whispering’ and why are they—?”

“Never mind that. The point is, every single one of the people who vanished was suspected of conspiring against the Capitol. That’s what’s important. Most of them were ‘under investigation’ or being considered for it at the time.”

“Tamra Etheridge too?”

“No, but what with this Chaff stuff...” said Finnick, gesturing to the empty chair that Patrick had
been sitting in.

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Peeta, trying to keep the suspicion out of his voice. Reading people was one of his greatest strengths, and he sensed a great cynicism behind Finnick’s charm and lightness. Maybe it was the way he always looked at everyone and everything like he was looking to crack a joke, to take the piss out of anyone he saw as pompous or square. People like Finnick, in Peeta’s experience, rarely trusted the people around them and would certainly not give unsolicited help to someone who’d followed them covertly. If there was an angle here, Peeta would find it.

“I dunno,” said the Finnick, looking thoughtful. “I’m a bit drunk, I s’pose—drink up, by the way. You’ll hurt Carl’s feelings—plus you followed me here. You might as well know I’m not here plotting to murder your fiancée.”

Peeta thought again of the conversation he’d witnessed and decided to wait and not reveal that he’d overheard it; he wanted see if Finnick would volunteer the information himself.

“That’s good,” he said, and became suddenly aware of a faint, pleasant haziness in his vision and head. He took another gulp from his mug.

“There you go,” said Finnick approvingly. He patted Peeta on the back. “Anything else you’re curious about, before I get too drunk for this stuff?”

Peeta turned away from Finnick and looked at his mug. Briefly, he considered mentioning Snow’s agent, but then he thought better of it. He was intrigued by Finnick’s apparent easy access to information, however. Finnick just laughed, a little wildly.

“Cheers,” he said, and they both drank.

Peeta never would have guessed that he would have found himself here, drinking at a bar with Finnick Odair. He’d never been properly drunk before, but he was pretty sure you were supposed to trust the people around you the first time you tried. Somehow it didn’t seem so important at the moment.

“Two more, Carl,” said Finnick, sliding the empty mugs to the bartender and turning back to Peeta as two full ones were placed in front of them. “So tell me, now that you’ve had a bit. What’s she like in the sack?”

“Who?”

Finnick laughed again.

“The Girl on Fire,” he said, still grinning. “I’ll bet she’s really bossy. Orders you around and stuff. Am I right?”

“Wouldn’t know,” said Peeta blankly. He was pleased that it didn’t sound mopey or self-pitying. “We’re not like that.”

“Oh?” said Finnick, still grinning. “I saw her stumbling out of your room half-dressed on the second morning—”

“We just... sleep better, together. Just sleeping,” said Peeta. He didn’t want to explain about that. To do so felt like a betrayal of Katniss’s trust. Drunk or not, Peeta wouldn’t do that. There was also something about the set-up that made Peeta feel completely exposed.

“We’re... friends,” he said, but he knew that wasn’t really an accurate description. He didn’t have a
word for what he and Katniss really were.

“I see,” said Finnick quietly.

They sat in silence for a moment, taking small sips from their mugs.

“But you want to be more than that,” said Finnick.

The baker’s son frowned at him.

“Yeah,” he said, awkwardly. He noted how Finnick didn’t ask about how she felt. Had it really been so painfully, pathetically obvious?

“Tough break,” said Finnick.

Peeta only nodded, and it was silent again for a few moments.

“You should know something,” said Finnick, not meeting Peeta’s eyes. “Snow loves to twist the knife. When you’re a Victor, let’s just say there are certain expectations of your behavior.”

He paused to look up at Peeta’s expression and then looked down again.

“Your wedding is coming up,” Finnick said. “And the Capitol’s excited about it. Some people, some very rich, influential people, I’ve heard, are a bit excited about a certain part of it.”

“Yeah?” said Peeta, as Finnick looked at him pleadingly. As though he was hoping he wouldn’t have to say the rest out loud.

“The wedding night,” he said at last, with a sigh. “Porn is... well, people like it. And the two of you are everyone’s favorite couple right now, so don’t be surprised if the two of you have to...”

Peeta could tell that Finnick didn’t want to finish his sentence, and he didn’t want to hear the end anyway. He downed the rest of his mug. That was the end of that subject.

Loosened by the alcohol, Finnick and Peeta chatted like old friends for over an hour. Finnick was surprisingly easy to talk to, and he listened like someone who was very used to it. After catching a glimpse of the clock on the wall, Peeta remembered he was planning on being away from Katniss for as short a time as possible, so Finnick paid Carl for the beers, including Peeta’s (politeness, really, money meant very little when one had won the Hunger Games), and they set off into the night.

It was still raining, but the beer kept Peeta warm. His thoughts were strange and convoluted, and he needed badly to pee. Finnick’s warning about his wedding night swam to the forefront of his consciousness and stayed there, unyielding.

When they had gotten to the top of the hill that lead down to the wall of the Training Center, Finnick halted.

“What’s up?” said Peeta. His alcohol blanket was starting to falter, and he was impatient to get back up to Katniss and the bathroom.

He’d started down the hill when Finnick grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and jerked him into the nearest bush.

“Shit!” he breathed. “Of course this would happen today.”

“What are you—?” Peeta began, but then he saw.
Down the hill that Peeta had almost walked down, in front of the hologram, their only way back into the building, there was a swarm of Peacekeepers.

“Oh shit,” said Peeta.

“Yeah,” said Finnick.
“Okay,” said Peeta. “There’s got to be another way to get in.”

The shock of seeing Peacekeepers had sobered them both up instantaneously. Crouching in the bush at the top of the hill, Peeta felt cold, wet mud seep through the knees of his sweatpants.

“I have an idea,” said Finnick, “but I don’t know how well it’ll work.”

“We don’t have many options at the moment.”

“All right,” said Finnick, “See how they—-quit rustling, they’ll hear us—-see how they’re patrolling?”

Peeta squinted and saw two armed Peacekeepers stationed at the entrance to the hologram. Two more marched past them and disappeared around the corner of the building, only to reappear minutes later around the other side.

“There,” Finnick said, pointing to the wall nearest them. “If we can get there when the patrol’s on the other side, we can climb up on that ledge there.”

“Whatever works,” said Peeta, trying to keep his voice to a whisper. “But our rooms are both on the fifth floor.”

“We’ll bang on Blight’s window or something. He’s on the third floor. See that line of windows over there, right above the ledge? I’ll bet that’s our ticket in.”

It was far from a foolproof plan, but Peeta had nothing better to suggest, so he raised no objections.

“It was only a matter of time until Thread found out about the hologram, I guess,” said Finnick. He punched the ground.

“Wait a second,” said Peeta. “How did you find out about the hologram? Where did it come from?”

“Now’s not really the time,” snapped Finnick, his eyes trained on the wall that was their goal. “We’re going to need to time this right. It’s dark enough that they shouldn’t see us from their stations over there. Rain’s not hurting either.”

“Just say when,” said Peeta.

The patrol disappeared around the back of the building again.

“When,” hissed Finnick, and they darted out of the bush, down the hill, and to the right. They reached the wall with no trouble, but that wasn’t the hard part.

“Need a boost?” asked Finnick, kneeling and putting his hands out. Peeta accepted gladly.

He held onto the ledge as Finnick shoved. There was no other place for a handhold, so he couldn’t adjust, and he ended up more or less sideways. The ledge was so narrow that he had to lean all the way into the wall to have any chance of not falling off.

Slowly, he tried to slide his hand up the wall to begin the laborious task of getting upright, but he lost his balance and tumbled from the ledge.
Peeta swore as he stood from the ground. His elbow was thoroughly bruised. Finnick decided to have a go as well, but he too was unable to stay on the ledge, even with Peeta’s boost.

Short on time, they retreated to the bush again to wait for the patrol to pass them before returning for second tries. This time Peeta decided to do something different.

“I’m going closer to the corner this time,” said Peeta. “I can grab the other side of the wall to help me up. It shouldn’t make a difference if the Peacekeepers aren’t looking this way anyway.”

“You sure?” asked Finnick, raising his eyebrows “Blight’s window is that one,” he said, pointing to the one almost directly above them. “You’ll have to slide over.”

“Got a better idea?”

“No.”

Peeta had no idea what would happen to them if they were caught, but he was sure it was nothing good.

This time, by supporting himself with a hand on the other wall, Peeta managed to get upright and grabbed hold of the closest windowsill. Finnick struggled a bit, not having anyone to help him, but he managed as well, with perfect timing for the patrol to appear.

Peeta held his breath and prayed that the Peacekeepers wouldn’t look up. The ledge was too narrow to turn and look at Finnick behind him, or even throw a glance at the Peacekeepers.

Don’t fall on them, he kept telling himself, Don’t fall on them.

“If we don’t catch anyone, I’ll be pissed,” said a woman’s voice below him. “I didn’t sign up for this.”

Another voice, a man’s, yawned.

“I just want to go back to bed,” he said. “If Thread knows someone’s using the hologram, why doesn’t he just shut it down?”

“Because, idiot, then he wouldn’t catch anyone in the act,” said the woman.

Peeta was sure no two people had ever walked slower than those two down there were doing right now.

“But why now?” asked the man.

“You really need to start paying attention when Thread talks to us, Gus,” said the woman. “Thread set up a sensor in the hallway and it tripped. Thread’s sure it was a Victor.”

The Peacekeepers’ voices faded into the background as they slid around the corner.

“Get moving,” said Finnick’s voice from behind him. Peeta’s fingers were frozen and painful from the rain and having to hold onto the sill, which was almost flat. Every inch he scooted, he was sure he’d fall to the ground again.

For ten minutes and another pass of the Peacekeeper patrol (not really the best at their jobs, Peeta thought), Finnick and Peeta struggled across the ledge, passing three windows. Finally, at the fourth, they’d arrived at Blight’s. Peeta scooted over it so Finnick could stay by its right side.
They knocked on the window, risking their balance by releasing one hand each, hoping Blight wasn’t too deep a sleeper. It wasn’t so easy to see inside the room, either, so they had no way to gauge the likelihood that they’d have to stand there until morning, abandoned on the ledge.

“Come on!” said Finnick, his knocks becoming pounds. The rain was picking up now, and both he and Peeta were thoroughly soaked.

Finally there was movement in the room, and Blight’s face, swollen with sleep, appeared in the window. He rubbed his eyes and smoothed down his bedhead. It seemed to take ages for him to get the window open.

“What’s up?” he asked, with a yawn.

“Oh, you know,” said Finnick, his hair sticking to his forehead, “just out here picking daisies.”

“What?”

“Damn it Blight, open the window!”

Blight yawned again but opened it all the way for them, and they tumbled into the room and shut the window tightly behind them.

“Can’t believe you,” said Finnick, with a glare at Blight. “’What’s up.’ What the hell does it look like?”

He stalked to the bathroom while Peeta sat quietly on the carpet, aware that he was going to leave a huge wet spot. Blight blinked at him.

“We’ll explain in the morning,” said Peeta, as a loud whooshing noise came from the bathroom.

Blight shrugged and clambered back into his bed with another yawn.

“Is it okay if we stay here for the rest of the night, Blight?” asked Finnick, emerging from the bathroom completely dry. “I’m worried they’ll have Peacekeepers patrolling all the halls now.”

Blight grunted from the bed and gave an affirmative wave of his hand.

“Thanks,” said Finnick. “Peeta, the shower has a drying setting if you want to use it.”

“We’re staying here?”

“I am,” said Finnick, taking a large pillow from Blight’s bed and putting it on the floor. “But you’re welcome to go out and have a chat with the Peacekeepers explaining why you’re out of bed at three in the morning, if you want.”

Peeta sighed. He could get to Katniss before she woke up in the morning, couldn’t he? How would she react if she saw he was gone?

“No, you’re right,” said Peeta. “I’m going to go dry off.”

***
Katniss jerked awake from a nightmare, the sheets wet from her sweat. It was one of those mornings she woke up and realized that she’d had on too many blankets and that everything was sticky and awful. The absence of the familiar sounds of Peeta’s breathing made matters worse.

“Peeta, you in the bathroom?” she called, her voice harsh and croaking. No answer.

She threw the blankets off her and wiped the sweat from her forehead; she’d need a shower in a minute, but first: to find Peeta. The bathroom was empty. Where was he? He’d never leave for breakfast without waking her up. She glanced at the clock. It was ten to eight.

Panic mounting inside her, she unlocked the door and threw it open, running smack into the very person she was looking for.

“Hi,” she said back. “Where were you? I woke up and you were gone.”

“Sorry about that.”

She let him in and closed the door behind him. Stretching and rolling his shoulders (he’d woken a bit stiff on Blight’s floor), he began recounting his experience at Morrison’s with Finnick, and how they’d managed to avoid getting caught by the Peacekeepers despite Blight’s grogginess and the slippery, narrow ledge.

“Cinna’s disappeared?” she said, when he had finished. Dread settled over her like a dark cloud.

“I know,” said Peeta. “Other suspected rebels, too.”

“Do you think we might end up on that list?”

There was a knock at the door before Peeta could reply, and Katniss got up to get it, not caring about how she looked or that she was still in pajamas.

Across the threshold stood a Peacekeeper, but her helmet was down. She was wholly unremarkable to look at: thin and pale, with limp blonde hair that fell to her shoulders. Her eyes were a tad too close together. She kept looking over her shoulder, as though some predator could jump out at any moment and devour her. A second later Katniss recognized her as the Peacekeeper who had taken her to Thread’s office on the day Seeder died.

“Katniss Everdeen,” she said with a nod. “May I come in?”

Normally Katniss would have just said no on instinct, but the earnestness and trepidation of the woman before her gave her pause. Peacekeepers were usually bullies, and they never asked to do things before they did them.

“Okay,” said Katniss, and she let the woman in. Peeta stood from the bed immediately.

“No, please, don’t get up for me,” said the Peacekeeper. She held her helmet in her hands and fiddled with it, occasionally looking down at it. When she did this, she looked surprisingly like a little girl.

“I’ve come to give you a message from Inspector Romulus Thread,” she said, her voice suddenly robotic. “You are both expected in the ballroom today at noon, and I must remind you that exiting the Training Center outside of the allotted hour is a crime punishable by imprisonment,” she finished, and then her eyes dropped to her helmet again.
“Thank you,” said Peeta.

Katniss met Peeta’s gaze, and he nodded to her. He was probably thinking the same thing she was. A message from Thread would be one thing, but this Peacekeeper was here for another reason altogether.

“Is that all?” asked Peeta gently.

The Peacekeeper broke out of her study of the helmet and looked at them, still visibly unsure.

“If you want to know some things,” she said, “I would recommend that you come to the surveillance office sometime between two and four. Sometime in the next few days.”

“Surveillance office?”

“Well, Thread’s office. It’s not actually his, but anyway. It’s on the second floor—”

“I know where it is,” said Katniss. A dozen questions fought to spring first from her mouth. The one that came out was at least practical:

“Why?”

The Peacekeeper nodded at her with a pointed look and withdrew from the room without saying a word. Katniss ran after her.

“Wait!” she called to the Peacekeeper, who was already halfway to the elevator. “You’re Edna, right?”

“Oh,” said the Peacekeeper, stopping and smiling slightly. “Yes. I’m Edna. That’s me.”

“All right,” said Katniss. “Thank you, Edna.”

Edna crossed the rest of the way to the elevator and was gone. Katniss went back to her room and found Peeta there, lying on his back on the bed with his eyes closed.

“Are you seriously sleeping?” she said, grabbing a pillow and boxing him in the stomach. His eyes jerked open and he threw up his hands to block her attacks. “That was important! I left for like a half second!”

“I’m sorry,” said Peeta with a yawn. “I barely slept last night. I had to sleep on the floor, and it’s harder—” he started to say, but then he stopped and blushed bright red.

“What?” said Katniss.

“It’s harder when you’re not there,” he said, not looking at her.

“Oh,” she said, blushing as well, though she didn’t know why. There was nothing to be embarrassed about. “Sorry. Nap then.”

“What did that Peacekeeper say to you?”

“Nothing important,” said Katniss. “Go to sleep. I’m just going to go get some food from the café for when you wake up.”

“Thanks,” he said, with a grateful smile. He climbed under the duvet with his clothes on. “How much time do I have?”
“We just have to be in the ballroom at noon, so almost four hours. Careful with the covers, it’s warm this morning,” she said.

By the time she got to the door he was already asleep.

***

Thread was not pleased.

The noon appointment found the Victors reluctantly gathered in the ballroom, listening to Thread as he informed them of the hologram’s discovery and immediate decommission. The inspector’s face was redder than normal; his temper, shorter. It seemed as though he was barely keeping it together.

If Katniss hadn’t been so annoyed about losing the hologram, she might have enjoyed seeing him so upset. He snapped at the Victors when they asked questions, roundly dismissing Beetee’s request to study the hologram.

In the end, Thread urged anyone with information about the hologram’s origins to come forward immediately, and this made Johanna laugh like her old self. Though Thread gritted his teeth, he said nothing to her.

Afterwards Katniss and Peeta sauntered over to the café to wait for Blight, who’d agreed to take them to the telescreen center today.

Katniss was antsy, and Peeta laughed at her inability to sit still, but it didn’t bother her in the slightest. She was going to see Prim soon. It occurred to her, then, that she knew almost nothing about Peeta’s family or friends, or if he had someone he was excited to call.

“I don’t know your brothers’ names,” she said, returning to the table from having got a cup of coffee. “What are they? I can’t believe I’ve never even asked you that before!”

Peeta chuckled.

“I’m sure you know them if you think about it,” he said. “Just take a few guesses. The younger one was only a year ahead of us in school.”

Katniss thought for a moment but could only think of ridiculous names. Mellark, she thought to herself. Remember, Mellark.

“I’m not sure,” she said after a while. “This might sound stupid. Your dad’s a baker, so I keep thinking it’s, like, bread types...”

“Is there a type of bread called Peeta?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t ask me; you’re the one with the bread knowledge.”

Peeta laughed again.

“All right then,” he said, still grinning. “So what kinds of bread are my brothers named after?”

“One of them’s got to be, like, Rye,” said Katniss.
“You only said that because Rye’s the only bread you know.”

“Not true!” she said. “There’s pumpernickel! And your cheese buns.”

She frowned as her mind went blank. She could think of no more breads.

“You got it,” said Peeta. “You guessed them. My brothers’ names are Pumpernickel and Cheese Bun.”

“I knew it!” said Katniss. “Pumpernickel is the older one, right?”

“That’s right.”

They laughed for longer than the joke warranted. Every time Katniss started to recover, she glanced at Peeta’s expression and cracked up again.

“You’ll have to make me Peeta bread sometime,” said Katniss, when she at last regained control of herself. Peeta snorted and put his forehead on the table edge as he tried not to start laughing again.

“Seriously though,” said Katniss. “You’ve never told me anything about your brothers.”

“There’s not much to tell,” said Peeta, raising his head from the table. “My family’s not the closest.” His expression was frank and unconcerned, but Katniss found herself alarmed.

“Why not?” she asked him.

Peeta shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he said. “My mom’s just not the touchy-feely type, I guess.”

“Your dad then.”

“Not really either.”

Katniss grabbed a sugar cube from the bowl at the corner of the table and plopped it in her coffee. She was appalled.

“I think I would have died a long time ago if I hadn’t had Prim to live for,” she said after a long time. She stirred her coffee to make sure the sugar cube had dissolved, then looked up and saw a wistful, far away smile on Peeta’s face.

“What?” she said.

Peeta was quiet for a moment.

“You,” he said. “And your sister. Just the both of you.”

He seemed to struggle for words, something Katniss found bizarre.

“What about us?” she asked.

Peeta looked away from her and then back, the wistful smile still on his lips. It was sweet. Shy.

“I remember standing there, during the reaping,” said Peeta. “Before they called my name, thinking I’d never seen love like that. Didn’t know there were people who really loved like that.”
“I hope you—”

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” said Peeta, shaking his head and looking very matter-of-fact. “My childhood was good. I had enough to eat. I had good friends.”

“I don’t,” she said, though she wasn’t quite sure. His hand was on the middle of the table, and she took it on impulse. “Feel sorry for you I mean,” she added. “I’m lucky to have Prim.”

Peeta smiled.

“Yeah, you are,” he said. He leaned back and gave her hand a squeeze. “Thanks for the tea, by the way.”

Katniss nodded, but a fraction of a second later, some strange intuition leapt in her. Peeta was now sipping from a mug that she didn’t remember getting for him.

“Peeta,” said Katniss, jumping up. “I didn’t get you any tea.”

Peeta opened his mouth to say “oh?” but he suddenly began to cough. The coughing turned almost instantly into full body twitching, and Peeta fell sideways off the chair onto the floor.

Katniss yelped and bent down to try to pick him up. Think! she told herself, but her thoughts would not comply, and she only became more scrambled. Peeta’s jerking became more violent.

“HELP!” she wailed, and her voice cracked. There was no time to go to the infirmary. She felt like she was gasping for air herself, or in a dream, where she could scream out her lungs and still see no sound come out. She grabbed his face between her hands.

“HELP!” she wailed again, and then to Peeta: “Stay with me, Peeta, come on, stay with me. Hold on!”

She opened her mouth to yell again and at that moment felt a hard blow to her left side that knocked her flying. She landed hard, momentarily stunned. Instinctually, she got up to fight off her attacker, to get back to Peeta, but then she saw who it was.

Haymitch stood over Peeta now.

“Get her out of here, Taylor. Take her to my room or something,” said Haymitch, and another figure moved into Katniss’s field of view and lifted her off the ground.

“PUT ME DOWN! HE COULD DIE! I HAVE TO—”

“PUT ME DOWN! HE COULD DIE! I HAVE TO—”

“No can do,” said Blight. She was slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Sorry Katniss. You shouldn’t see—”

“PUT ME DOWN NOW!” Katniss demanded. Unable to do anything else, she began punching every inch of Blight she could reach, which was incidentally just his back; it didn’t do much good. Blight kept walking down the corridor as if he felt nothing.

Katniss screamed and howled and threatened, but it was no use. By the time they’d reached Haymitch’s room, she’d dissolved into sobs. How could she have been so stupid?

Blight dumped her onto the bed, and she curled into a ball, still sobbing. She thought of Seeder, how quickly she’d gone from coughing to dead and gone forever. It had taken more than that amount of time to get to Haymitch’s room now.
“He’ll be all right, I think. He’s a tough kid,” said Blight’s voice. She had completely forgotten he was there and merely grunted in response.

Behind her eyelids she could see Peeta laughing. Healthy. Relaxed. Carefree almost. Just a few minutes ago she’d been with him, and now she was sure she would never see him again.

She stayed curled up, and a moment later she heard Blight’s receding footsteps and the click of Haymitch’s door closing. Satisfied in being alone, Katniss uncurled and lay flat on her back, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

How had she missed it? That cup hadn’t been sitting there when they’d first sat down, she was sure of it. Momentarily, she was angry with Peeta, too, for not realizing she hadn’t brought him the damn thing, but that only lasted as long as it took for it to hit her that she might never see him again. That he might never hold her again. His arms, his eyes, his voice. The way the skin around his eyes crinkled when he smiled. The way he scrunched up his nose when he was about to sneeze. For all she knew, all of it was gone.

After what could have been minutes or hours, Katniss heard someone coming and jerked upright. It was Haymitch who now joined her, and he was alone.

“Tell me,” she said.

“He’s alive,” said Haymitch, stony-faced. “Not good, but alive for now.”

Katniss collapsed backwards onto the bed and let out a heavy, rattling sob.

Haymitch approached the bed and stuck his hand into the pile of pillows, pulling out a bottle of liquor. He got a glass from the cupboard, crossed to the plush chair in the corner, and poured himself a huge drink.

“See what happens when you don’t listen to me?”
Calling Home

Haymitch left the room early to get breakfast and give some sort of statement. After demanding to come along and to see Peeta, Katniss had ended up arguing with Haymitch for a half hour before he finally convinced her it was not possible. Apparently the infirmary personnel were going to keep Peeta isolated for a while, and there was no way they’d budge. They’d also all been instructed not to let her in.

So Katniss had remained shut up in Haymitch’s room in day-old clothes, unwilling to go downstairs and get the chocolate croissants she was now craving. She figured she didn’t deserve them. Croissants were for people who didn’t let their friends (partners?) get poisoned. She would not bathe either, and last night she’d insisted on sleeping in the plush chair even though Haymitch had offered her the bed.

By having the forethought to carry a nightlock antidote (which Katniss didn’t even know existed), Haymitch had saved Peeta’s life, but his and Katniss’s phenomenal luck made worse rather than better. She’d been far too close to losing Peeta for good.

Whoever the killer was, he or she was not playing around, but even Katniss had to admit that something odd was going on. The killer seemed to hit the people around Katniss easily, but had still never managed to hurt Katniss. Throwing in the details of the threatening notes and the simple fact that Snow could easily have found an excuse to get rid of her in a much quicker, tidier manner, and the whole thing made her head hurt.

There was a knock at the door, and Katniss decided immediately to ignore it. The knocker was probably looking for Haymitch anyway. Even if they weren’t, Katniss was sure that another Victor’s concern would only irritate her.

She heard the door open and rolled her eyes.

“Katniss?” said Cashmere’s voice.

“Hi,” said Katniss weakly, wondering how long she’d have to let Cashmere stay before being able to ask her to leave without causing offense.

“I brought you iced coffee,” said Cashmere. Still not looking up, Katniss heard Cashmere’s footsteps. “Blight told me you were in Haymitch’s room. Gloss says hi too.”

Katniss didn’t see why Gloss would feel the need to say hi to her through his sister when he never felt the need to in person. She didn’t particularly want iced coffee, either, but she mumbled her thanks anyway.

Katniss felt the bed tilt slightly as Cashmere sat on it, so she turned towards her and sat up, aware that her hair was all over the place and she looked like she hadn’t slept, because she hadn’t.

Thankfully, Cashmere had enough tact not to say so, though of course she herself was looking perfect as ever. Katniss wondered where Cashmere found the will to do so much work every single day; Katniss could barely muster enough vanity to wash her hair once every few days.

“You okay?” asked Cashmere, handing the glass of iced coffee to Katniss.

“Better than Peeta,” said Katniss. She went to take a sip of the coffee, then stopped, remembering that she had to be more careful with her drinks from now on. She narrowed her eyes at Cashmere.
"I’m the only one who touched that glass,” Cashmere said, looking amused. “I promise.”

Katniss took a sip and was hit in the face with sugar. Occasionally she liked a sugar cube or two in her coffee, but the amount in this glass was... shameful.

She set her glass down, wondering if this was the level of sweetness Cashmere was used to. After all, District One exported sugar, as well as diamonds, beauty products, and other things whose uselessness outweighed their appeal.

“Thanks,” said Katniss, when she noted Cashmere’s expectant silence a minute later. Cashmere gave an approving nod, and Katniss felt a sudden, nasty desire to spoil Cashmere’s self-satisfaction. “It’s going to make me hungry now, though,” she said.

Cashmere reached wordlessly into a purse Katniss hadn’t noticed and drew out a large chocolate croissant, just like the one she’d been fantasizing about. Her antagonism became shame; she was beyond grateful for Cashmere Carmichael.

“They’re saying that Peeta’s in the infirmary for food poisoning,” Cashmere said as Katniss bit into the croissant.

The girl from Twelve choked and coughed at this, and when she spoke next, her eyes were watery.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious,” said Cashmere. “I don’t think Thread wants to let go of his Chaff theory. It doesn’t make much sense because really, I don’t think even Thread thinks Chaff’s behind this, but that’s the story he’s going with.”

Katniss felt anger bloom inside her but tried to remain outwardly calm. Thread being a corrupt idiot wasn’t anything new.

“Haymitch says they won’t let me see Peeta,” muttered Katniss. “I have to wait until he’s ‘recovered a bit.’”

Katniss felt Cashmere’s eyes on her; her cheeks burned.

“At least he’s alive,” said Cashmere, placing a hand on her wrist. “You’ve still got him. Speaking of which, don’t take this the wrong way, but I think you might like him a little more—“

“So, you don’t think it’s Chaff, huh?” said Katniss, to change the subject. Cashmere smirked, and for a moment Katniss thought the matter would persist. Thankfully, she was wrong.

“I told you already, I never thought it was Chaff.”

“How come?” asked Katniss.

“It just didn’t feel right,” said Cashmere. “I told Johanna that too, before she dragged you into her plan.”

Katniss took a bite of her croissant.

“Yeah. I still don’t get why she asked me at all though.”

“Support,” said Cashmere with a shrug. “She felt like she had more permission to suspect him, I think, with you on board.”
“Is she still hiding out in her room?”

Cashmere nodded.

“I can’t convince her to come out. She says she’s fine, but she’ll always say she’s fine.”

Katniss swallowed. Maybe she and Johanna were more similar than she’d thought. Earlier Johanna’s sulkiness had annoyed her, but now she thought she understood. The idea that Cashmere was patiently attending to them both struck her as ridiculous.

“Why are you so nice to me?” Katniss asked.

“What do you mean?” asked Cashmere, frowning.

“Why do you want to be my friend, Cashmere. What about me is interesting to you?” said Katniss.

“People don’t usually ask me questions like that,” said Cashmere blankly.

“I know they don’t,” said Katniss, annoyed again at Cashmere’s ignorance, or presumption, or something. If Haymitch were here, he’d tell her to stop instigating, but Katniss kept talking anyway. “In District Twelve we get the leftovers that weren’t good enough for your District. We don’t usually have the luxury of pursuing friendships based on who’s new and hip.”

Cashmere’s eyebrows shot up into her hairline, her face hardening. The two of them sat there glaring at each other for a long time; Katniss figured Cashmere was waiting for an apology, but if that was the case, she’d be waiting a while.

“So it’s this nonsense again, is it?” Cashmere said, standing up. Her voice was low and dangerous. “If you’re just going to hurl assumptions at me, I’ll leave. I might not have had all the same troubles as you, Katniss, but if you haven’t noticed, all of us have one huge thing in common. I think that trumps whatever easy life you think I’ve had otherwise.”

She strode out, and Katniss experienced another surge of indignation, followed by one of guilt as she realized she was still holding the chocolate croissant and iced coffee that Cashmere had brought her.

At that moment, Haymitch appeared in the doorway.

“I just ran into Cashmere,” said Haymitch, looking serious. “What did you do? She’s furious.”

“I was an ass as usual,” said Katniss, setting the glass on the nightstand and retreating into the bed covers. “Why can’t I keep my stupid mouth shut?”

Haymitch’s stern expression melted, and he laughed at her.

“I’ve wondered that since I met you, sweetheart.”

They chatted as Katniss finished her croissant. It was nice. She knew Haymitch was as worried about Peeta as she was, and because they shared the anguish, it was easier to shelve. Still, she refused his suggestion to go for a walk. She’d stay here for a bit and then go back to her and Peeta’s room before evening.

After a while there was another knock on the door. Haymitch opened the door, and Katniss heard Blight’s voice. Not up to dealing with his perennial good mood, Katniss started to excuse herself but stopped when she realized why he was there.

“Oh right, the telescreens!” she said, running up to him. She pushed Haymitch aside and invited
Blight to come in.

He gave her a furtive look.

“I see how it is,” he said. “Only want to come because I’ve got something to show you eh?”

Katniss blushed, but Blight was grinning.

“Sorry,” she muttered, before dashing out the door so she could get to Peeta’s room to change.

Twenty minutes later, Katniss and Blight stepped through the doors of the Training Center and into the bright afternoon. As soon as she was outside, Katniss noticed the clear blue sky and how good the sun felt on her skin, and she felt a bit better; then she remembered that Peeta was locked in the gloomy infirmary.

“Where is this place?” she asked Blight as they jogged down the road from the Training Center.

“We’re almost there,” said Blight. “Look, you can see it up ahead.”

Directly in front of them was the tall pink building she’d noticed when she and Peeta had spoken on the roof the first day.

“Oh is that what that is?” she said.

“It’s a big building,” said Blight. “It’s got a lot of stuff.”

Blight brought her to the shop, where the word “Telescreens” was written in large blue font across the doorway. Through the window she saw a plain, chrome room with maybe 30 telescreens arranged in rows. Only a few of them were in use.

Inside, Blight paid the receptionist and gave Katniss a quick how-to for the screens, but in her excitement she missed most of the details. When she asked him to repeat himself, he winked at her and said he was sure she’d figure it out just fine.

Katniss thanked Blight and chose a screen in the back corner of the shop, among several unoccupied ones, so she wouldn’t be disturbed. For a moment she was unsure of what to do, but then the screen hummed to life. The word NAME in appeared on the screen in neat, white letters.

“Katniss Everdeen,” she said. The screen cleared for a moment.

NAME OF RECEIVER

“Primrose Everdeen.”

PLEASE WAIT WHILE YOUR PARTY IS REACHED

Minutes passed without anything happening. As she sat there, it occurred to Katniss that she wasn’t sure if her house in Victor’s Village had a telescreen, and her spirits sank. She was about to get up and walk away when her living room in District Twelve appeared. Prim was reading a book on the couch.

“Prim!” said Katniss, and her sister started and dropped her book. She looked around before meeting Katniss’s eyes.

“Katniss?” she said, getting up from the couch. “Can you hear me?”
“Yeah, fine.”

“How did you get on our TV?” asked Prim.

“I’m not sure,” said Katniss, “A friend of mine brought me to something called a telescreen center.”

“Weird,” muttered Prim. “But you can hear me fine?”

“Wouldn’t be answering you if I couldn’t.”

“I didn’t even know there was a microphone on this thing,” said Prim, and Katniss felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. There were probably plenty of microphones in Victor’s Village, as useful for spying as for having a conversation across the country.

“When are you coming home? I miss you.”

“Not sure,” said Katniss. “But I miss you too. What did they tell you when I didn’t come back on time?”

“Nothing,” said Prim, throwing herself back down on the couch, satisfied that the TV was working and that that was all there was to it. “They just said you were staying in the Capitol until further notice. Gale was really angry about it. He just left, actually, should I go get him—?”

“No—no, that’s fine, Prim. I’ll see him later,” said Katniss. If Gale was annoyed, she would wait to talk to him until she at least had some kind of good news.

“So what are you up to there? Why did they keep you?”


Prim nodded, but Katniss was sure she could tell it was a lie. She didn’t dare risk any part of the truth, though.

“Where’s Peeta, is he nearby?”

“Um,” said Katniss. “He’s not feeling too well right now.” At this, her sister jolted upright, looking alarmed. “He’s fine, it’s no big deal, he says hi though!”

Prim’s frown deepened.

“All right,” she said, with a defeated sigh. It sounded alarmingly adult.

Veering clear of the taboo subjects (which had the annoying habit of continuously bubbling to the forefront of her mind) Katniss talked to Prim for a long time. Her sister thought she might try to take up knitting soon. Posy had a really horrible cold but it looked like it was getting better. Their mother was trusting Prim more and more with healing—she even left her alone with the patients sometimes.

As if on cue, their mother entered the room. She appeared surprised and delighted to see Katniss, though a little miffed at the casual and conversational tone between the sisters, which suggested that they’d been talking at length and nobody had called her.

Katniss and her mother exchanged the usual stiff pleasantries, and Mrs. Everdeen reported mostly the same local chat that Prim had. Katniss tried not to make it obvious that all she wanted was to get back to talking to Prim by herself.
After several minutes of this, Katniss felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning her head, she saw Blight, who was pointing to his watch and motioning for her to finish.

“Oh—Prim, mom, I’ve got to go. We’ve got a limited time here.”

“Already?” said Prim, deflating.

“I’m sorry,” said Katniss. “I’ll call again in a few days.”

“All right,” said Prim, and her smile was a bit sad. “Tell Peeta I hope he feels better.”

“Will do. I’ll see you later.”

“Love you,” said Mrs. Everdeen.

“You guys too,” Katniss said, though it took a bit of effort. “Speak soon.”

There was a brief comedic moment as both sides of the telescreen realized that nobody knew how to turn it off or hang up. The screen seemed to realize this, and the laughing faces of Katniss’s mother and sister disappeared in an instant, leaving her feeling homesick and a bit sad.

“Ready to go?” said Blight, when Katniss stood from her chair.

“Yeah,” she said. “Sorry about that. Wasn’t paying attention.

“No worries,” said Blight cheerfully. “We’ve got to hurry though, or we’ll get in trouble. We’ve only got fifteen minutes until we have to be back.”

They hurried along in silence for a minute or so, then Blight asked:

“Did you tell your sister about Peeta?” It caught her off guard.

“Not exactly. I just told her he wasn’t feeling well.”

“Oh,” he said, and fell silent. “Are they close?”

Again Katniss thought before she answered.

“I’m not sure,” she said at last. “I haven’t paid attention.”

The question struck her as a bit odd, until she remembered that Blight was probably assuming that as her fiancé, Peeta had integrated himself with her social circle. Katniss was sure that Prim felt loyalty to Gale and knew of his jealousy towards Peeta, but now that Katniss thought about it, she could also remember signs of affection between her little sister and Peeta. The day before getting on the train to the Capitol, Prim had even called him her friend.

Blight nodded and started whistling. Katniss didn’t know many people who could whistle, but Blight’s whistling was probably the best she’d ever heard. Even as they hurried to make their curfew, Blight whistled intricate tunes with well-placed tremolos almost like a bird.

“Blight,” she said, when they could see the Tribute Center coming up, “Can I just say that I don’t get how you’re always in a good mood?”

Blight smiled but kept whistling for a moment, making sure to end his song gracefully.

“What do you mean?” he asked.
“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you annoyed, or upset, or even neutral. You’re always so... chipper.”

“I don’t know if I was so chipper when I brought you up to Haymitch’s yesterday.”

“That’s different,” said Katniss, shaking her head. “I was punching you. But you still showed up today like nothing happened, all ‘hey Katniss want to go see the telescreens.’”

Blight shrugged. They were now on the steps to the Tribute Center, and within a minute they walked through the door and passed two bored looking Peacekeepers.

“Cutting it a bit close, don’t you think?” muttered one of the Peacekeepers. Katniss glanced at the clock. They’d made it with only about 30 seconds to spare.

“Just taking all the time we’re allowed,” said Blight cheerfully. “Wanna grab something at the café, Katniss?”

“I’m not hungry,” said Katniss. “I’ll sit with you for a bit, though.”

“Sounds good,” he said. A moment later, they’d resumed their earlier conversation. “I can’t think of a real reason I’m like this,” he said, looking puzzled. “I’ve just always been that way.”

He held the café door open for her.

“Even throughout the Games and everything?” said Katniss, raising her eyebrows. She sat at the nearest table. Soon, she’d make an excuse and be out of here.

Blight shrugged again and chuckled as he took the chair opposite her.

“Maybe not during the Games, but I got out, didn’t I? Sun’s gonna rise again tomorrow no matter what.”

Katniss stared at him from across the table.

“So you’re just... over it. All of it,” she said. She was aware of her accusatory tone, but didn’t much care.

“Well, I don’t know about all that,” said Blight, looking vaguely ashamed of himself, like a dog that’s been caught misbehaving. “I just...Well, they’re dead, aren’t they? They’re at peace, the other Tributes. I can’t do anything about it now.”

“But what about you?” Katniss said, frustrated. “How can you just come out of something like that and say ‘the sun’s going to rise again tomorrow’?”

“Because it does,” Blight said, confused now. “It just... does. It’s not like I don’t wish things were different, because I do, but what’s the point of dwelling on it?”

Katniss dropped it, convinced she wouldn’t make any progress in discovering how the anomalous Blight Taylor threw off the nightmares and the fear and still woke up with enough spirit to whistle with the birds, knowing full well what he had to do year after year. It seemed irresponsible somehow. Complacent.

She stayed with him while he ate a bagel and then excused herself and went back to Peeta’s room. She wondered whether Cashmere would still be angry at her tomorrow. She, at least, had a reasonable view of the Games and what they did to people.

She was sitting there, annoyed after all that she hadn’t picked up some food for herself, when
Haymitch stopped by and informed her that he’d manage to convince the nurses to let them see Peeta the next day. He wasn’t ready for release yet, and he needed to rest a while longer, but he could handle a short visit.

Overjoyed, Katniss hugged Haymitch until he grumbled at her to stop. After he left, she ran down to the café, her hunger really killing her now.

Katniss picked up so much food that she knew she would struggle to carry it all back upstairs. She paused on the mussels, knowing Peeta loved them. A silly part of her wanted to save him some, but that was ridiculous. Surely he was well-fed in the infirmary.

Instead, she stole a full bottle of wine. She wasn’t especially fond of wine, nor was Peeta, but she wanted to have something to give him when he was released. A sort of “thank you for not dying.”

She went to bed early, but sleep evaded her. She was too busy thinking about tomorrow, about how wonderful and heartbreaking it had been to see Prim, Blight’s whistling and Cashmere’s iced coffee.

Suddenly Katniss’s eyes snapped open. The surveillance office, she’d forgotten it. Tomorrow, after seeing Peeta, she would go there herself. It was, of course, not a guarantee that whatever Edna had for her was at all related to the murders, but Katniss didn’t care. She would follow every lead to the very end. It was personal now.
Katniss found herself at Haymitch’s door at eight in the morning.

“Oh, so now you want my company,” said Haymitch, though he was smiling. “Now that Peeta’s not around I’m the next best thing, huh.”

“Don’t get excited. I would’ve eaten with Cashmere if she weren’t angry with me.”

Haymitch chuckled.

“Since when are you and Cashmere all buddy-buddy?”

“I dunno,” said Katniss. “But yeah, it suprises me too.”

Haymitch nodded and they headed down to breakfast.

“You hung out with Blight yesterday.”

“Yeah.”

“And back before Chaff was arrested, you and Johanna were going through rooms.”

“Correct.”

“Katniss,” he said, pushing open the door to the café, “You’re getting awfully comfortable—“

“What? You’re friends with all of them,” said Katniss. She and Haymitch stood at the buffet table now. She shoved one croissant in her mouth immediately and put another on her plate.

“Yes, but at the moment we know— for sure —that one of these people poisoned Peeta and killed three other people,” whispered Haymitch, and Katniss noticed he didn’t hesitate in drinking his coffee. Luckily there was no cause for alarm.

“I’m not going around spilling my guts to everyone I meet,” said Katniss. The door to the café opened and Johanna Mason appeared, looking pale and exhausted, followed by Beetee, who carried his computer under his arm. “You could say I’m studying them from the inside.”

Haymitch said nothing as they walked towards the table.

“Do you really, honestly still not get it?” he said. “Even after Peeta?”

Katniss was not in the mood to be lectured about the seriousness of the situation. Some part of her took offense to the idea that Haymitch might be more concerned about Peeta than she was.

“Jeez, Haymitch,” said Katniss, braving her coffee and finding it fine. “I’m not five years old. I get it. Just as well as you do. And I’m doing everything I can, but that isn’t much, really, is it?”

Haymitch leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

“You knew about the hologram before it was closed down, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Katniss, knowing better than to lie.

“Why didn’t you say anything to me?”
“Because I knew how you’d react. Also you were on a multi-day bender.” She leaned forward. 
“And by the way, two out of those three Victors you mentioned have solid alibis for at least Lavinia. I’m not stupid.”

Haymitch stood up from his chair and pushed it in.

“Come on, we don’t want to be late for Peeta.”

On the contrary, they were waiting outside the infirmary a half-hour before their appointment. Katniss felt strangely nervous. Though it had only been a few days since she’d last seen him, the conversation with Peeta in the café seemed like it was ages ago. Tapping her foot in impatience, Katniss ignored Haymitch’s pointed looks.

Finally, the door opened and a tall, wrinkled woman came out of the infirmary and invited them inside. Katniss and Haymitch followed her through the glass door and across a sterile-looking waiting room (where an incredibly bored receptionist sat, smacking her gum) into a narrow corridor.

The older lady, who had identified herself as a nurse, stopped in front of a door on the left and motioned for Katniss and Haymitch to enter.

The room inside was bare and stark-white as well, but Katniss’s attention was immediately drawn to the boy in the hospital bed. Peeta looked drowsy and a bit pale, but very much alive.

Relief flooded Katniss’s system and she ran to him, throwing her arms around him, her face finding the crook of his neck. Suddenly and without her understanding what was happening, she was clinging to him and sobbing.

“Hey,” Peeta said, “don’t cry.”

She felt him slip his arms around her, noting how they still felt a little unsteady. It was too much, and she was starting to feel embarrassed. It wasn’t enough to make her move.

“My gown’s all wet,” said Peeta.

“What?” asked Katniss, pulling away just enough to see his face. She wiped away her tears and saw that she’d dampened the front of Peeta’s hospital gown.

Her eyes flicked up to his face. Peeta was smiling at her in a vague, silly sort of way. It was an expression she’d seen on his face only a few times before, usually in the cloudy moments between sleep and waking. It was the smile that meant no nightmares. A peek into his sweetly uncomplicated heart.

He was still breathing; he was with her, and before she knew it she was kissing him full on the mouth. Dazedly at first, his lips moved with hers. Her hand went to his cheek as he caught up to her.

“No, no,” said the nurse, closing the door behind her. “None of that now.”

Startled, Katniss broke away from Peeta and reddened as she realized there were other people in the room.

“He needs to be as undisturbed as possible,” said the nurse.

“You can disturb me any time,” said Peeta, his smile enormous and his eyes half-closed. Katniss
looked at the floor and took a step back, ignoring Peeta’s faint protest. Haymitch chuckled.

“Is he on a lot of drugs?” he asked the nurse.

Katniss saw the woman’s mouth form a small, short line.

“Yes. Mr. Mellark is on several medications, so he will be a bit disoriented.”

“But he’s going to be fine, right?” said Katniss.

The nurse nodded.

“The poison caused some liver and kidney damage, but it should clear up fine with treatment.”

After a short update on Peeta’s health and an estimate of three more days of treatment, the nurse left them. Maybe it was just Katniss’s relief at seeing Peeta again, but she felt an admiration for the nurse and her curt efficiency. It was an unusual quality in the Capitol.

Peeta was still grinning widely and goofily.

“I’m really glad,” he slurred. “Really glad you’re here. Both’ve you.”

“I won’t be kissing you though. Sorry, kid,” said Haymitch.

“Katniss can kiss me again,” said Peeta, without missing a beat. Katniss looked at the floor again.

“The nurse said no,” said Haymitch. “They’re no fun around here. When I was in here they knocked me out.”

Peeta gave an exaggerated shrug.

“How’s it been for you?” asked Katniss. Peeta drew his eyebrows together. He looked to be deep in thought.

“It’s a bit hazy, aguess,” he said. “been thinkn’ lots ‘bout ducks, fer some reason.”

“Ducks?” asked Katniss.

“Yeah, I know,” said Peeta. “It’s weird. The story ‘the ugly duckling,’ I wuz just thinkin’, y’know? If they’d known he was a swan, nobody would have thought he was ugly, but they didn’t realize that he wasn’t a duck at all.”

“Oh... Okay?” said Katniss.

“Sorry,” said Peeta, his dreamy grin returning. “I’m babbling, I know. It seemed really important at the time.”

He closed his eyes and lay back on the pillow, still smiling serenely. Katniss grabbed his hand.

“I was worried about you,” she said softly.

“Don’t worry,” Peeta replied.

“I--we could have lost you.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”
Haymitch was being uncharacteristically quiet where he stood in the corner of the room; it made Katniss slightly nervous.

"Haymitch saved your life, you know," she said. "If he hadn’t showed up—" Katniss couldn’t finish her sentence.

"Thank you, Haymitch," said Peeta gravely.

Haymitch nodded to him.

"Someone’s got to take care of the two of you."

Peeta turned back to Katniss, looking at her blearily through half-closed eyes. His gaze slid downward, to her braid, and he lifted it and studied it for a while. When his eyes again met hers, he looked a bit more awake, a bit more earthbound.

"I’m so glad you’re here with me," he said, "You look so pretty, I—" His expression changed immediately to one of sheepishness. "Oops. Not supposed to say that. Sorry."

"It’s okay," said Katniss, self-conscious because of Haymitch’s presence. To his credit, Haymitch was pretending to study the wall.

"I’m not s’posed to say that stuff," said Peeta. "I don’t want you to feel sorry for me. Ever. For anything."

"I won’t," said Katniss, and she squeezed his hand. Peeta closed his eyes for a moment and lay back on the pillow. She thought back to when he’d said those same words to her last, right before he’d been poisoned.

"Good," said Peeta, his eyes still closed. "Good."

Katniss didn’t know what to say so she just squeezed his hand again.

"I was worrying about something," said Peeta suddenly, sitting up and looking at her intently.

"What’s that?"

"I don’t want to get married," he said.

Katniss glanced again at Haymitch. His face was still neutral, as if the room were empty.

"Okay," she said.

"I don’t want you to hate me," said Peeta, his eyebrows drawn together.

Katniss frowned.

"Why would I hate you?" she asked him.

"Dunno," said Peeta, reaching up and brushing her cheek with his free hand. "I just—don’t want to be a reason you’re unhappy."

"Peeta, you don’t..." said Katniss. "Just lie down, all right? Don’t think about any of that."

Peeta nodded slowly and lay down again, his eyes on her. She wished she could handle this sort of thing more gracefully. No matter what she said, it was always wrong. As for what she felt, well, who
knew how she was supposed to put that into words?

Katniss slid her hand into the hair above Peeta’s left ear, stroking his temple lightly with her thumb. It was something her father had used to do when Katniss had trouble sleeping, something Katniss had used to soothe a young Prim in the middle of dark, hungry nights.

It worked on Peeta, too. He closed his eyes at her touch and was asleep within five minutes.

“We should probably go,” said Haymitch quietly. Katniss nodded and pulled her hand away slowly. The two of them opened the door as quietly as they could, and Katniss stole as last glance at Peeta before joining Haymitch in the white hallway.

“We can come back now, right?” said Katniss. “We don’t have to make an appointment every time?”

Haymitch shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

He was quiet for a while, not saying anything as Katniss said goodbye to the nurse. When they’d slipped out of the infirmary door, he sighed.

“Look, I don’t want to tell you how to—” said Haymitch, and Katniss walked faster. Haymitch sped up to keep pace. “I don’t want to talk about this any more than you do.”

“So how about we don’t,” Katniss said sharply, and then immediately regretted it. “Peeta, he’s—I ___.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Haymitch. “It’s your business anyway. But just... be a little delicate, all right?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you should consider the idea that he feels like he’s ruining your life.”

“I’ve never given him any reason to think—“

“Whatever,” said Haymitch, stopping and gripping Katniss’s arm so she couldn’t get away. “I’m not scolding you. I’m just telling you what he’s afraid of.”

“Message received,” said Katniss.

Haymitch glowered at her with an intensity she wasn’t used to, and she wanted to run and hide. They’d never talked about how she’d practically ignored Peeta— abandoned him, really – those first months after the Games, but she knew they were both thinking about it now.

“I’ll keep what you said in mind” said Katniss, sincerely this time.

Haymitch looked at her for a long time and nodded.

“Good. I’ll see you later,” he said, and then he stalked off in the direction they’d come from.

As Katniss wandered back to her and Peeta’s room, she tried to picture what her life would be like after the wedding. Most likely, she would have to move into Peeta’s house in Victor’s Village. Prim and her mother would probably not be able to come with her.

There were more pressing things to deal with, though. Hopefully Edna’s offer was still good.
Katniss opened the surveillance office door and peeked in. A thin, pale Peacekeeper was facing away from her, looking at screens on the wall.

“Edna?” said Katniss, and the Peacekeeper whirled around, looking panicked.

“Miss Everdeen,” she said breathlessly, visibly relaxing. “You—you came!”

“I did,” said Katniss. “But I’m not clear on what—“

“I’m extremely sorry,” Edna interrupted, “but I can’t tell you anything.”

She walked over to the tall cupboard and opened it. It was empty.

“But you said—“

“I can’t help you,” said Edna pointedly. She was gesturing wildly to the open cupboard. “Not at all. You’ll have to come back when Inspector Thread is here if you have any questions.”

Katniss opened her mouth to say something scathing, then caught on to what Edna was doing. In the Capitol, everything was monitored.

Katniss pointed at the cupboard, and Edna nodded vigorously. Still unsure, Katniss approached the cupboard, stepping inside of it after Edna gestured again. Edna closed the cupboard door. Luckily, there were slats at eye-level.

Katniss stood inside the cupboard and waited, but nothing happened. Edna went back to the screens, occasionally pushing a button on the panels in front of her. Katniss’s patience for cupboard-standing was starting to wear thin when finally she learned why she was there.

Two large male Peacekeepers entered the room and took off their helmets.

“Hey Edna,” said one of them, a dark, burly man with close cropped gray hair; he looked around fifty.

“Afternoon,” Edna replied, and Katniss was jarred by the change in her tone of voice. In Katniss’s room, Edna had been hesitant and earnest, but now she spoke robotically. A coping mechanism for a Peacekeeper with higher than average sensitivity.

The third Peacekeeper was much younger, probably only two or three years older than Katniss herself. His hair was close cropped as well, and his planed face would have been handsome if it wasn’t for his cruel, darting eyes.

“What are you up to in here, Edna?” he said. “Hiding from the loonies?”

“No,” said Edna sharply. “This is the surveillance office. I’m surveilling.”

The young man scoffed and threw himself down in one of the chairs facing the screens.

“Surveilling what, exactly?” he said. “They caught the guy, didn’t they?”

The older man laughed at him. Katniss could see the seated Peacekeeper’s lip curl in annoyance.
“You are so naïve,” said the older, still laughing. “It’s not about who did what. It’s about how many of the Victors need to be locked up.”

“And something’s still going on,” said Edna, throwing a glance at the cupboard. “There’s a signal jam going on. The cameras and bugs in all of the rooms are still down. All I’m getting is the café, the entrance, and about half of the cameras on the tenth floor.”

Cameras? Bugs? Katniss would have facepalmed had there been room to do so in the cupboard. That’s why Thread couldn’t check the tapes to see who had snuck into Lavinia’s quarters or who had been in Katniss’s room with Cressida. Thread hadn’t been trying to lie; it had actually been impossible.

An idea dawned on her that she hadn’t considered: maybe Thread was completely in the dark. She’d long suspected he didn’t know everything, but maybe Snow had been so covert, so secret with deploying his agent, that Thread genuinely thought it was some unconnected person. After all, who could fool the Capitol beside the Capitol’s leader?

“Why don’t you put on something more interesting,” said the young man. “For instance, why don’t we check and see how our old boy Chaff is doing?”

“Marcus!” said the older man, his face suddenly turned serious. “You know we’re not supposed to —“

“No, we’ll show him,” said Edna calmly. “Thread won’t find out. It’s just a turn of the dial.”

Both Marcus and the older Peacekeeper stared at Edna incredulously. Not quite as tough now, Marcus looked like a scared little boy.

“Yeah. Okay,” he said, trying to fake bravery now that his bluff had been called. “Thread won’t find out.”

Katniss was sure Edna was doing whatever it was she was doing for her and not for Marcus, so she squinted in an attempt to better see the screen Edna was looking at.

Chaff appeared on the screen, and Katniss gasped. She clapped her hand over her mouth, certain the Peacekeepers had heard her, but they were too distracted by the sight themselves.

Chaff Etheridge hung suspended by chains in a dark room. Not much was visible apart from his hollow, ghostly eyes and the various bloodstains on his clothing. In the brief two weeks since he’d been arrested, he appeared to have lost most of his muscle weight, and he twitched every few seconds as though an electric shock was going through him.

Katniss was so horrified she almost didn’t catch what Marcus said next:

“Wasn’t he one of ours?”

“Yes,” said Edna slowly. “He was a Capitol intelligence operative.”

“He looks like he’s just come out of the Games,” Marcus observed drily. The older Peacekeeper looked extremely uncomfortable.

“His reports to the intelligence department have been deemed unsatisfactory lately,” elaborated Edna. “They—and Thread especially—were starting to think he’d turned rebel.”

“But they haven’t got anything out of him yet?” asked Marcus.
Katniss’s brain was reeling. Chaff, a Capitol intelligence operative? A spy? A potentially rebel-turned Capitol spy?

“No,” said Edna. “Couldn’t tell you why, either.”

Marcus stood from his chair and studied the screen.

“I give him three more days,” he said. “What do you think, Gus?”

The older Peacekeeper shook his head.

“Never mind that, we came to charge our Tasers. I’ll be reporting you, Edna. You’re not even supposed to be in here, much less showing us this.”

Gus made a move to the cupboard, and Katniss realized he was coming straight for her. She didn’t know what would happen if they caught her there, but it was definitely nothing good, not to mention that Edna would certainly be executed. If this wasn’t treasonous, nothing was.

“Wait,” said Edna, stalling, as Gus stood a foot from the door. “Take mine.”

She unclipped her belt and handed Gus her Taser. He stared at it for a moment and frowned, then dropped it on the ground. Marcus was looking at Edna with an amused look on his face.

“You know,” said Gus. “You’ve been acting a bit suspiciously, lately, as well. Maybe Thread should be looking into you.”

Something wild and irrational leapt in Katniss. However stupid it may have been, she acted. She burst forth from the cupboard and swung her fist at Gus, who hadn’t had the chance to turn towards her yet. Her punch caught him on his left temple, and he dropped like a sack of potatoes.

The moment Katniss had exploded from the cupboard, Edna had grabbed a nightstick hidden behind the desk and gone for Marcus. She smacked him, too, on the side of the head, and he fell comically on top of his colleague and was still.

Katniss and Edna locked eyes.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” said Edna, and Katniss laughed in spite of herself. The Peacekeeper smiled as well.

“I don’t think they saw me,” said Katniss once she’d calmed down. “But they’re both going to guess what happened.”

Edna nodded.

“I know.”

“What are you going to do?”

Edna bit her lip and glanced at her incapacitated colleagues.

“Got to leave the Capitol, don’t I?” she said with a wry smile. “Hopefully it goes better for me than it went for Lavinia, though.”

There was a charged silence.

“You know about that?” whispered Katniss. She’d never said aloud what she’d seen so many years
ago in the forest.

“I’m surprised you know about it,” said Edna. “Lavinia and I grew up together.”

A piece clicked. Any tacit doubts about Edna’s trustworthiness were instantly dismissed in Katniss’s head. She wanted to ask Edna more, but Gus was already stirring on the floor, and Edna had to go if she was going to have any chance.

“Thank you,” said Katniss.

Edna nodded again.

“Injustice is tiring,” she said. “I’m done with this city anyway.”

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said, with an amused glint in her eye. Katniss couldn’t believe she’d ever thought her frail. “Maybe I’ll look for those famous terrorists.”

Katniss smiled at her.

“Good luck,” she said.

“Thanks—now get out of here. No need to get you in trouble too. Please solve this, Miss Everdeen.”

“Call me Katniss,” said Katniss, hoping with everything she had that Edna wouldn’t have to pay a price for helping her.

***

Haymitch wouldn’t approve. No way he would approve

She’d decided on it late at night, amidst worries about Peeta and Edna, who had sacrificed her whole current life to get her some information. Lying there, tossing and turning, Katniss had come to the conclusion that the only thing to do was to find Chaff, wherever he was, and ask him for the truth.

Katniss wasn’t even sure he would know anything, but it was her best bet. If he had been a spy, there was a chance he knew of other spies. Thread had known that Chaff was a Capitol informant but was prepared to execute him anyway. If Chaff hadn’t already turned against the Capitol, Katniss thought he had good reason to now.

Haymitch would tell her it wasn’t enough to go on, or that there was no reason to believe that Chaff would know anything about Snow’s agent if Thread was in the dark about it.

But Chaff had to know something. The day he’d been arrested, he’d mentioned the agent, and then he’d told Katniss to remember it, to use it.

And what about the original mission of that agent? Why would orchestrating Katniss’s death require so much secrecy, such an elaborate plan, and then not even hit its target? It didn’t make any sense. She, Peeta, Haymitch, all of them, had just gone with the assumption that whoever had done this had done it to get at Katniss, but it seemed laughable that someone who was able to disappear without a trace after killing three people could still bungle every attempt.
But what other explanation was there? She could have stood next to anybody at the fika, which rendered any motive on anyone but herself just...senseless. And why would the killer poison Peeta if not to remind her what he or she was planning? Were they just torturing her? Trying to scare her as they circled?

No. It still didn’t make sense, but it had to be there. She didn’t want to beat around the bush or be careful anymore: no matter what, she had to see Chaff. She could feel that he had an answer, or at least a puzzle piece she didn’t yet have.

Such was the thought process that led her to Finnick Odair’s door that night. Peeta had told her about his superior information gathering skills. Hopefully, this was something he could arrange.

He opened the door as soon as she knocked, and after a polite hello, she sat in the plush chair and explained that she needed to know exactly where Chaff was being kept and how to get to him undetected, provided there was a way. It wasn’t hard to convince him once she’d explained what she was hoping to find.

“But I don’t want Haymitch or Peeta to know about it,” she added, once Finnick had agreed. Her companion raised an eyebrow.

“I think Peeta will notice if you suddenly disappear without saying where you’re going.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want to put him in harm’s way again.”

Finnick studied the bedspread for a moment.

“Fine, whatever you want. I won’t lie to him if he asks me, though.”

“He won’t ask you,” said Katniss through gritted teeth, “because he won’t know there’s anything to ask about.”

Finnick rolled his eyes.

“Okay then. No telling Peeta, no telling Haymitch.”

“Thanks,” said Katniss, standing up to go.

“I’ll need Beetee in on it though,” said Finnick.

“Why’s that?” asked Katniss, frowning.

“Because Thread’s messed with the hologram,” said Finnick. “There’s no way they’ve put a new wall in yet, but Beetee’s the only one who can get it open again.”

“Why don’t you do it during our free hour?” asked Katniss.

Finnick gave her a very patronizing look.

“I will. But you can’t exactly sneak off to wherever the hell it is in the middle of the day when Peacekeepers have you checked out.”

“Oh, that sounds all right then,” said Katniss, feeling stupid.

“And I’d recommend bringing one or two others with you too with you too,” said Finnick. “You don’t want to try it alone; I’m sure there will be traps and things.”
Katniss nodded.

“Why don’t you come with me?”

Finnick grinned at her.

“Oh of course I’m coming,” he said. “I wouldn’t miss this. I meant some others though. Think about it, at least.”

Katniss suggested Beetee. The fewer people involved, the better.
Katniss found Cashmere in the café the next day and apologized for her outburst. Cashmere said nothing while Katniss spoke, and she was beginning to worry that whatever tenuous comradery that had sprung up between them was gone when Cashmere smiled.

“Thank you for your apology. You were a bit nasty,” said Cashmere. “But I figured you were in a mood. Not so strange, considering the circumstances.” Cashmere touched the tabletop right next to Katniss’s coffee mug. “Of course, you’re forgiven, my dear. Just let’s not have the same conversations over and over.”

Katniss smiled mildly and leaned back in her chair. So Cashmere wasn’t as gracious as Peeta was when she snapped at him; few people could be.

She stayed in the café with Cashmere for most of the morning, sneaking glances at Brutus and Enobaria at the other end of the room. It was Enobaria, first, who’d caught her attention, caught it with periodic scans of the room. Katniss recognized that better than anyone: it was what her prey did when they were on their guard, fearing the hunter.

“Why do you keep looking over there?” Cashmere asked eventually, and Katniss became sheepish, unaware that she’d been so obvious. She leaned in.

“Is it me, or is Enobaria acting a bit strange?”

Cashmere made a face and snuck her own glance at Enobaria.

“I think I know what it is,” she said a moment later. “While you’ve been locked up andmoody—don’t worry about it Katniss, I’m joking—Enobaria and Brutus have had quite the change in behavior.”

“How so?”

“Well isn’t it obvious?” said Cashmere. “Enobaria at least, but Brutus too, it looks like. Everyone knows that Peeta didn’t get ‘food poisoning,’ so Chaff’s not the suspect anymore—“

“And now Enobaria and Brutus could be arrested themselves,” finished Katniss with a slight smile. “Though if they didn’t have anything to hide, there shouldn’t be a problem like that.”

Cashmere shrugged.

Still, Katniss didn’t want to check anymore into Enobaria or Brutus until she had what she needed from Chaff. She wasn’t sure how long this type of thing usually took, but she hoped Finnick would be back within a day or two with the information she needed.

***

The next day Peeta was released from the infirmary, and Katniss greeted him with a monstrous, crushing hug. She’d been able to control herself this time, so there was no kissing.

Feeling pathetic as she drew back with tears on her face, she turned away so he wouldn’t see them,
but she didn’t let go of his hand once on the way to breakfast.

Cashmere, Blight, Finnick, and even Johanna stopped by their table to welcome him back. Johanna looked a tad shaky, though she was clearly attempting to maintain her usual prickliness. She made a small joke at Katniss’s expense and fled. Mags patted Peeta on the head as she passed but said nothing, and Beetee waved at them from where he sat across the room, on his computer as always.

Once Peeta turned back to Katniss, Beetee winked and gestured at her in what she was sure was supposed to be an allusion to the Chaff plan. She averted her eyes.

That afternoon, during their free hour, Katniss and Peeta wandered the city hand in hand, making sure to take backstreets where there would be as few others as possible.

From the sea of chrome and concrete, a patch of green emerged. A park lay before them, only ten blocks from the Training Center. A low chrome fence was interrupted by an engraved door that announced the “Forests of District Twelve.”

“It was you,” said Peeta, pointing at the engraving. “You made District Twelve cool. I’ll bet that’s why this is here.”

He opened the door so they could get a better look at the park, and Katniss had to stifle a laugh. There were a few trees, and they were of the right type, but they were much too sparse for the place to be considered a forest. It was more like a meadow, with bright, unnaturally colored flowers that stank with fake scent, interspersed with soft grass and a chrome bench before them. A gentle, warm breeze was blowing.

The park extended far ahead of them, and Katniss thought it must have been taking up the place of three or four Capitol skyscrapers. It was by no means the forests of District Twelve, but Katniss loved it anyway. It felt like ages since she’d left home, even though it had only been a couple of weeks.

“I guess they like some nature with their city, then,” said Peeta, looking around. Katniss went to the nearest tree to feel the bark. It was spongy, young. Nothing like the trees at home, which were rough enough to slice up your hand and leave it stinging.

“It’s nothing like the forest at home though,” she said. She turned to Peeta and saw him staring wistfully into the trees.

“What is it like?” he asked. “The forest?”

She stared at him.

“You saw... in the arena...”

“Oh,” he said, looking embarrassed. “I was hoping you were going to say it’s nothing like that.”

Right. Now she understood what he meant.

“Well... I can put it this way,” she said finally. “All the traps in the real forest are mine. And most of the animals aren’t trying to kill you.”

“But some are?”

“Some of them... yeah I guess,” said Katniss.”
“Like which?” Peeta asked.

“A bear, for instance.”

Katniss walked to the bench and sat down. Apparently the bench sensed her weight; a fountain of colorful water spewed forth from the ground before her. It was like a water rainbow.

“I can’t imagine seeing a bear in real life,” said Peeta.

“I’ve only seen one once. From a distance. You don’t really stick around when you see a bear, generally.”

She saw a quiet, subtle smile play on his lips and was pleased. These smiles of his were her favorite ones, the ones she was the surest of. He swapped from himself to his TV persona so quickly she sometimes had trouble discerning which was which.

“What your life must have been like,” he said, with a sigh. “How amazing. Not that it was easy or anything,” he added. “I know you had to struggle a lot.”

“I know what you meant,” she said. Peeta’s words hadn’t offended her in the least. When they’d been young, Peeta had had more than she did, and she would have resented him for it. Now she understood, in all her material wealth, that always having enough to eat didn’t solve all your problems.

Peeta sat down beside her on the bench, putting an arm around her shoulder.

“I was a lot freer then,” Katniss said, and when she turned her head to face him his smile had turned sad. “I didn’t mean—"

“No, I know,” said Peeta. “Don’t worry about it.”

They sat there quietly while she studied him. Absently, she thought about what he’d told her about painting once: that nothing was ever just one color and there were always at least five, ten, fifteen shades of everything. The sun was shining just so, reflecting off his hair and revealing yellows and golds and even pale orange-reds in it, and she thought it was beautiful. If he ever painted a self-portrait, she’d want to keep it.

There was also the expression on his face. It was so thoughtful and sad, and it was making her sad, so she did the only think she could think to. She gave him a kiss.

But he turned his face away the instant her lips touched his.

“Don’t,” he said, but gently. “How many times do I have to tell you I don’t want you to feel bad for me?”

“I don’t feel bad for you,” Katniss said.

“Yes you do,” said Peeta. “I can see it in your face.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said, and leaned back, crossing her arms. Peeta grinned at her.

“You know, Peeta,” she said. “Sometimes you talk to me like I’m a little kid.”

Peeta raised his eyebrows.
“What do you mean?” he asked.

“You’re good at reading me, I’ll admit that. But you get it wrong a lot, too.”

“How so?”

“You act like I don’t care about you at all,” she said, frowning. “You think everything I do is because I feel obligated to you, but I don’t.”

“I don’t think that,” Peeta said. “I know you care about me.”

“Oh really?” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“Yeah. A little,” he said. He was wearing the faintest of smiles.

“A little? Peeta I—” but she broke off, because she didn’t know what to say, and she suddenly wanted more than anything to march away. To shut a door in his face and not tell him anything and not think about anything. It was what he was used to from her.

“When you were poisoned, I...” she said slowly. “I stopped breathing. I care about you a lot, you jerk. A hell of a lot.”

She punched Peeta lightly on the shoulder, and he gave a half-hearted chuckle and they were both silent again, listening to the gurgling of the fountain. It was pleasant, peaceful.

“I love you,” said Peeta.

“You don’t have to go trying to one-up me,” said Katniss drily, and he laughed for real this time.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “I know. You’re right.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s just,” he said, as his laughter faded, “I worry sometimes. About you and me.” He paused and sighed. “Finnick told me something that night at the bar that freaked me out.”

He fell silent, and Katniss waited for him to elaborate. He took a deep breath.

“He said that-- that he thinks there’s a bidding war already on... on a tape of us...” said Peeta. “On our wedding night.”

For a moment, Katniss didn’t understand, and she met Peeta’s miserable gaze with confusion. Then it was like a cold wind blew through her as she grasped what he meant. Kisses and soft words wouldn’t be enough the day they got married. No, the Capitol would want a full and thorough consummation, and the cameras would be there for all of it.

Katniss could feel Peeta’s eyes on her as she turned away. She needed a moment to process. For some reason, it had never occurred to her that this might happen. In retrospect it seemed obvious. Why wouldn’t the Capitol invite itself into her bedroom?

“You know what,” said Katniss, looking Peeta in the eye again and trying to keep her voice steady, “we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

She reached across him to grab his hand and gave it a squeeze for good measure. Peeta sighed, stroking the back of her hand with his thumb.
“I hate them for this,” he said. “I hate this so much.”

“It’s okay,” said Katniss. “I—I know you’ll be gentle.”

Peeta looked away, and Katniss sat in awkward silence, unsure of what she could say that wouldn’t make it worse. Peeta didn’t turn back to her.

“Please don’t torture yourself,” she said finally. “It’s not your fault. There are... worse things.”

Peeta made an mm noise that Katniss couldn’t interpret. It could have been agreement or anger or dismissal or something else entirely, but she was at a loss.

“It’s just—touching you like that,” said Peeta, and she could hear him choking up. “Doing that with you when I know people are watching. When I know it’s not your choice.”

“Peeta,” said Katniss, “we can’t do anything about that now. And—”she took a deep breath “—at least we’ll be in it together. At least it’ll be with someone who—someone who loves me.”

The expression on his face was the saddest she’d ever seen it.

“I wish you didn’t need to settle for just someone who loves you,” he said, and stood up. “Sex, marriage, all of it. It’s supposed to mean something.”

Katniss stood up too, and grabbed hold of Peeta’s shoulders. She turned him to face her.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m not settling for anything. Plenty of people have sex without it meaning anything, all right?”

Peeta frowned, but said:

“All right.”

“I don’t want you to beat yourself up over this,” she said, surprised at the words that were coming out of her mouth. “We’ll get a little drunk beforehand or something. Make the best of it.”

“Make the best of it?” said Peeta, clearly bewildered. Katniss was pleased; she had hit her stride now, and whatever she felt, or worried about, Peeta agonizing over violating her would not help anything. Sex was not a topic that she’d spent much time or energy thinking about anyway, and at the moment it was more important to make Peeta feel better than to worry about how she felt about it. Lately she had had trouble being horrified by things, anyway.

“Peeta,” she said. “I’m telling you, I’m okay with it.”

He looked at her for a long time, then nodded solemnly.

“Okay. Just one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I meant what I said, back in the infirmary.” said Peeta. Katniss jumped slightly. She’d assumed he’d forgotten all about that. “If this is something we have to do, I’ll do it. But I don’t want to—I can’t be a reason you’re unhappy—”

“But you don’t make me—”

“Let me finish,” he said softly. “We’ll do this, if we have to, but afterwards... If there’s something
between you and Gale, something real, then I think you should consider pursuing it. You and me can go along for the cameras, but off-screen, you’re... free. At least as far as I’m concerned.”

Katniss’s brain stopped working. Completely unable to form a real sentence, she instead made a few incoherent noises and then just stared at him. Peeta smiled at her sadly.

“Come on,” he said, taking her hands off his shoulders. “We should get back to the Training Center.”

They left the park with the trees and the green grass behind them and walked down the cobblestone street. In the park the sun had kept them warm, but now it was blocked by the tall buildings, and Katniss shivered in the breeze.

“So,” said Peeta. “What’s your plan?”

“My plan?” said Katniss vaguely, still thinking about Peeta’s words in the park.

“I’m sure you’ve got a plan.”

“Nope,” said Katniss. “No plan.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Peeta, shaking his head. “What is it?”

“There is no plan!”

Peeta smirked at her, and she felt a compulsion to laugh. It was nice to laugh with him, especially after such a heavy conversation. Before today, Katniss had gone along with a tacit assumption that Peeta’s feelings for her were a kind of advantage in their relationship: where she was unsure, he was positive. How could giving her up be preferable to this?

“I’ll find out eventually,” said Peeta, “so you might as well tell me now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Katniss, trying to keep a straight face. “There’s nothing. No plans. I have zero plans.”

“So Beetee’s sign language to you this morning didn’t mean anything. Is that what you’re saying?”

Katniss groaned.

“I was hoping you hadn’t caught that.”

At first reluctantly, Katniss began to fill him in on what had happened since he had been in the infirmary. After a few minutes, she forgot why she initially had wanted to keep him out of the loop at all. With Peeta, there were no doubts about trust.

“Oh!” said Katniss as they walked in the front door. “I talked to Prim the other day. Damn it! I was going to show you the place.”

“It’s okay,” said Peeta, appearing amused. “There’s not a whole bunch of people I need to talk to at home in Twelve anyway.”

Katniss frowned at him as they made their way to the elevator. Back when they were in school together, before they’d had a conversation, Katniss had almost always seen Peeta surrounded by a crowd of friends. It was tough for her to imagine that what he said was true.

“About that,” said Katniss, struck anew by the realization that he’d never mentioned any friends or
acquaintances to her. “You used to be so popular. You’ve got to have someone else at home.”

Peeta shrugged as they reached the elevator. Katniss pushed the call button.

“I don’t know, really,” he said. “They just kind of... fell away, most of them.”

“Fell away?”

“School is a bubble,” he said, and she felt a little sad for the indifference in his voice. “I don’t really know what happened, or when it happened. I just kind of... realized I didn’t have that much to talk about with most of my friends at home anymore. Not that it’s their fault or anything—a few of them really tried—but I just wanted... to grieve or something. On my own.”

Guilt tore through Katniss as she realized he was talking about the period in which they’d been avoiding each other after the Games. She had never thought before about how Peeta had approached her first to repair their friendship. She didn’t want to think of him, stuck in his nightmares by himself, with nothing but his passive father and evil mother, and the two brothers who had felt no compulsion to volunteer for him.

“It’s okay,” he said, catching the expression on her face. The elevator arrived and they found it empty. “I’m okay. I’ve got you and Haymitch, don’t I? And who knows what’ll happen in the future, with the others.”

Katniss kissed him on the cheek.

“Having lots of friends is overrated anyway,” she said. “I definitely never had them. And you’ll always have me.”

Peeta smiled at her and opened his mouth to say something, but at that moment they were interrupted by the opening of the elevator doors. Finnick appeared before them.

“Oh yeah?” said Katniss. “Not that it matters now, but if this is about you-know-what I’m sure I told you not to mention it in front of—“

“It’s a go, Katniss, but it’s got to be tonight.”

“What?” she said, grabbing his forearm in one hand and Peeta’s in the other and dragging them both to Peeta’s room. She let go of them only long enough to open the door and shove both of them inside, double checking that there was nobody else in the hall before sliding in behind them.

“Well it’s not my preferred gender ratio, but I guess I’m game,” said Finnick.

Katniss stared at him.

“‘It’s got to be tonight?’ that’s the warning I get?” Katniss hissed. Her initial anger over Finnick’s brazen address in the hall faded when she remembered that the surveillance systems were likely still all down.

“Yeah,” said Finnick, flopping down on the bed as if it were his. “Chaff’s close. I’ll take you there, but we’ve got to go tonight.”

“I’m coming too,” said Peeta.
“Thought so,” said Finnick.

“Why tonight?” Katniss snapped.

“Because,” said Finnick, smirking. “Tonight will be our only Peacekeeper-lite night. Half of the squad will be gone.”

He was looking very smug. For some reason, though they were on the same side, Katniss wanted to throw him off balance and wipe that laughing smile off his face.

“Where are they going, and how do you know?” she said, after steadying herself.

“Away. And I know because I know everything.”

Peeta snorted, and Katniss sent him a ferocious glare. Finnick looked very pleased with himself.

“Could you be serious for a minute!”

“I don’t know exactly where,” said Finnick, when Katniss posed the same question to him again. “It’s just details. After you told me about Edna I had Beetee bug the surveillance office.”

“Bug the surveillance—?”

“Just details, I told you,” said Finnick, more serious now. “It doesn’t matter how we managed it. That’s not nearly as interesting as Beetee hearing this morning that our dear friend Edna is suspected to be hiding out in the hills. The Peacekeeper squad is being sent to get their deserter.”

“Half of the squad?” said Peeta, and Finnick nodded at him. “That’s weird. Why do they need so many Peacekeepers, especially from this squad, just to catch one deserter?”

“Never mind that,” said Katniss.

“No, I agree with Peeta,” said Finnick. “It doesn’t make much sense. Granted, Thread just decided on it this morning, and they seem to think they can get away and then back before the Victors notice.”

“So are they leaving or not?” asked Katniss impatiently. “Are we going or no?”

Finnick exhaled loudly.

“They are. And yes, I guess we are, too.”

“Good. Hopefully Edna keeps them awhile, then.”

This was both because she wanted as open an opportunity as possible, and because she prayed that Edna would escape. She couldn’t handle all the things she was starting to owe this woman she barely knew.

“Anyway,” said Finnick. “They’re scheduled to leave around eleven, and we probably should head out around midnight. We don’t know how long they’re going to be gone, so getting back here might require some acrobatics. In all likelihood we’ll be discovered talking to Chaff and already be in much more trouble than—”

“So we leave at midnight,” said Katniss. Finnick nodded “How are we getting out of here. Did Beetee figure out the hologram?”
Finnick smirked again.

“He did. Well—he will have. With your help,” he said, and with this pointed at Katniss’s bow, which was resting against the wall in the corner. Katniss stared at him, hoping for an explanation.

“That hologram, wherever it came from, was blocked up with a force field as a replacement for the burnt-out wall,” he said. “Thread and his minions have not had time to put in a new wall yet, so they’ve settled for a permanent force field. All force fields have a weak spot and—”

“And you want Katniss to shoot it out,” said Peeta, grinning at Katniss as though she were some rare jewel.

“Bingo.”

“Whatever,” said Katniss. “I can do that, if you show me where it is. But isn’t that a bit unnecessary? Why don’t you just throw a rock at it or something?”

“Because you need a smaller focal point,” said Finnick, “With a lot more strength behind it, and your aim is the best there is.”

Katniss decided to drop it. Bringing her bow along was probably a good idea anyway.

“And you want Katniss to shoot it out,” said Peeta, grinning at Katniss as though she were some rare jewel.

“Bingo.”

“Whatever,” said Katniss. “I can do that, if you show me where it is. But isn’t that a bit unnecessary? Why don’t you just throw a rock at it or something?”

“Because you need a smaller focal point,” said Finnick, “With a lot more strength behind it, and your aim is the best there is.”

Katniss decided to drop it. Bringing her bow along was probably a good idea anyway.

“You sure where I find a rock?” Finnick muttered.

“Okay,” she said. “Midnight by the hologram. We’ll meet you there.”

“Agreed,” said Finnick, nodding. “Now, unless this threesome is going to happen after all, I should be going.”

He shot a sultry look in Katniss’s direction before rising from the bed. He crossed the room to leave, and Katniss moved out of his way and then shut the door behind him.

“See, I would have found out anyway,” said Peeta, once Finnick was gone. “No point in hiding anything.”

Katniss nodded curtly and darted into the bathroom for a moment. It was just hitting her that she was orchestrating something potentially dangerous to herself, Peeta, two other Victors, as well as Chaff. Her idea, so solid when she’d first had it, seemed brash and silly now.

She sat on top of the cold porcelain toilet and put her head in her hands. Finnick had appeared so quickly again, with a fully thought out plan and a perfect opportunity, willing to go with her though he knew they would probably be caught. Beetee too, with his enthusiasm and complete lack of discretion. She was considering backing out of the whole thing when Peeta appeared in the doorway, looking concerned.

“Hey,” he said. “Everything okay in here?”

“Yeah,” Katniss attempted, but her voice cracked and flew up an octave.

Peeta entered the bathroom and crossed it to kneel next to her.

“What’s up?”

Katniss raised her face from her hands and met his eyes. His face was only an inch or so away from hers.
“I’m stressed out,” she said. He laughed at her.

She glared at him as he put his arms around her.

“Look,” he said in her ear. She couldn’t see his face. “Who knows if this will work. It’s better than sitting here waiting to get attacked again, though.”

Katniss sighed.

“I feel something, Peeta. We’re on the edge of it, I’m sure of it. I’m just...”

“Stressed out,” said Peeta, and they stayed like that for a while, hugging and ignoring the cold hard bathroom tile and porcelain toilet. “You know what,” he said. “I feel it too. We’re going to figure something out today.”

They spent the rest of the day avoiding the topic of their coming excursion and instead napped so as to be rested. Katniss was pleased to find her sleep completely dreamless, and woke at dinnertime feeling refreshed.

Peeta was still sleeping, and she turned to face him, grateful he was there with her again. She could not believe she had attempted to conceal her Chaff plan from him, or anything. It was unimaginable that he not accompany her.

Her thoughts brought her to earlier that afternoon, and his suggestion. Their marriage had always been a far-off concept, one less than ideal, but never horrible. She’d never thought about an attempt at any relationship outside of it, but now Peeta was offering her an out. Yet another sacrifice he would make for her.

Did she want that, to be with Gale? She had never been enough of a forward thinker to consider the possibility. And what about Peeta then, all alone with a wife he loved but couldn’t truly call his own?

More than anyone she had ever known, Peeta was able to assuage her worries. Nothing ever seemed insurmountable when he was there. They’d made it out of the Hunger Games, after all.

She didn’t want to give him up, but nor could she say that she wasn’t tempted by his offer of freedom. It made her feel guilty just to think of the possibility. Her guilt was doubled by an acknowledgment of the selfish desire to keep Peeta in her life like this, though that was surely impossible. She would have to choose, someday.

She reached across the bed to touch his face, and he stirred but didn’t wake. He was so different from the other boy, in small things as well as large. Where Gale was rough and loud, Peeta was gentle and soft-spoken. Where Gale was impatient and impulsive, Peeta was deliberate.

She drew back her hand and turned to get out of bed, resolving to put off thoughts of marriage and the soap-opera sure to ensue. She would instead return to the much more Katniss-like business of worrying about what she was going to eat for dinner.
“Boots, right? They’re tough, I can run in them.”

“That’s your choice, Katniss. I really have no idea.”

Katniss decided her boots were the best option, laced them up, and tightened them.

“Right, sorry,” she said. “I think these should work pretty well.” She’d found her hiking boots in the back of Peeta’s closet. It had been quite the pleasant surprise; she’d been sure they were gone forever.

“I don’t think the success of this mission will have anything to do with your shoes,” said Peeta, yawning. He was apparently still groggy from the long afternoon nap they’d taken.

“How long until we’ve got to be off, again?” she asked.

“Thirty minutes.”

“What!” demanded Katniss, certain there’d been a mistake. “You said thirty minutes like twenty minutes ago.”

“No, I said thirty-five minutes when you asked me five minutes ago,” said Peeta patiently, “Just relax, there’s no reason to freak out yet.”

Katniss continued pacing and ignored Peeta’s suggestion that she join him on the bed and try to settle down. It took her fifteen minutes—and two more requests for the time—to agree. She busied herself by studying her bow, which unfortunately needed no adjusting.

Fifteen minutes later (though it seemed like ages to Katniss) they rose and went to the door, making as little noise as possible as they slipped out of the room.

It was dark and quiet, similar to the night that Peeta had ventured into the dark hallway by himself. Also similarly, the pair of them ran into someone they were not expecting to be out of bed.

It happened as they entered the stairwell to descend to the second floor. Katniss, in an eagerness to be off, rushed in without consideration of the dark, and ran smack into another person who was coming down the stairs.

Katniss swore and raised her bow instinctively, though she dropped it again a moment later upon concluding that there was nobody to shoot. It took her a moment to register who the person was who now stood before her. Of the three people present, all surprised, Peeta recovered the fastest.

“Johanna!” he said, his attempt at keeping his voice to a whisper making the word come out in a hiss.

“Tell your girlfriend to watch it,” Johanna said sourly. Though it was dark, Katniss’s eyes had adjusted enough that she could see Johanna was clad in only a nightgown. It made her look strangely vulnerable. “You could have broken my nose. Wait—” she broke off, eyes raking over them.

“What’s going on here?”

The bow was far too big to hide, so Katniss held it awkwardly at her side while she tried to come up with something to say. She saw Johanna study them, watched her as the pieces clicked together in her eyes.
“Looks like I’ve caught you in the middle of something, huh?” said Johanna. All of the reserve from the last few weeks was suddenly gone. “Go ahead then, what are we up to.”

“None of your business,” said Katniss. “What are you even doing up?”

Johanna made a tsking sound.

“Nope, no questions for you. I’m clearly in a nightgown and therefore totally innocent, whereas you two both look like you’re getting ready to rob someone. You should tuck that knife a bit farther into your belt, prettyboy. It’s pretty obvious as it is.”

Katniss and Johanna glared at each other. Continually trying to dismiss the other, Katniss attempted to maneuver around her, but it wasn’t of much use. She couldn’t afford a loud argument, either, and Johanna had the advantage should she decide to yell and wake everyone up.

Eventually, Peeta pulled Katniss aside and started whispering hotly in her ear.

“You know, we could...”

Katniss stared at him in horror.

“What?”

“Why not?” said Peeta, and he leaned in to whisper to her again. “She clearly has been feeling guilty about Chaff the whole time. And you never know, she could be useful.”

Johanna, meanwhile, eyed them suspiciously with her arms crossed but let them speak, apparently sensing that patience might bring her what she wanted.

Little though she liked the idea, Katniss didn’t have any other solutions. After a moment’s irritated deliberation, she turned and said:

“You wanna find out, go get dressed and meet us back here.”

“Sweet,” said Johanna. She turned and disappeared up the stairs, her footsteps making soft thumps.

“You better hurry up!” Katniss hissed after her. “We don’t have time to be waiting for you.”

Johanna made a rude gesture over the bannister before going completely out of sight. Peeta was smiling very slightly, and Katniss guessed that he was trying not to laugh at her.

“She better save our asses,” she said to him. “That’s all I have to say.”

Johanna proved the efficient changer, and reappeared on the landing not five minutes later in street clothes with a battle-ax strapped to her back.

“Have you had that ax with you this whole time?” Peeta asked her.

“Yep,” said Johanna, and Katniss heard a note of pride in her voice. “I never go anywhere without it.”

“Seems kind of impractical,” muttered Katniss.

“Shut up,” said Johanna, though she was smirking. “At least I’ve got both my hands free.” She turned her attention to a different subject as Katniss led her and Peeta down the stairwell. “So who are we assassinating, anyway?”
“Nobody,” said Katniss. “We’re going to see Chaff.”

That quieted Johanna for a bit.

When they arrived at the hologram, Finnick and Beetee were waiting for them. Finnick was very impatient.

“So you’re ready, then,” he said. “Took you long en— Oh, Hi Jo.”

Johanna looked from Finnick to Beetee in surprise, but retained her composure.

“Oh, so this is really a party, then,” she said.

“I want to get going already,” said Finnick, and he pointed to a red spot of paint high up on the wall. “That’s where you’re aiming for, Katniss. I painted a target for you.”

Pleased at how low and easy her target was, Katniss wordlessly backed up, drew an arrow from her quiver, and shot it into the middle of the red paint spot on the wall. It was uncomfortable to do in such a tight space, but the arrow vanished through it as if it was air. A millisecond later, the wall flickered once or twice, then disappeared completely. The janitorial closet was completely gone, and there was instead a gaping hole where the walls just stopped.

“Wonderful!” Beetee said. “Just perfect!”

“Great,” said Johanna. “You blew a hole in the wall. I’m sure nobody will notice it.”

“Oh, be quiet,” said Katniss. “Anything else we need to take care of?”

Finnick looked very alarmed.

“Um, I’m with Johanna on this one.”

Katniss stood for a moment, chewing her lip, aware that her four companions were looking to her for some decision, as though she was their leader. In a way, she guessed she was.

“I should stay behind,” said Beetee. “I don’t know what help I would’ve been anyway—and I think Miss Mason is a worthy replacement. I might be able to get a new hologram up.”

Katniss nodded at him, grateful for a solution.

“Good idea, we’ll see you when we get back—unless the Peacekeepers are also back by then, in which case—just get back to your room safely.”

He assured her that he would and dropped to the ground, opening his ever-present laptop and clacking away at it.

“Last chance to turn back,” said Finnick.

Nobody said anything, and Finnick nodded curtly.

“All right then,” he said.

Katniss, Peeta, Finnick, and Johanna climbed into the bare corridor left by the hologram and continued out into the night. The air was balmy, a light breeze carrying the promise of spring. The sky was clear and the stars visible, despite the Capitol lights. Had they been in a more remote area, it would have been the kind of night Katniss stopped and lay down in the grass.
But they had a job to do now. Finnick took the lead and the rest of the group followed close behind. Almost immediately, Katniss realized she was familiar with the streets they were walking.

“It’s not that far, or that hard to get to,” said Finnick over his shoulder. “But I hear they’ve got some nasty things in there. We should be okay if we keep our heads down, but God knows how long that will last.”

Katniss was certain the last part was directed at her, and she resented it.

They came to rest before the tall pink building where Katniss had phoned Prim.

“Here we are,” said Finnick.

Katniss gaped at him.

“Here?” she asked. “He’s been just here the whole time? But this is a—a shopping center, or something.”

“It’s a big building,” said Finnick with a shrug. “Come along, kids.”

Johanna made a snarky comment, but Katniss wasn’t paying attention. She was thinking about Chaff, hanging from chains somewhere inside, and a shared glance with Peeta told her he was thinking of the same.

Finnick led them around the stores, eerie in the silent darkness, to a tiny alley between two storefronts, where a small door into the main building stood sandwiched. Katniss never would have noticed it if she’d been by herself.

Unable to help herself, she darted forward and grabbed the doorknob, which, though chrome, was traditional otherwise. She twisted, but the door did not open.

“It’s locked,” she said blankly to her companions.

“Of course it is, brainless,” said Johanna, rushing forward and shoving her aside. “Move it.”

Before anyone could say anything, Johanna reached over her shoulder and took her ax from its straps. Swinging it once, hard, she struck the door with a loud clang that made Katniss wince. When she opened her eyes, she saw that Johanna’s ax had split the doorknob in half and left a deep gash in the door. Johanna only had to tap it for it to swing open.

She grinned smugly at Katniss and the men.

“All right, fuck my key then,” muttered Finnick, pushing past Johanna and Katniss. “Points on the subtlety, Johanna, I’m sure nobody noticed that noise you made.”

“Well excuse me for taking action,” she said, following Katniss into the building. “You could have told us you had a key, too, instead of being all secret and mysterious.”

The door would not close now, due to the latch being completely severed by Johanna’s ax.

“Speaking of which,” said Katniss, looking around her at the narrow chrome hallway they found themselves in, dimly lit by recess lights. “Now would be a great time to tell us the rest of what you figured out.”

“Nothing,” said Finnick, and Katniss noticed that though he was in front, he was not proceeding with the sure, decided steps of before, but continuing into a maze that was unknown to all of them.
“Patrick gave me this key last night,” he added, showing Peeta the glinting piece of metal. “He was pissed. You should have seen it.”

Katniss didn’t know who Patrick was but didn’t ask.

They reached the end of the hallway and an elevator with glass doors so clean that it was hard to see them. There were no buttons.

Katniss was about to ask if anyone had any ideas when the doors slid open with a soft swish, and the four Victors entered it. Once they were inside, the doors closed again. There were no buttons on the inside, either.

The glass doors lit up with blue writing, and a calm, pleasant female voice read it aloud.

“Floors detected: Four, Seven, and Twelve. Thank you.”

The elevator zoomed upwards.

“Which floor is Chaff on?” Katniss asked, and Finnick shrugged.

“I’m willing to bet it’s Eleven,” said Peeta. “‘Floors detected,’ it’s our Districts: Four, Seven, and Twelve. That’s probably how they sort their prisoners here.”

“So how do we--?” began Katniss, but Johanna interrupted her.

“Only if this is a prison. I heard this place was where they test out new traps for the Games.”

“Where did you hear that?” Katniss asked.

“Dunno. Don’t remember.”

Katniss turned back to Peeta with her original question.

“How do we get to get to floor Eleven, you think?”

But nobody knew.

The elevator dinged, and calmly announced: “Floor Four.” The glass doors slid open, but the Victors made no move to exit.

“Floor Four,” repeated the elevator, and the doors stayed open. Again the Victors made no move and again the elevator repeated itself.

“I think we’ve got to get off here,” said Katniss grudgingly. Maybe there was a stairwell they could use to climb to the eleventh floor, now that they were inside the place, though she would have preferred to have gotten off on at least the seventh for that.

“Floor Four,” said the elevator a fourth time, and the Victors exited slowly. As soon as they had emerged into the room, the elevator said: “Thank you,” and its doors slammed shut.

The elevator seemed to be encased in a pillar in the middle of a large, square room, which was otherwise bare. The walls were chrome, like the hallway they’d been in earlier, and windows took up the whole wall in front of and behind them. On the walls, a black four was painted.

“Great,” said Katniss, “let’s try to look for a staircase or something.”
“Where?” said Johanna. “There are no doors.”

Katniss turned back to the elevator. She tapped on the glass doors, but they did not open for her. Unease was creeping up on her: getting out of the Training Center, getting in here, not a soul to be seen. It was too easy...

The room seemed to shake suddenly, and for a moment Katniss didn’t realize what was going on. She looked down to see the chrome floor split in half and begin to slide into the walls. The ground beneath it was brown and spongy.

“Is that dirt?” said Peeta. He bent down and touched the floor. “It is. Wonder what—“

“Shit,” said Finnick, and Katniss saw the color drain from his face. “Johanna, you said you heard this is where they test out traps for the Games, huh?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I think you’re right.”

Katniss was about to ask him what he meant, when she noticed a small, grey-green vine rise from the soil by Finnick’s foot and wrap around his ankle. Another poked out of the earth by Peeta’s hand and wrapped itself around his wrist.

A split second of silence, and then an explosion—Huge, greyish vines were everywhere, coming out of the dirt and wrapping around their legs, their arms, their faces.

“Keval vine!” screeched Finnick, as the vines pulled him to towards the ground. He struggled but was overpowered and tumbled to the ground.

A vine she had not seen wrapped suddenly around Katniss’s throat and squeezed. She could not breathe. Her left arm was stuck to the ground by another vine. Her lungs screamed for air as she groped blindly with her right hand—if she could get to her quiver, would the arrow be sharp enough? Her vision was starting to blur.

Suddenly she saw a figure move in her vision, and the vine around her throat gave way.

“Peeta!” she gasped.

He’d slashed through the vine with his knife, and hurriedly cut off the ones on her arms and legs. As he did so, a vine erupted from the ground and wrapped itself around his torso, pulling him down. He let out a heavy grunt as the impact knocked the air from his lungs.

She caught the knife as he dropped it and slashed through the vine to free him. It went limp.

“You okay?” she asked him, breathing heavily.

“Yeah. You?”

“We’ll see.”

They jumped up and moved around, eyes on the ground. More and more vines were appearing every moment. There was no way they could fight them all off, not for long.

“AAAAH!” bellowed Johanna, swinging her ax. The vines bent and swayed away from it. As though they were afraid. As though they were sentient.
Finnick stood a few feet away from her, fighting off his own vines—ripping into them with his teeth. He seemed to be losing.

“Guys, look!” yelled Peeta, jumping to avoid a vine that lurched at him. He was pointing at the elevator in the center of the room. The glass doors were open.

“Let’s go!” screeched Katniss. Johanna and Peeta were making a beeline for the elevator, but Katniss looked at Finnick, who was still under siege.

The momentary pause cost her. A large vine wrapped itself around her leg, and she tripped. She fell headlong to the ground and slammed her forehead so hard that she saw a star.

“AAARGH!” came Johanna’s voice again, and the tension slackened. Katniss clambered to her feet. Johanna had swung her ax and severed the vine.

Katniss nodded at her and turned to head towards the elevator. Peeta was fighting off a vine by the door.

Another vine appeared out of nowhere and wrapped itself around Johanna’s chest, pulling her back with a force so great that she dropped her ax. She slammed against the chrome wall and squirmed to get free.

Katniss grabbed the ax and moved toward Johanna.

“What are you doing?” Johanna bellowed. “Get out of here!”

There was no time to argue. Katniss spun on her heel with the ax in tow. She reached the elevator along with Peeta, who had reduced the vine he was fighting to shreds.

“You better not fuck up my ax, Everdeen!” came Johanna’s voice as the glass doors slammed shut. All was quiet except for Peeta and Katniss’s belabored breathing.

They looked at each other then, hair mussed and bodies cut and bruised. It was a charged, tense second as their gazes met. The next moment Katniss crashed into him and their lips met.

They kissed violently, wildly. Peeta’s hands went to Katniss’s face as his mouth moved against hers, and she noted that he tasted like sweat, blood, and metal.

Peeta’s knife clattered to the ground. The noise brought Katniss back to herself, and she broke from Peeta. He was staring at her, his eyes wide. He was as surprised as she was.

“We are not discussing this now,” Katniss snapped, and she turned to face the elevator doors.

“Of course not,” said Peeta, likewise recovering.

The elevator dinged as they stood silently beside each other. The blue number seven appeared and then faded.

“Floor Seven not detected,” said the elevator. “Proceeding to Floor Twelve.”

“Take us back down!” screeched Katniss. God knew if Johanna and Finnick would make it. The mission, as she saw it, was already shot to hell.

Katniss and Peeta felt the elevator shooting upwards.

“Down! I said down!”
“Katniss,” Peeta warned, and she felt the elevator slow.

“Floor Twelve,” it said calmly, and the doors opened.

Instead of repeating itself, like it had on the fourth floor, the back of the elevator suddenly lurched and pushed them forward and out of it. Once they’d been expelled, the elevator slid downwards and was gone.

Peeta and Katniss locked eyes. Whatever was in here, they were stuck with it.

The room had the same layout as the fourth floor, with a large black “12” painted on the wall, but the ground was totally different. It was covered with soft green grass that swayed slightly, as though in a soft breeze. There were trees in the four corners of the room; old and rough looking, they resembled the trees at home much better than the ones they’d seen at the park. The air smelled slightly sweet, like a bouquet of flowers.

And flowers there were: blue, dainty looking flowers. They were the kind she’d only seen once before. On the train to the Capitol.

“Olvidia,” Katniss said.

As though triggered by her words, the flowers made a high, cold, hissing sound. They expelled a heavy mist from their centers so quickly that the room was immediately filled with a thick fog. Katniss and Peeta gagged on it.

“O-Olvidia—“ Peeta choked. “We’ve—we’ve got to find out a way to get out of here before it knocks us out.”

“Somehow I think these are aiming to kill,” said Katniss, before being overtaken by a fit of tearing, rattling coughs.

She closed her eyes in her multitude of coughing, and when she opened them again the world seemed to be going in slow motion. She saw Peeta’s face, purpled from his own coughing. It seemed to spin away from her. The next think she noticed was the vast green mat of grass that filled her field of vision as it swayed and contorted before her.

Air! Screamed the rational part of her brain. Get to fresh air! The window!

“Come on,” she said to Peeta, but the words sounded wrong, like she was speaking into water. She groped after his hand or arm, but her vision was spinning and swaying and she lost her balance and fell.

The whole world was green as she slammed into the ground. Her hands and knees smarted from the impact. Her left hand was in contact with a shoe. Moving it around, she found an ankle.

Peeta fell as well. Closing her eyes, Katniss more easily found her center, and she groped blindly, looking for Peeta’s hand. Finally she found it, and she started pulling him after her, though she suddenly felt exhausted.

The window, she remembered vaguely, starting to crawl in what she hoped was the right direction. As she crawled, Peeta slowed, and she had to tug him harder and harder to keep him with her. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep on the soft green grass.

Finally they reached the window, but Katniss could not remember what she wanted to do there, or how to go about it. She collapsed down into the grass, giving into her urge. As she jerked, she felt a
sharp pain in her right hand.

It was bleeding, her blood leaving bright red marks on the grass. For a moment she had no idea what had happened, and then she saw it.

_The ax._

The pain from her hand helped against the fog in her brain, tethering her to reality. She looked at the ax for a moment and hoped Johanna wouldn’t kill her after all.

Katniss grasped the hilt of the ax with her bleeding hand, and it stung. She wound up, held the heavy ax over her head, then threw it with all her might.

The ax flew through the air and collided with the window. Thankfully, mercifully, the window shattered, and Katniss saw the ax fall away through the air. She hoped it wouldn’t fall on anyone.

A cold wind blew in through the ruined window and returned Katniss to clarity. The hole seemed to suck the gas from the room.

“Nice move,” croaked a voice behind her, and she turned her head to see Peeta blinking at her, looking confused but all right. “You’re bleeding!”

“I’m okay. Are you?” she asked, and he gave a brief nod.

She sat up to inspect her cut hand. It was slashed diagonally, and it spewed blood. Looking at it made her feel light-headed.

“She,” said Peeta, ripping a piece of cloth from his shirt. “Let me.”

Feeling like she might throw up, she held her hand out to him. As he wrapped her hand in the makeshift bandage, she winced.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Don’t be. Thank you.”

“I think you’re going to need stitches.”

“Only if we make it out of here at all,” she said. Now that her bleeding hand was at least out of sight, the absence of the Olvidia gas and its effects made her more cheerful than she knew she ought to be.

“Any ideas?” he asked.

She shook her head. Peeta stood up and inspected the window.

“We’ve got to get out of this room,” he said, sticking his head out into the air.

“I don’t want to go farther in—“

Peeta cut her off. “It looks like there’s a balcony on floor Eleven.”

“What?” Katniss said, jumping up to join Peeta. Sure enough, there was a significant outcropping on the floor below them. “Chaff’s down there!” she said, looking back up at Peeta.

“Yeah...”
“What’s wrong?”

Peeta’s blue eyes were thoughtful.

“Isn’t that... a bit... too easy?” he asked.

Katniss snorted.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Would you rather stay in here with the poison gas flowers?”

Peeta shook his head.

“No. Let’s get out of here.”

Once the decision was made, the prospect of getting down onto the balcony seemed anything but too easy. The Olvidias were still hissing behind them, and Katniss was anxious to get out, but she couldn’t climb with her hand, and she certainly couldn’t get out of the window without cutting herself further. The whole matter was further complicated by her bow.

Katniss and Peeta kicked out as much of the glass as they could and decided that he would try to climb down. It didn’t look like such a long way, so Katniss was to sit on the ledge and jump down.

Having removed as much of the window as possible, Peeta bent down to climb out.

“Wait,” said Katniss. Peeta looked at her in confusion, and she reached down and pulled up the hem of her shirt. Biting down on it, she used her left hand to rip off a thick strip

“What are you--?”

“I don’t want you to cut your hands too,” she said, and lay the cloth strip on the edge of the window.

“There.”

“Thanks,” said Peeta, as he clambered out the window.

Katniss watched anxiously as he lowered himself down and then disappeared, letting go of the windowsill. She heard him hit the balcony with a clap.

“All good,” he said, his voice surprisingly close. Poking her head out the hole in the window, she saw his face only a few feet below her. It really wasn’t so long a fall.

With renewed confidence, she sat at the edge of the sill and dangled her legs off the end. She rotated her bow and quiver so she could hold them in the center, but when she scooted off the ledge, it occurred to her how much less control she’d have.

It proved a non-problem, as Peeta caught her easily. She breathed her thanks, and he set her back on her feet.

It hadn’t occurred to Katniss that they might be faced with the problem of another window once they had managed to get out onto the balcony. As it stood, it was completely open, and Katniss and Peeta’s eyes were drawn to the chained figure inside. They’d been right, he was here.

Katniss dropped her bow and quiver and raced in to Chaff. He was hanging from the ceiling, his skin sallow and loose over his frame. His clothes were torn and bloody and he had the sickly green tinge of malnourishment. His head was tilted to the side, and she realized he was asleep. His slow breathing was harsh and belabored.
He jerked awake as they neared him.

“What!” he screeched. “Who’s there?!”

For a moment he seemed unable to see them, and the fear in his voice made Katniss cringe. She couldn’t imagine what kind of torture he’d been through.

“Who’s there!” he cried again, and Katniss stepped closer so Chaff could see her face clearly.

“It’s Katniss and Peeta,” said Katniss, suddenly self-conscious. “We—are you okay?”

“Not exactly,” said Chaff. When he moved the chains jingled. “What are you doing here?! You have to go! They could come back at any moment.”

Ignoring the warning, Katniss spent a moment trying to figure out how to frame her request.

“We just had some—”

“It wasn’t me!” cried Chaff desperately. She noticed that his eyes were bloodshot. “Whatever you think. It wasn’t me!”

“We know,” said Peeta gently. “We know. That’s why we’re here.”

Chaff turned his head and spit blood onto the floor. Katniss said:

“You told me to look for the agent. Snow’s agent. Do you know who it is?”

Chaff looked at her with confusion, and Katniss felt her stomach contract in apprehension.

“Of course,” he said. “But that—that won’t help me. You’ve got to leave, Everdeen, quickly!”

“What do you mean? They framed you, right? Your wife and your history and—”

“What?”

“Snow’s agent,” said Katniss. “The agent tried to get to me and they’re framing you for—”

“You’ve got it all wrong,” said Chaff desperately. “It wasn’t Snow’s agent trying to kill you—or anyone—”

“But surely—”

“Seeder was the agent, Katniss. Seeder.”

Peeta and Katniss froze. For a moment nobody spoke, and the only sound was Chaff’s clinking chains.

“Seeder?” said Katniss at last. “But then—”

“There’s someone else,” said Chaff. “It’s not Snow’s agent at all. They arrested me because they think I took out the agent.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because Seeder was the one who organized my service and kept an eye on me so I wouldn’t go turncoat. I never wanted to work for the Capitol,” Chaff added hastily. “My wife, she’s—she’s sick.”
Peeta reached up and placed a hand on Chaff’s arm.

“We know,” he said, and then he turned to Katniss. “We have to get him out of here.”

Katniss’s mind was still scrambled. She’d been so sure of the situation. It had made sense. Not every question was answered, that was true, and there were details that seemed odd, but it had been the best solution she had. Now there was just fog.

“Yeah,” she said, snapping out of it. “Yeah, let’s get him out of here.”

“Oh, my dear,” said a voice behind her.

She and Peeta whipped around to see Thread and twenty armed Peacekeepers with their guns aimed straight for the three Victors.

“About that,” said Thread, a sick, triumphant smile stretching across his face. “I’m afraid it’s not going to work out.”
“You lied to me, Miss Everdeen,” said Thread icily. “Tsk, tsk, tsk.”

His expression was that of a madman; smile huge, eyes unblinking. Katniss tried to speak, but no words came out. She would have felt much safer if she had her bow, but she’d left it on the balcony. And there was no way she’d be able to take on twenty Peacekeepers, anyway.


Thread looked surprised that Peeta was addressing him.

“Hello!” he said. “Such manners!”

It was incredible how quiet it was when he stopped talking. Nobody moved. Chaff seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness.

“I have to admit,” said Thread finally, “I had a few moments of doubt. But you came after all.”

Katniss blinked.

“You knew we would come here?”

Thread laughed.

“Of course, you silly girl,” he said. “Do you really think I would leave an entire facility so lightly attended? Does that really make sense to you? No, Miss Everdeen, I was hoping you would take the chance I gave you, and you did.”

“I just wanted to find out what happened,” said Katniss.

Thread sighed, and his smile faded.

“Fine, play dumb,” he said. “You and your group tried to remove a high-ranking terrorist to prevent his spilling of rebel secrets.”

“What?”

“Oh yes,” said Thread, his smile back. “We’ve picked up your helpers, starting with Mr. Beetee Latier. They’re—”

“No, not that!” cried Katniss. “You have no evidence that we’re part of any terrorist group!”

“I believe your reasons for being here are quite plain.”

“Well you believe wrong,” said Katniss. Something else dawned on her then. “Did you know Seeder was working for Snow?”

“I know everything that goes on around here,” Thread said.

“Well see--that part was news to me,” said Katniss.

Thread rolled his eyes and turned to the Peacekeepers.

“I don’t have time for this. Arrest them.”
Three Peacekeepers stepped forward from the crowd.

“Wait!” cried Peeta. “Don’t arrest Katniss. She can bring you the real killer!”

The Peacekeepers paused and looked at Thread, unsure.

“What are you stopping for?” he snapped, his sudden flare of anger surprising. “He’s lying, of course!”

“No, I’m not,” said Peeta. He was smiling now, even as he held his hands up in surrender. “And you know it. Snow doesn’t think it was us, does he?”

The air seemed to crackle with electricity. The Peacekeepers looked at Thread warily.

“The President has delegated the investigation of these matters to myself,” said Thread icily.

Peeta’s smile grew wider. Katniss kept looking from him to Thread to the Peacekeepers, unsure of what would happen.

“So?” said Peeta, and he even managed a laugh. Sometimes his ability to lie was unnerving.

“How do you think it’s going to look when you bring in the wrong person again,” said Katniss, trying to imitate Peeta’s breeziness. Somehow she didn’t think she sounded as convincing.

“All because you wouldn’t listen,” said Peeta.

Thread’s smug grin vanished. He seemed to be arguing with himself. Shaking his head, he said:

“Give it up. You’ve been caught red-handed. Both of you are under arrest.”

The Peacekeepers moved towards them again. Peeta gestured for them to wait with such authority and sureness that they paused. It was enough for him to get in another sentence.

“We haven’t been caught doing anything,” said Peeta calmly. “You’re the one who made all the assumptions.”

Thread was purple in the face.

“This. Is. Nonsense. I told you, arrest them!”

“It wasn’t them, Romulus,” said a gruff voice behind Katniss. “They just wanted information.”

Katniss whirled around. Chaff looked dazed and only half-conscious.

“Well, unfortunately for them,” hissed Thread, “The information I have says otherwise—“


Now even Peeta lost his composure and turned to look at Chaff, horrified. The room was silent.

“All right then,” said Thread, after a while. His expression had returned to the smugness of before.

“Please take Mr. Etheridge to the execution chamber. Normally we would wait, and gather a big crowd, but the President would like to get the whole ordeal over with as soon as—“

“No!” said Katniss, as a Peacekeeper shoved her aside and went to loosen the chains. She couldn’t
let Chaff go down for them. Enough District Eleven blood had been spilled for her already. “Didn’t you hear what Peeta said? I can bring you the real killer—it’s not Chaff!”

Thread looked at her like she was a piece of gum on the bottom of his shoe.

“If you execute Chaff, the rebels are only going to do something else,” added Peeta. “To embarrass you—and Snow. How will the President feel about you then?”

For a fraction of a second, Thread looked worried. Then he recovered himself and narrowed his eyes at both of them. The Peacekeepers had undone half of Chaff’s chains. The prisoner himself was shivering, though it was not cold.

“Very well,” said Thread, his voice cold. “I will postpone the execution, with a condition.”

The Peacekeepers backed away again.

“Let’s hear it,” said Katniss.

Thread took a step towards her.

“You are aware—you must be, that you have just confessed to knowledge of the crime. If you can provide the real killer, with proof, within three days, Chaff Etheridge will be pardoned.”

Katniss’s stomach tightened. Something was wrong.

“But,” said Thread. “If the two of you cannot provide us with the perpetrator, it will be treated as treasonous obstruction: an offense punishable in the country of Panem.” the icy smile stretched anew across his sallow face “-by death. Believe me,” he added. “I’m looking forward to what you come up with.”

As they were escorted out of the room and back to the Tribute Center, Peeta leaned over and whispered in Katniss’s ear.

“Have you got any ideas?”

“None.”

***

Katniss’s arrow missed the target by a mile.

The Gymnasium was empty except for Katniss and Gloss; she kept willing him to leave her there, alone, albeit unsuccessfully.

Bender, the guarding Peacekeeper, glanced up at Katniss from his desk across the room and muttered something. She couldn’t hear what he said, but she was sure it was about her horrible aim and being glad he wouldn’t have to change the target faces. Katniss thought about making a snide comment about talking to yourself, but she thought better of it.

Gloss, meanwhile, seemed completely at ease. He threw knives under his leg, around his back and from all other strange, acrobatic positions. He hadn’t missed the bull’s-eye yet today. Katniss thought about saying something snide to him as well, but could think of nothing, and his throwing was
actually quite impressive.

Annoyed, Katniss took one more shot (hit the target high on the left corner. Better than nothing, but definitely not great) before slinking out to put her bow away.

She found Peeta in the café, writing in a notebook. She sank heavily into the chair opposite him and sighed.

“What’s up?” he asked, looking up from the notebook.

It had been over twenty-four hours since Thread had put his deal on the table, and Katniss was no closer to finding a solution. She and Peeta had stayed up late last night, poring over the little they’d gathered, trying to figure out how and if Chaff’s revelation about Seeder cleared anything else up. On the contrary, it had only made things murkier.

“Maybe we’ve been wrong the whole time,” Peeta had said after a few hours of pacing. His face showed desperation, not epiphany. “Maybe Seeder wasn’t an accident?”

“I thought of that too,” said Katniss. But they couldn’t figure out how anyone could have predicted which cup to poison. At the same time, if it wasn’t about Seeder, if it wasn’t about cup passing, the motive got a bit cloudier. Who would want Katniss dead, besides the Capitol? Surely Seeder would have been in on that plan. She shivered as she thought of Seeder at the fika, when she’d whispered in her ear about bravery, trying to ingratiate herself.

Katniss breathed heavily and slipped a few inches down her chair. It was enough of an answer for him.

“We should go talk to Prim today,” said Peeta. “Maybe she’ll cheer you up?”

“The only way she could cheer me up is if she managed to figure this thing out for me.”

Peeta nodded and turned his attention back down to his notebook.

“What are you writing?” she asked.

“It’s nothing. Just rewriting everything I know about everyone here. Hoping it gets my thoughts moving, or something.”

“Oh.”

Both of them were well aware of the urgency of the situation, but there was little they could do. The threat of death couldn’t motivate them where there was nothing to be learned. Besides, the answer was probably already in front of them; they just hadn’t been able to put it together yet.

“Who are you doing now?” said Katniss, her gaze sliding around the room. It was empty apart from the two of them.

“Enobaria. Wanna see?”

“Sure.”

Peeta passed the notebook across the table. Katniss perused the page for a moment before setting the book down. There wasn’t really anything new in there.

“This is like word for word what we have on the computer upstairs,” she said. “‘Hostile to Cressida, no known rebel or Capitol ties. District Two. Hunger Games tapes.’”
Peeta smiled humorlessly.

“Never said it was productive."

“Who else have you done?” asked Katniss. Maybe looking at everything again would jog her own memory.

“I did Blight first,” he said. “Go back a few pages.”

She flipped through the book.

“Gotcha. ‘found Katniss/Cressida on tenth floor.’ But that’s it on him, too.”

“I don’t really see him doing it, though,” said Peeta.

Katniss put her head down on the table and groaned. It was cool against her forehead.

“That’s the problem,” she said. “I don’t see anyone doing it.”

The door swung open and Johanna slouched in. When she saw Katniss, she turned around. She was angry about Katniss losing the ax. And getting them caught, probably. Katniss had no idea what kind of stakes there were for Johanna, Finnick, or Beetee, but none of them had said a word to her all of yesterday or today.

“Come on,” said Peeta, and she heard him get to his feet. “It’s almost time for the free hour.”

Outside, heavy clouds hung low in the sky. It was going to rain soon. Katniss wondered if she’d ever get to see those District Twelve storms again, the ones where it would rain so hard you couldn’t see and when it cleared up everything smelled all clean, like it’d been through the Capitol laundry.

The pink building loomed over them, threatening now, and Katniss wondered what other horrors were hiding in there. In reality, she probably didn’t have time to be calling Prim instead of focusing her attention on the murders. But she was going to do it anyway.

Inside, Katniss paid the receptionist, who stared openly at her as if she was an exhibit at a zoo. Go ahead and stare, thought Katniss, I won’t be back again.

Peeta slid off towards a corner of the room, muttering about calling his father. It was likely, after all, that they would never see each other again. Still, Katniss would have liked Peeta with her to talk in soothing words to Prim, to assure her that they’d both be home soon. His voice wouldn’t crack when he lied.

She took her seat and told the telescreen in front of her to call her sister. The screen stayed on the working screen for a long time, so long that Katniss began to worry that she wouldn’t pick up.

At last, Prim’s purple bedroom appeared on the screen, and Katniss relaxed. Her sister was in bed with her eyes closed. Katniss watched her silently, not wanting to disturb.

Only a moment later, Prim stirred and opened her eyes. She brought her hands to her face, rubbed her eyes, and let out a huge yawn.

“Hi,” said Katniss. Prim started.

“Oh! Hey, you scared me,” she said, giving Katniss a wan smile. She was pale and her eyes looked swollen.
“You okay?” said Katniss. “Why are you sleeping in the middle of the day?”

“I was up late last night,” Prim said, sitting up and drawing her blanket around herself. “I had to help mom with some herb sorting. The delivery was late and all messed up. Plus I think I might be coming down with something.” She sneezed powerfully.

Katniss felt such a strong urge to hug her sister she thought she might cry. The purple walls, her sister’s messy hair and puffy face, it was all too much. Katniss should be home, sliding Prim food under the door and pretending to be terrified of catching her cold.

“Are you okay?” Prim asked. “You look like you’re going to puke or something.”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Is something wrong?” Prim said. She was sounding alarmed now. “What’s going on? Is Peeta okay?”

Katniss let out a single, short chuckle. “Yeah, he’s fine. He’s just talking to his dad now.”

Prim was still frowning.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re really stuck there?” she asked after a moment. Katniss wasn’t even surprised, really. Sometimes it felt like Prim was the older sister.

“I—I don’t know how much I can tell you,” said Katniss. “But—well—one person died.”

“The lady from Eleven.”

“Yeah,” said Katniss, surprised. “Seeder. How do you know about that?”

“Saw it on the news,” said Prim, drawing the blanket tighter around herself. “That Miss Seeder died and she was a great Victor and how we’ll all miss her a ton.”

Katniss blinked. Of course, Panem had to know something. She decided a few more details couldn’t really hurt.

“That’s not it though,” she said quickly, before she changed her mind. “There were two more, a cameragirl named Cressida and... another girl I knew. Her name was Lavinia.”

Prim nodded but showed no sign of surprise.

“What happened to them?” she asked matter-of-factly.

Katniss hesitated before she spoke, but Prim’s eyes were focused and unyielding.

“We don’t really know,” she said. “I saw both of them though, just before.”

“Did they say anything weird?” asked Prim, frowning.

“Well, Lavinia couldn’t talk, and Cressida...”

Katniss thought back to the last time she’d seen Cressida. In the elevator

“You can’t miss it, the only other door is a janitorial closet. Every day. 1:00 to 3:00”

But was that really the last time she’d seen Cressida? She couldn’t remember anything else, but those
few words stuck to her. Another thing, too.

“A little before she died—not just, but a few days before,” said Katniss, more for herself than for Prim. “Cressida flashed this weird symbol at me. A Mockingjay, like the pin Madge gave me.”

She’d crossed the line into absolutely-not-to-be-discussed territory. She could sense it. It couldn’t hurt Cressida now, though, so it couldn’t matter. It wouldn’t be long before nothing could hurt Katniss anymore, either.

“ Weird,” said Prim, tossing her hair and looking away. It was not a thoughtful look; it was more the one you give if someone’s telling you a story you don’t care about. Still, upon looking back she made brief, intense eye-contact with her sister. Prim was damn good at this.

“Yeah. I don’t know,” said Katniss.

“You’ll be home when they figure it out though, right?”

That was code for What’s going to happen to you?

“Yeah, soon.”

Nothing. Don’t worry.

Prim narrowed her eyes.

“Any idea how long?”

I don’t believe you.

“No,” said Katniss, smiling. “No idea. But I miss you.”

I love you.

Prim sighed heavily and tightened the blankets again; they’d fallen loose in her conversation. Katniss marveled that her sister was both so old and so young, but the thought came with a pang of sadness. Twelve year olds were supposed to be absorbed in their own pubescent world of self-consciousness, but Katniss’s sister had grown to fill the space she herself had left, a space for no child.

“Katniss? Are you listening to me?”

Katniss jerked out of her thoughts.

“Yeah, sorry. Well, no... say again?”

Prim sighed like she was annoyed but Katniss could see the softness beneath it. It was familiar, this softness, but where she’d seen it she couldn’t tell.

“I said, Mama’s been letting me help her a lot more lately. Been delegating and stuff. And I’m learning to knit, so we can make our own clothes.

“So you’re sticking to the knitting thing, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Prim, dropping the blanket and getting to her feet. The twelve year old was back again, thank goodness. “I made you a scarf, actually. But it’s really ugly and uneven and I’m pretty sure I dropped a stitch or two, so it might fall apart. I’m trying again, though. I’m hoping eventually to get up to sweaters and things.”
She crossed the room and disappeared from sight for a moment. She reemerged with a very red, very ugly piece of fabric, holding it up for Katniss to study. Katniss had never even thought about knitting before.

“That’s great, Prim,” said Katniss. She was trying to be discreet as she wiped away the wetness in her eyes. “It’s beautiful.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Prim, laughing. “But it’s only my first one.”

“I’ll wear it anyway,” said Katniss. “I’ll wear it all year, just to brag that my sister can knit.”

“I’d better start working on a new one, then. So you don’t make a fool of yourself.”

So she would go along with Katniss’s charade.

“I love you,” said Katniss, “so much.”

“Love you too. Do you have to go now?”

Katniss glanced at the clock on the wall. She did not have much more time.

“In a minute,” she said. “Tell me more about what’s going on at home.”

“There’s not much going on. Gale’s been in a mood lately, though.”

“Gale?” said Katniss, and she looked up. With what was possibly the worst timing ever, Peeta was walking over from his telescreen, finished with his call. “He’s always in a mood.”

“Yeah, but he’s been extra quiet. He’s out in the woods a lot more, too.”

Katniss shook her head, hoping that was the end of it. She would probably never see Gale again, anyway.

Meanwhile, Peeta sat down in the chair beside her. She wanted to talk to Gale, and about Gale, but she couldn’t with Peeta there. She’d completely avoided thinking about Peeta’s proposition so far, and she didn’t care to start.

“Hey, Prim, how’s it going?”

“Peeta,” Prim said, and Katniss was surprised by the warmth in her voice. “Hi! You’re better!”

“I am,” he said, nodding politely.

“We were worried,” said Prim. “Thought you might have had an... accident.”

“Nope! Or... I’m all fine now, at least.”

Katniss glanced at the clock again. The three of them chatted for the next few minutes, as quick as they could, to get as much out of it as possible.

When they went to hang up, Katniss was saved from bursting into tears only by the fact that her mind had moved forward. That tiny question about Cressida was floating around in her mind.

“Everything okay?” said Peeta. He held the door for her as they left the shop.

“Yeah, I just... Prim reminded me of something, but I—“
She broke off midsentence, because an idea had suddenly occurred to her. It was crazy, incomplete, farfetched, with lots of moving parts and a requirement of insane luck. She took a moment to go through the theory, make sure it held water, but could think of no reason why it didn’t. Her theory made sense.

“Peeta,” she breathed. “I think I’ve just... We’ve got to get back to the Tribute Center!”

She bolted, not leaving time for Peeta to ask her what she was talking about.

“Why? What’s at the Tribute Center?” she heard him call behind her.

“Proof, Peeta. Proof.”
Katniss pounded on the table for emphasis. The man across from her was not amused.

"Please, Mr. Thread. There's proof in there, I know there is."

Thread placed his pen down on the yellow notebook in front of him.

"Absolutely not, Miss Everdeen," he said, slowly and evenly. "We don't follow your orders here."

"But you told me to bring in the murderer!"

"Yes, I did," said Thread, his eyes boring into hers. "But you're going to have to find another way to prove it."

Katniss threw her hands up in exasperation. She turned away from Thread, afraid she might not be able to withstand the urge to physically attack him.

"If I lay it all out for you—"

"No. We will not go digging into Cressida McGregor's possessions to find something if you can't prove its existence beforehand. That's not how it works. You don't get to tell me half of a story. The Peacekeepers are not your personal detectives."

Katniss banged on the metal table again. Thread didn't even flinch.

"Please," she said, after gathering herself. She looked him in the eye. "Please."

"No. Not until you bring me something better."

So it was on to Plan B, then.

"Can I at least have those files I asked for?" she asked, sitting down. It occurred to her that Thread would probably be more cooperative if she toned herself down a bit.

Thread frowned, pursing his lips so hard they turned white. He looked her up and down, as though trying to decide whether she was insane or not. Leaning over, he called to a Peacekeeper in the hall.

"Garth! Bring me the files you checked out from the archive this morning, please."

Garth emerged into the office carrying the two files, which he dropped down in front of Katniss. They were both very thick. Narrowing his eyes, Thread motioned at the files and said:

"I can't imagine what use those will be."


Pursing his lips again, Thread picked up his pencil and turned his attention back down to his
notebook. Their meeting was over.

"I'll need those back," he said, not looking at her. "Tomorrow morning, please. By 8:00 am."

Katniss fought the urge to snap at him. He'd just said he thought the files would prove useless. Clenching her teeth, she instead said:

"Not a problem."

Before anything else could slip out, she stepped out the door and into the hall. Of course Thread would block her getting into Cressida's things. Never mind that they'd stood open and accessible those first few days, before anyone thought to go through it. Idiots, the Peacekeepers had probably thrown the best possible piece of evidence in a garbage bag, too lazy to go through it all, sure already of their own theories and too stupid to check what was right in front of them.

Katniss took the files back to her and Peeta's room and hid them under the pillow. It wasn't like there was anything secret in there, but she felt like leaving them out and exposed was asking for trouble. If her suspect found a way into the room in the meantime and found them...well, they wouldn't be able to make heads or tails of the files anyway, so there was no use in worrying.

Since Thread was unwilling to cooperate, Katniss had but one hope left. It was far from a given that Ada Fray could give Katniss the proof she so desperately needed, but it was worth a shot.

Katniss made her way to the first-floor ballroom, thankful that she'd been able to persuade Peeta to go to the Gymnasium to paint for a while. She didn't want to share her theories yet, not until she was absolutely positive they were true. Enobaria was on the elevator with her, but the two of them said not a word to each other.

Luckily, the ballroom was empty. Surveillance cameras were clearly visible, high up in the rafters, and Katniss wondered if the signal was still jammed. Strange, how many things had to be in line for everything to go as planned. Depending on the way you looked at it, one could consider the killer extremely lucky or extremely unlucky.

She crossed the room, large and echoing now that it was empty, and approached the tapestry that was supposed to cover the Avox passage down to the kitchens. Sure enough, as she pushed the tapestry aside, she met a plain hallway with steep metal steps that curved down and away.

Katniss began descending the staircase, noting that the hall turned in a narrow, tight circle on the way to the kitchens. When she emerged, it was into a large, plain, rectangular room, chrome cabinets lining the white walls and long chrome cupboards on the wall opposite her. There was a long rectangular stainless steel table a few feet in front of her, and a large, industrial stove beyond that. Between them stood the tiny Ada Fray, accompanied by her soft humming and the sizzle of her frying pan. Whatever it was she was making, it smelled like fat and salt, and Katniss could not stop her mouth from watering.

"Ada?" Katniss asked, and the small woman jumped. She whirléd around, a look of panic on her face, and seemed to take an extra-long time to identify the person standing before her.

"Miss Everdeen," Ada said breathlessly, still leaning back into the stove. "What are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to talk to you," Katniss said. "You were so helpful last time," she added, when she saw the worry still on Ada's face.

"Oh," said Ada. She wiped her hands on her apron. "What about?"
"Just some specifics about the day of the fika. I know it was a while ago, but I was hoping you could help me out."

"I'll try... but I don't think I—"

"You'll do fine," said Katniss, moving forward. "I'm not expecting very much."

Ada stared at her. She flinched as a droplet of oil spattered from the pan and landed on her skin.

"Are you okay?" said Katniss.

"I'm fine," the chef said, but she grabbed a cloth and held it to her skin. She was clenching her teeth slightly. Her eyes dropped to the floor. "I'm trying out a new recipe."

"It smells amazing," said Katniss. "I can... wait for you to finish."

"No, no, it's okay," said Ada with a sigh. She turned a dial on the stove and the flame died. The sizzling sound petered out. "How can I help you?"

"Well," said Katniss, suddenly feeling small and unprepared, "I—I just wanted to double check with you. You told me you left the drinks alone for a period of, what, fifteen minutes?"

"Yes, miss."

"And that's all?"

"Yes, miss."

The maid's eyes were welling up with tears.

"And where does the other entrance to the kitchen come out?" asked Katniss, pointing down the corridor on the left.

"There's another staircase there, that leads to the main entrance. I come straight to work in the mornings and I leave at night through there."

"And you're sure nobody came in through there?"

"That's what Edna told me."

Katniss felt a twinge at the mention of Edna's name, but kept going.

"Okay, good," she said, hoping Ada might relax. The last thing she needed was for the chef to start bawling like she did the day she came to Katniss's room. "Now, you told me Lavinia was late."

"Yes, miss," said Ada. "I'm—I'm sorry to interrupt, but why are you asking me this?"

There was a short, tight silence in which Katniss had to decide what to tell her.

"I'm trying to find out what happened. Exactly what happened."

"But... why do... I thought... Mr. Etheridge?"

"It wasn't Chaff," said Katniss, bristling, and Ada cowered again. "Sorry, didn't mean to raise my voice."

Ada didn't say anything. Maybe she was used to getting yelled at.
"Okay, so when you went back to the storerooms," said Katniss, "there was nobody here, and by the
time you came back, Lavinia had arrived."

"Yes."

"But you don't know when exactly."

"No."

"Okay, that's okay," said Katniss. "I only have two more questions. Have you ever worked with
Lavinia before?"

"Yeah, a few times. Why?"

"Was she ever late any of those times?"

Ada Fray looked off to the side in the curious way she did, and looked thoughtful.

"I—I don't think so, but—" a moment passed where no sound came out. "Lavinia being late, that could
have just been... me. They never tell me when the Avoxes are going to come serve, or if they're
coming to serve, and she was there when I finished the last drink. It was... all my fault I left those
cups alone..."

The wetness in Ada's eyes spilled out onto her face. It wasn't the bawling, raucous crying from all
those weeks ago, but the quieter kind. The kind that comes from a wound that won't heal, even when
the initial, more violent cries leave you.

"Ada," said Katniss. "I don't think that cup was poisoned down here."

It was quiet.

"What?"

"Don't tell anyone that," said Katniss. "I—please promise me you won't tell anyone that."

"Okay," said Ada, her expression showing that she could hardly tell which way was up.

"Thank you," said Katniss, and she slipped up the staircase before she could accidentally reveal
anything else.

Katniss was sure now. So sure, she could have decided not to read the files she had borrowed from
Thread. She still would, of course. There were a dozen things in those that could throw her theory
way off kilter, but it was clearing in her head.

Katniss was even surer of Ada's words than the chef herself had been. There was no way Lavinia
was late because of coincidence. No, Peeta had said it so long ago, without any inkling of how right
he was: Lavinia had had a very good reason for being a place other than the kitchen right before the
fika, and Katniss knew exactly what it was.

The trouble now was proving it.

***
Katniss sat in the café with the files. Staying in her room meant risking that Peeta would come straight back and know she was looking at something vital. Out here, in the open, she could be more private about all of it, because things you do in public aren't nearly so interesting as those you do in private.

Such was the way when Blight came over to sit by her with a plate of fried potatoes. Katniss wondered if Ada had to constantly remake things to keep them fresh, and throw them out if they sat.

"Whatcha reading there?" Blight asked her.

Katniss closed the file she was reading and smiled at Blight.

"Nothing important. What's up?"

"Finnick was looking for you," he said. "He told me he couldn't find you anywhere. But here you are."

"Here I am," Katniss repeated, keeping the smile on her face.

Blight took a fry and popped it in his mouth. He leaned in and started speaking very quietly:

"I got the impression Thread was threatening you, or something."

Katniss raised her eyebrows.

"Finnick knows about that?"

"Yeah, well, of course. He knows everything."

Chuckling, Katniss said:

"Not who the murderer is, though."

Blight didn't say anything, and he wasn't smiling. As annoying as she'd found it, Blight's perpetual smile was part of how the world worked; it's absence disturbed her.

"Look," he said, "I know we don't know each other all that well, but if you need help with anything, just let me know. Anything."

Katniss nodded at him.

"Thank you, Blight."

He munched on fries and waited, but Katniss didn't ask for any help. The two of them sat there as Blight worked his way through his plate, his pace slowing down as the number of fries dwindled. When he got to the last one, he hesitated, then sighed, popped the fry in his mouth, and got up to leave.

Brutus and Enobaria entered the room, followed shortly by Mags, who Katniss hadn't seen in days. She waved her over, knowing that company would ward off anyone else who felt they needed to come talk to her. Katniss liked Mags a lot. Partially because the possibility of real conversation was limited.

Mags must not have seen her, because after taking food for herself from the buffet, she disappeared through the doors again and was gone, presumably to eat in her room.
Enobaria and Brutus kept to themselves. It was no wonder the District Two Tributes were always so haughty when their Mentors never talked to anyone from anywhere else.

Alone, Katniss went back to her files and enjoyed a good fifteen minutes of peace before she heard the chair opposite her groan under the weight of another person. Looking up, she saw it was Johanna Mason.

"Hey," said Johanna, and there was no malice in her voice, "I need to know what's going on." She was pale again, kind of curled in on herself like she'd been the first few weeks after Chaff's arrest.

Katniss frowned at her.

"What do you mean?"

Johanna rolled her eyes. When Katniss still didn't volunteer an answer, she continued.

"With Thread. What's going on?"

Katniss blinked at her.

"Come on, Everdeen," said Johanna. "We get caught trespassing, you and Thread have a little chat, and everything goes back to how it was? I don't think so. He could have just let those Keval vines kill us, and I don't understand why he didn't."

Still, Katniss said nothing.

"You owe me," said Johanna then, narrowing her eyes. "My ax."

Katniss laughed. It was all too ridiculous.

"You wanna know what's happening? They're executing Chaff tomorrow." she said, becoming serious again. She didn't add that there was a possibility that Peeta and herself would also be executed.

Johanna closed her eyes like she needed to recover herself, then said:

"Okay, anything else?"

For some, indiscernible reason, Katniss slid the files across the table. She supposed she did owe Johanna, after all.

"What is this?" said Johanna, opening the first file and scanning down the page. "Why are you looking at”—she glanced down to double check—"stuff about Woof?"

"Look at the other one."

Johanna frowned as she closed Woof's file and opened the other.

"I have to say I don't see the relevance of this either."

Katniss leaned over and pointed to a line on the page Johanna was looking at.

"Do you see what that says?"

"Yeah, so?" said Johanna.
"It's important," said Katniss. "So important that if it had never occurred to me to check it, I would have no idea who killed Lavinia, Seeder, and Cressida."

Johanna stared at her.

"Are you saying-?" she began, but Katniss could tell by the look on her face that she already knew the answer.

"I can't tell you the details," said Katniss. "You'll see soon enough. Thread let us off for this."

Johanna slid both the files back to Katniss, barely touching them, as though they were diseased.

"Fine. thanks," she said, getting to her feet and starting to walk away.

"Johanna," said Katniss, and Johanna turned. "I wouldn't have found out...what I know, if it wasn't for you."

Johanna snorted and walked away. They still weren't friends. That was fine by Katniss: she didn't have time to chat anyway.

Peeta gaped, and for a moment Katniss was afraid she'd gone off the deep end. She was crazy. Her theory was way out in left field and she was grasping at straws.

Her fiancé ran a hand through his hair.

"So what do we do about it?" he asked. "Who do we tell and what do we tell them?"

Katniss exhaled and felt her panic evaporate. She'd thought of this part too, but first:

"You believe me?"

"Yeah," said Peeta, nodding. "I never would have seen it coming, but I believe you. We still need a way to prove it though."

His frown grew deeper as she explained her plan. When she was done, he asked her if there was anything in it he could do, any role he could take off her hands. She told him it would probably be better if he pretended to not know anything about it.

"Has Thread already agreed to this?" he asked her.

"No," said Katniss. She didn't like the way his eyebrows shot up when she said that. "But he'll have to, won't he? I mean, it'll work, right?"

Peeta reached across the bed and picked up the two files. Giving them to Katniss, he nodded.

"Let's hope so," he said.

Katniss started towards the door but paused. Her hand on the door-handle, she turned back to Peeta.

"Hey," she said, "about what happened in the elevator..."

Peeta put his hand up to stop her talking.

"Let's not worry about that yet," he said. "First, let's make sure that Thread doesn't kill us."

"Agreed," said Katniss, smiling softly. She paused and then added, "Let's hope this works."
He smiled at her, and she turned and exited the room.

She knocked on the door to the surveillance office at 10:24 PM. She had no idea if Thread went somewhere else for the night. She tried to picture him going home to a wife and children every day, but shuddered and decided she'd rather not.

Nobody answered the door, so she tried the handle. Locked. Fine, she thought, and she slid the files under the doorframe, sticking a note to the Woof file. It said:

Dear Inspector

I know how to end this thing.

We're going to need a train. Meet with me in the morning for details.

-K

Chapter End Notes

I know, it's a short chapter, but trust me, this was all necessary! Also, this is the LAST UPDATE before the murderer is revealed. IE, the last update before the mystery starts unraveling. Depending on how closely you've paid attention/how long you've followed the story, you may want to consider rereading it to catch all the clues and hints :)

Anyway, we're rolling up to the final three chapters, and they're all doozies. Seriously, the finale is coming and I'm SO EXCITED.

see you next week, friends,
Breakfast was incredibly tense.

All of the Victors had been called down to the café at exactly nine for a shared meal. Once they had all arrived, Thread appeared at the head of the table and announced Chaff Etheridge's confession and subsequent sentencing. This breakfast, he explained, would be followed by a short train ride to the execution. The Victors had an obligation to their country; their presence was necessary to show their condemnation of treasonous behavior.

Katniss sat between Peeta and Cashmere, avoiding everyone's eyes while Thread spoke, afraid she might otherwise give something away by not appearing shocked or incensed.

"Poor, poor, Chaff," said Cashmere, shaking her head and pushing her eggs around her plate. "I'll have to go put on black after this."

"Not the skimpy dress, I hope," said Gloss, on her other side. Cashmere glared at him.

Katniss said nothing. Cashmere and Gloss would learn the truth along with everyone else.

One person seemed to notice Katniss's reservation, and she was making it obvious. Johanna Mason kept stealing from across the table, questioning and suspicious. In a way, it was funny. On the first night, Johanna's gaze had been full of malice and threats, but it didn't intimidate Katniss anymore. No, in fact, Katniss's unique knowledge lent her a confidence that changed how she looked at all of the Victors. Just like her and Peeta, most were only doing what they needed to do to survive.

That wasn't to say that she felt totally at ease. Quite the opposite. Brutus, unlike the others, was lively and jovial, and it was grinding on Katniss's nerves. When he laughed, loudly and without restraint, it was almost too much for her.

"Don't say anything," said Peeta, and she felt his hand on hers, under the table. "Not yet."

Another person whose eyes had fallen on them was Haymitch. He glanced from Katniss to Peeta, but continued to eat quietly where he sat next to Beetee, who was talking his ear off.

Katniss pushed her plate away from her, too nervous to eat. Instead she let her eyes glide over everyone at the table. Blight, with his characteristic good mood dampened now; Mags, silent and frowning; Enobaria, indifferent to everything, her shark teeth flashing as she ate; Johanna, pale and beside herself; Beetee, oblivious and chatty; the Carmichaels, haughtily disapproving of their very middle-class company; and lastly Finnick, talking calmly to Blight at the end of the table, as though nothing were happening.

"It's time now," Peeta whispered in her ear, and she stood. The two of them excused themselves "to go get ready," and swiftly headed towards the exit. Peeta held the door for her, and as she passed through it she turned and caught a glimpse of Haymitch's small frown.

That morning, Thread had called Katniss in at seven and listened with pursed lips as she'd laid out her plan. It was a strange type of collaboration. Never had she thought she would end up handing a rebel to the Capitol, but that was what was happening now.
Because it was a rebel; of that she was sure. A brilliant one, one who had manipulated everyone. Too brilliant, maybe, to fall for Katniss's trick, and she was relying on a reaction. It was the only way to get solid proof.

In the room, they found a black suit for Peeta and a dress for Katniss lying on the bed. Her bow was there too, to Katniss's bewilderment. She'd been sure it was gone forever, but the return of the last remnant of Katniss's father lent her a sliver of hope. The bow was not gone for good. Now it was just a question of whether she would ever get to use it again.

***

The train pulled out of the station, and the Victors were silent. Spring balminess had given way to a heat which, magnified through the windows, was enough to discompose even the most stoic of the Victors.

Katniss, sitting at the end of the car, was paying close attention to the things in the window. She was anxious. The reality of what she was about to do was hitting her harder than she'd expected, and a part of her was terrified that she would ruin it. It seemed so much easier now, minutes before her task, to just walk away from it.

"Where is the air conditioning?" said Cashmere, fanning herself with her black lace fan. "My hair is going to frizz."

"All of us are hot, Cash," said Gloss, wiping sweat off his brow. "There was a general grumble of agreement amongst the Victors.

Peeta sat at the opposite end of the car from Katniss, and she met his gaze. He broke into a smile, and she couldn't help it; she smiled back. It was mystifying, how he could calm her with just a glance. His faith in her was solid, unshakeable. She would need to borrow some of his confidence.

This was the only chance they had to get home, anyway.

Katniss looked out the window as the first trees began to fly past. This was about where she and Thread had agreed.

"Now, Peeta," she said.

With a nod, Peeta stood and pulled a lever on the wall, the subsequent lurching of the train throwing the inhabitants off balance. The train had stopped, and Peeta took his seat again.

Katniss felt her heart flutter and her stomach contract.

"What did you just do?" demanded Brutus. Peeta glanced at him for a moment and turned back to Katniss.

"He stopped the train," said Katniss, and the train car was silent. "Because I asked him to."

Enobaria stood and dusted herself off, walking past Katniss to the door.

"Don't bother," said Katniss. "It's locked, and the conductor wouldn't start us again even if you asked."
She stood up, not looking at Enobaria. Haymitch met her eyes, and in an instant she was sure they'd spoken telepathically. He smirked at her and leaned back in his chair as if to say, *let's see it then, Sweetheart.* She surprised herself by smirking back at him.

"Um, Katniss?" said Finnick, who was seated next to Haymitch. "Would you mind letting us know what's going on?"

"Inspector Thread said that this was where it should be done."

"Why are you listening to that old goon?" snarled Enobaria from behind her. Katniss turned.

"I'll tell you, Enobaria," she said. "But would you mind sitting down first?"

"I'd rather stand."

"Fine with me."

Katniss turned to the rest of them. She was unsure of how to start, and for a moment she panicked, but her words returned to her as swiftly as they had fled.

"Chaff Etheridge did not kill anyone," she said, and she was glad to note that her voice did not waver. "He was framed by someone in this room."

The next moment was silent enough to hear a pin drop. Every pair of eyes was suddenly intently trained on her. All fidgeting ceased.

"The person who committed these murders fooled a lot of us for a long time. Peeta,"—he looked startled to be addressed—"when you were in the infirmary, you said something about ducks. Do you remember what it was?"

Peeta looked unsure, but all of the Victor's faces had turned to him. He had their complete attention.

"I said the ugly duckling was only thought ugly because they were looking at him as a duck and not a swan."

"Right," said Katniss, "and—"

"What are you going on about?" said Brutus.

"—and I don't think you realized how relevant that was," said Katniss, ignoring Brutus. "Because I was thinking about it, what is the best way to hide a Capitol spy?"

Haymitch leaned forward and answered for her:

"In plain sight. Get someone from the other side."

"Right," said Katniss. "Seeder was a Capitol spy, for those of you who don't know. And I know several of you do already."

The Victors all glanced at each other and shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Katniss was feeling more relaxed by the minute.

"We were always looking at it wrong. Until Chaff told us the truth, we assumed that Seeder was, well, a rebel sympathizer, since she was from District Eleven."

"What does this have to do with anything?" hissed Enobaria. "Can someone get us moving?"
"I told you to sit because we're going to be awhile," said Katniss. Enobaria scowled and didn't move, so Katniss continued.

"Once that got flipped on its head, I started thinking a lot about Seeder, and I suddenly remembered something Blight said to me."

Blight blinked and looked bewildered.

"Who, me?"

Katniss smiled at him.

"Yeah, you. At the Gymnasium, you told me you'd talked to Cecilia, who'd seen Seeder recently because she'd come to visit her good friend Woof."

"All right," said Blight. "So? What about it?"

"Just a minute," said Katniss. "Yesterday Inspector Thread lent me an old file on Woof Casino, and what do you know? When he died, he was on a list for investigation, just like those people who have been disappearing. Investigation for rebel behavior." She felt a twinge as she thought of Cinna.

"I can't know any of this for sure, but my guess is that Seeder killed old Woof. He didn't get suddenly sick and die."

She waited and let her words sink in. As her gaze passed over each face in turn, she noted who looked surprised, and who didn't. Peeta winked at her. She was doing a good job.

"Wow," said Finnick, after a while. "You figured that out, huh?"

"Yeah," she replied. "And I saw something else in that file. Woof wasn't under just any old investigation. He was top priority, top drawer—but I'll get to that in a minute. For now, Finnick, I have to ask why you didn't just tell me this."

"Tell you-?"

"Everyone knows," said Katniss, "that there isn't a single thing that happens in Panem that gets past you. You knew Seeder murdered Woof, a rebel spy, and you also knew that this whole thing wasn't what it looked like."

Finnick opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"You played dumb," said Katniss, and then she turned. "And so did you, Blight."

That one wiped the smile off of even Haymitch's face. Blight stared at her.

"Peeta overheard, almost at the very beginning, a conversation between you and Finnick. He couldn't see you then, but we figured it out."

"What?" said Blight, standing up, "how?"

Katniss smiled sheepishly.

"Well, I guessed. But thank you for the confirmation."

Blight's mouth hung open for a moment. He sat back down and crossed his arms.
"I was too obvious, huh."

"Not at all," said Katniss. "But you slipped up a little yesterday when you offered me help. I would have stayed behind the scenes if I were you."

Blight nodded but stayed quiet, a smirk spreading across his face.

"Um, so could you please explain what you're talking about to the rest of us?" said Johanna. "Blight, what the hell were you—?"

"He was leaving me notes," said Katniss. "Leaving me notes and clues, and I thought they were from the killer, to taunt me, but they weren't. You were trying to clue me in on the things you knew, the things Finnick had told you. About Seeder, about Cressida. What I haven't been able to figure out is why."

"Finnick was sure that none of this mess was about you," said Blight, "but I wasn't. I thought—"

"Blight!"

Across the car, Finnick was bristling, and Johanna was staring at him like she'd never seen him before.

"The cat's out of the bag," Blight said to him, then turned back to Katniss. "I wasn't sure if it was about you or not. Finnick thought it was a hit on Seeder—"

"So that's who you were talking about!" blurted Peeta. '"'She's had a target on her chest since last year,' that was Seeder, not Katniss."

"I'd like to remind everyone," said Beeta quietly from beside Haymitch, "that Katniss's cup was the poisoned one."

"If everybody is done interrupting me now, I'll finish my sentence," said Blight, though he smiled pleasantly. "I thought you should know about Seeder, just in case. With everything going on, I thought the notes would keep you on edge. Careful."

"And after Chaff was arrested, you continued because—"

"Because I knew the killer was still out there and might be tempted... Chaff was too deep..."

Katniss turned to Johanna.

"You see what I mean when I say it wasn't your fault? Blight planted a lot of that mistrust for Chaff in you because he knew that Chaff was in the Capitol's pocket. Think about it. Your suspicion always weirded me out because it seemed like it was coming from nowhere, but it didn't come from nowhere. You'd been hearing lots of subtle little hints, for a long, long time."

Johanna's eyes dropped to the floor.

"Blight..." she said. All of a sudden, she looked very young.

"She's right Jo," he said gently. "It's my fault Chaff's in trouble, not yours."

"No it isn't," said Katniss. "It's nobody's fault except for the person who framed him."

At this, Enobaria took her seat again, crossing her arms and glaring at Katniss.
"Thanks for joining us, Enobaria," she said, feeling a strange little flicker of pride. "You're in this next part."

Enobaria scowled at her again, but Katniss continued anyway.

"Beetee just pointed out that my mug was the poisoned one, and in that same vein, I found Cressida's body in my room, where Blight found us, coming to deliver another note, probably."

Blight chuckled.

"The truth is, though," said Katniss. "That these murders had nothing to do with me at all, despite the attempts to make it look that way. Finnick," she said, looking at Blight, "was right. But I'll get there."

She turned back to Enobaria as the room gasped.

"What are you looking at?" spat Enobaria. "I don't have anything to do with—"

"Save it," said Katniss with triumph. "Sit there and be quiet. You don't have any reason to be angry at anyone."

Enobaria looked like she'd been slapped. She looked to Brutus for support but got none; he was scooting away from her.

"I remember standing outside the surveillance office," said Katniss, "and you were in there, swearing up and down that you'd never seen Cressida before. But that wasn't true, was it?"

Enobaria didn't answer the question. She glared at Katniss, as though it could make her burst into flames.

"Woof's file wasn't the only one I borrowed," said Katniss. "Where are you from in your District, Enobaria?"

"Sugar Stack," said Brutus quietly. "She's from Sugar Stack."

"Hmm," said Katniss. "Coincidence, huh? Cressida was from District Two as well. Sugar Stack."

Enobaria glared at Brutus this time, but her gaze was loose, missing its edge. She was tiring.

"When we first got here," said Katniss, glancing at Peeta quickly, "I noticed right away that Cressida looked familiar. Hers was the other file I checked out, by the way. Turns out she got her break for film because of a recommendation of a childhood friend. A childhood friend who happened to volunteer for and win the Hunger Games."

"We saw her on the television years ago, from when you volunteered. You're hugging goodbye, and she's crying, so lying about that wasn't the most effective thing, was it? Because anyone rewatching your Hunger Games would see it. That's why she looked familiar to me."

She waited for Enobaria to say something, but the Victor from District Two kept her shark-toothed mouth shut.

"There was another thing in Cressida's file, too," said Katniss. "In fact, it's starting to be a pattern, here. 'Suspected of treasonous behavior and rebel sympathy.' Thread even alluded to it a bit. I'll bet she was feeling some real heat, so she went to her dear friend Enobaria, a Capitol darling, for help."

"But you wouldn't help, would you? You were afraid that vouching for her might mean you would get put on that list and be the next to disappear or be murdered by Capitol operatives. Cressida
wouldn't let up though, would she? I'll bet she said she'd blackmail you—"

"She was living in a fantasy world!" Enobaria said, erupting finally. "She went and made all the wrong friends, talking about 'revolution' and nonsense, and she thought she'd drag me down with her!"

The color had drained out of Brutus's face. It was almost comical how such a large man could cower like that.

"I don't know if I would talk that way about her," said Katniss. "Nothing was ever proven against her—and anyway, she couldn't blackmail you if she didn't have anything on you. I'll bet she had, let's say, a tape. A tape of you, perhaps, saying something you shouldn't about the Capitol? A tape that you stole so she wouldn't have anything on you."

Cashmere gasped in the corner and fanned herself harder.

"When Johanna and I went through your room—"

"That was you?" said Enobaria, indignant. "You can't—"

"Oh, don't make such a big deal out of it," said Johanna, leaning forward and glowering at Enobaria. "Clearly you were up to something." She turned back to Katniss. "Keep going."

Katniss threw Johanna a grateful look and ignored Enobaria.

"We found Hunger Games tapes, for every Victor here but you. If they were your tapes, that would make perfect sense—why would you need or want to watch your own Games? But they weren't yours, they were Cressida's."

Katniss looked around the whole room and addressed everyone.

"There was another tape in that bunch—Enobaria's tape—which I'd bet my life had something hidden on it she didn't want the Capitol to see. She stole them all, because she didn't know where Cressida had her leverage, and it just so happened that Cressida didn't have the forethought to put it on a tape other than Enobaria's—if she had, all of the tapes would have looked more suspicious. Very 'hide it in plain sight,' Cressida was. Still, it was dangerous to have those tapes on you, especially when Cressida turned up dead."

She turned to Brutus.

"Brutus, I saw you get hauled in by the Peacekeepers—am I right in guessing that you overheard something while in custody? Something that disgusted you?"

His blank stare was all the answer she needed.

"When they let you out," said Katniss, "you ran straight to Enobaria, telling her that Chaff Etheridge was a dirty Capitol sellout, and that gave her the perfect out.

"Everyone assumed, after Cressida died, that the missing tape was involved somehow. Enobaria needed to get rid of it: even with the label ripped off and the contents scratched, it would look suspicious enough to get you taken in. So she used Brutus's knowledge about the iffy Capitol spy and the fact that nobody had been caught sneaking into her room to do the very same thing to Chaff. She planted the tape that Johanna and I found. Enobaria is the reason Chaff was arrested."

Katniss walked back to her seat and sat down.
"So there we have it," she said. "That's how we got here. Lots of things going on at once, clouding the truth and making it harder to see. So who poisoned that cup, who killed Cressida and Lavinia? Who tried to poison Peeta?"

She stopped speaking and looked straight at Peeta.

"Perfect," he mouthed.

The faces in the room were all puzzled and curious, all except one, who was only pretending.

"These were not random acts," said Katniss. "In fact, this was a carefully planned assassination. The assassination of Seeder Agyeman."

Standing up again, Katniss felt strength flow into her. Her nerves from before were gone, and she felt powerful now, instead.

"But how could anyone poison Seeder from another cup? And why kill Lavinia, the Avox?"

"I went down to the kitchens yesterday, to talk to Ada Fray, the chef, and she assured me that nobody had been in the kitchen that day except for her and Lavinia. Nobody else would have been able to predict that Lavinia would be late and the mugs would be alone, and nobody would have been able to predict that I would stand next to Seeder.

"But I kept asking myself, why was Lavinia late? How could a slave, who had no free time to distract herself, find herself late? Lavinia's death has seemed like a strange afterthought, unnecessary and baffling, but it wasn't. In fact, Lavinia's death was the key to all of it."

Katniss took a deep breath. Haymitch was smiling at her too now. Don't feel too proud of me yet, she thought.

"Nobody has understood how the murderer managed to get past all of the Peacekeepers that night, to find and murder Lavinia. But—and this is the really brilliant part—Lavinia wasn't killed that night at all. In fact, Lavinia was murdered first."

Katniss turned slowly to face one of the Victors. She took a step forward.

"Cashmere," said Katniss softly. "It was you."

Time froze in the train car. Even Brutus and Enobaria dropped all pretense and stared. Gaping at Katniss, Cashmere stopped fanning herself.

"Katniss," she breathed, smiling. "What are you talking about?"

"You were there," said Katniss. "You told your brother you were visiting your boyfriend and going late to the Capitol, but that was a lie. You came straight here, as per your plan—"

"This is ridiculous," said Cashmere, her smile gone now. "Where are you getting this?"

"—you were outfitted to assassinate Seeder Agyeman in retribution for her murder of rebel leader Woof Casino," said Katniss. "And while we were all getting ready for the fika, you snuck in through the hologram that rebel operatives had set up for that express purpose. You went down to Avox quarters and found a redheaded Avox you recognized, and then you shot her up with so much Olvidia serum that her heart stopped. Was that part really necessary?" she said, angry now. "She was completely innocent, and she wouldn't have remembered a thing. Was that even part of your orders?"
"I didn't—" began Cashmere.

"I'm speaking!" spat Katniss. "You're a wonderful camouflage artist; I saw that on your Hunger Games tape. Nobody even recognized you when you dressed up as Lavinia. Not even Ada Fray, who was so frazzled that all she noticed was that you were 'late' when in actuality no Avox had been tasked with serving us the fikabrews that night at all. You went upstairs and served us as if you were Lavinia, who meanwhile lay dead in her quarters. After that, you might as well have been furniture: who would have noticed an Avox walking around, pouring something in my drink while I talked to Seeder and Haymitch? It's impossible to prove whether or not you know something, but I bet you knew about the passing."

"That's not—"

"Then once it was done, you ran away again, out through the hologram and back to District One, with the excuse that you just didn't want to be a part of that tacky fika. Coming to the Capitol, you and Gloss were the only ones with an ironclad alibi. A nice touch.

"But you messed up, didn't you?" Katniss continued, on a roll now. "Because Cressida McGregor saw you coming through the hologram and put two and two together, didn't she? Her office was right next to it. When she showed up in the elevator talking to me about interviews, she wasn't talking to me at all, but hinting to you that she knew, that she'd seen you. Every day, 1:00 till 3:00, right by the janitorial closet.

"It served double, then, when Cressida said to meet her at her office the next day, because that made my room free. Free for her to meet up with another Capitol darling and get help for her investigation—maybe even get help from the organized rebellion? But instead you killed her because she was a loose end, even though she was on your side."

"Katniss," said Cashmere, alarmed. "I don't know where you got any of that."

"From you," said Katniss sadly. "I never would have figured it out if it wasn't for the nail polish. You forgot to take it off when you dressed up as Lavinia. Avoxes don't wear nail polish, and that kind is your favorite. You told me so yourself the day Johanna and I searched Enobaria's room."

Cashmere stared at her in horror, but said nothing.

"And then," Katniss went on. "I went with you to the Pink Lady and told you about Blight's notes. You knew I didn't believe in Chaff's guilt. You knew I was going to keep going, as long as it seemed like I was the center of the mystery. You did exactly what Haymitch warned me you might do: you dropped off a poisoned cup of tea at my and Peeta's table, so subtly that neither of us noticed. Just like we didn't notice at the fika."

"Do you have proof of all of this?" came Johanna's voice from behind Katniss.

"Of course not," said Cashmere, recovering herself. "She can't prove it because that's not what happened!"

Katniss watched Cashmere's face, looking for the guilt. She'd thought it must show in the face, but Cashmere was good at this. She'd become so good at lying that you could know the truth and still doubt it.

"Yes," said Katniss. "Because there was another tape, one that Cressida held separate from the Games tapes Enobaria stole. An insurance policy in case she needed to return to blackmail again. She always had that camera over her shoulder. Useful, when you catch people doing things they
shouldn't. This other tape- I'm betting it's the one with the 'Victor Arrivals,' don't you think, Peeta?"

"They're checking on it now, Cashmere," said Peeta from his seat, perfectly executing the bluff. It was the one part Katniss had known she couldn't do herself. "It's over. When we get off this train, Thread is going to arrest you."

Cashmere looked at him and frowned. She lowered her fan, folded, to her lap.

"You pretended to be my friend," said Katniss, and she heard the hurt in her own voice. "But you were just hiding in front of my face. You tried to comfort me even after you poisoned Peeta."

For a long time, nobody said anything. Cashmere and Katniss stared at each other. Katniss thought back to the fika, the day she'd been dressed in Cashmere's clothes and had felt like a femme fatale.

"I'll bet all that boo-hooing over Caprice was fake too," said Katniss. "You don't care about anything, do you?"

Katniss' hand itched for her bow. Still, Cashmere did nothing. Finally, a deranged, twisted smirk stretched across her face, marring its beauty.

"Well," she said, her voice low and deadly. "Isn't that just it then?"

Chapter End Notes

So at long last, the murderer is revealed. After all this time sitting on it, I can't believe it's out there. It's OUT THERE.

Two chapters left, people. I'm sorry about the cliffhanger; the chapters just split themselves up so nicely that way! You've taken this journey with me so far, just trust me to get you a little farther, to the end ;)

I'm going to go mentally unravel now (no, not unwind, unravel. Exams are hard), See you next week :)
Cashmere jumped to her feet and was on Katniss in an instant, pushing her to the wall with so much force that Katniss felt dizzy. Reacting, Peeta lurched at them, grabbing Cashmere and throwing her off.

"Gloss!" Cashmere screeched, and her brother was there, the blade of his knife against Peeta's throat.

Katniss's heart jumped up into her throat; anything she did now could end Peeta's life.

"That's better," said Cashmere, straightening her dress. "Anybody else want to try something? Haymitch?"

Katniss glanced at Haymitch and saw that he'd leaned forward, ready despite Gloss's superior strength. As she watched, he leaned back again and glared at Cashmere.

"No," he spat.

Cashmere crossed in front of her brother and Peeta to Haymitch's seat, and patted him on the head.

"That's what I thought. Any of you are welcome, of course. It all depends on how much you care about Lover Boy dying."

"Cashmere," said Johanna, her voice shaking. "You did this? You let me frame Chaff?"

"Oh, Johanna," said Cashmere, smiling sweetly and moving closer to her. "It wasn't personal. Chaff made his own bed. I didn't have to do a thing."

"You slit a girl's throat for no reason!"

"So? You split a girl's head open."

"Don't compare what you did to the Games. We've all had to do those things."

"Aw, Jojo," Cashmere cooed, touching Johanna's cheek. Johanna turned her face away as though the hand had burned her. Cashmere bent down to speak in her ear. "This isn't any different."

"It is different," said Katniss. "You can't just—"

"What?" said Cashmere, looking at Katniss as though surprised she was still there. "Fight the Capitol? Rebel against the sick bastards who put us in those arenas? Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Katniss's stomach contracted. Seeder was bad, that was confirmed, but the other two...

She met Peeta's gaze, still even and steady despite the knife at his throat. Her doubts vanished.

"I'm not on whatever side you're on," said Katniss. "That's for sure."

"Really?" said Cashmere, raising her eyebrows and taking a step towards her. "Even though you're the one who started the whole damn thing?"
Katniss stared at her.

"The berries, darling, the berries. Don't you know any of this?" she laughed loudly and wildly, like a madwoman. "You're the Mockingjay, sweetheart, I guess Haymitch hasn't really kept you informed on the goings on outside your soap-opera world."

"You're a terrorist," said Katniss.

"Only if you listen to Snow," said Cashmere with a shrug, taking another step in her direction. "It's called rebellion. Sometimes there's collateral damage."

"No," said Katniss, smiling too. "You're a terrorist. You don't care about justice, or innocence, or anything. Cressida was on your side. She flashed me a Mockingjay when I first got here. What did she say to you, when you met up? Did she ask for help or did she not have the time before you killed her."

Cashmere's smirk was gone and replaced with a grimace. She was glaring with clenched teeth. Katniss's plan was working; if there was one thing she was good at, it was getting a reaction.

"You're nuts, Cashmere," said Katniss. "You might be on the rebel side, but you're no better than Seeder. You're just the looney-toon they put in charge of doing their dirty-work."

For a moment the mask slipped, and Katniss saw the horrible, unhinged girl behind the makeup and the curls, her eyes shining with an unnatural light and opened too wide. Then she got control of herself again and stepped up to Katniss so their noses were almost touching.

"Looks like I'm making you angry," said Katniss. "You can rage all you want, you aren't getting away with this."

Cashmere tugged at her fan and the top part came off, revealing a long, thin blade.

"There are Peacekeepers outside, Cashmere," warned Finnick from his seat.

Cashmere didn't take her eyes off of Katniss.

"Who said anything about getting away with it?" she said quietly, and raised the blade so the tip was resting against Katniss's jugular.

Katniss swallowed hard, and Cashmere smiled.

"I told them to board," said Katniss, though her voice betrayed her by shaking. "They'll be here any second."

"I killed Cressida with this knife, you know," Cashmere said. "And they're going to kill me anyway, so what's one more—forgive me-two more lives."

She backed up a bit so Katniss could see Peeta and Gloss again, but she kept the knife-tip against Katniss's throat. Peeta looked terrified, desperate, but she knew it wasn't for himself.

Which was all just as well, because she was plenty scared for him. The tides had turned in an instant.

"Should we do you first, or the boy?" asked Cashmere. "You can watch."

"Me," said Katniss. Her voice was calm, but tears betrayed her by spilling down her cheeks. She hated herself for it; Cashmere would pounce on any sign of weakness.
There was no point in begging Cashmere to spare Peeta, though she ached to. Katniss had been through enough, by now, to know the end when she saw it. She met Peeta's gaze, saw his wide, horrified eyes, and knew he felt it, too.

"See how she is, everyone?" said Cashmere in flat tones. "Talks all tough, but she pops like a balloon." The knife tip broke Katniss's skin a on the word *pops*, and she felt warm blood drip down her neck.

"Pop me then," said Katniss. "Take me out, if it's so easy for you."

She was sure she'd sound more menacing if it hadn't been for those tears. Still, there was nothing to bargain with.

And yet Gloss had still not drawn the knife across Peeta's throat. Why not?

Cashmere said something, but Katniss didn't hear it. Peeta was mouthing something: *Love you*. Next, a blow to her temple brought her back to Cashmere.

"Are you listening to me?" the madwoman demanded.

Up close, Cashmere didn't look so pretty. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with her face, exactly: her eyes were still bright and youthful, her complexion smooth. But there was a touch of decay there as well, as though the seams of her exquisite face were about to burst apart to reveal something bloody and rotten.

She brought her red lips to Katniss's ear and spoke in a whisper.

"I wasn't going to do this to you. You made me."

"I didn't make you do anything."

"Oh, but you did. You tried to corner me like I'm one of your rabbits."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"We're the same, you and I," Cashmere said. "I killed an Avox and a camera girl, but who do you think Marvel's parents blame?" Over her shoulder, Peeta was still mouthing *Love you*. No, it wasn't that, it was three words, clearly.

"We're not the same, Cashmere," said Katniss, trying to focus on what Peeta was saying.

"You're right. I'm on the right side. I'm on the side that will make sure nobody loses their children to the Games. What are you? Don't think I didn't notice the things you left out of your little explanation, and I don't think it was by mistake. You've got a pretty selective set of ethics, my dear."

Katniss felt a prickling on the back of her neck and a chill running down her spine. Even if the Peacekeepers boarded the train...

She looked back at Peeta, who was still steadily mouthing to her. *Love of you? No. Lift up you? Left of you.*

If it had been anyone else, she might have doubted. She would have questioned. *Left of you.* Peeta had never steered her wrong.

One chance, she had one chance.
"Thanks for everything, Cashmere," said Katniss, and with all her might she used her left arm to shove Cashmere away from her. The blade, so precariously stationed a moment earlier, clattered to the floor. Cashmere's face contorted in fury as she collided with the window, and then there was a swish and something flew through the air.

The blade caught Cashmere in the middle of the chest with a thud, and she looked down with shock at the now protruding knife hilt. The misguided instinct overtook her, as it overtakes all dying people, and she grasped the hilt and drew the knife out, spilling her own blood. She held it in her hand, and when she looked up at her brother her face was a child's. He looked away from her.

"Gloss," she whispered, and fell.

***

"And she was working alone?" Thread asked, his eyes narrowing.

Katniss pressed the gauze tighter to her neck. It was bleeding a little, but she would live.

"Yes sir. You'll see her confession if you had a camera installed in the car."

Peeta returned with more gauze, insisting on tying her an interim bandage. Once they got back to the Tribute Center, the infirmary could patch her up in no-time.

"Yes, very well," said Thread. He turned to Gloss, who stood sullen and silent on his other side. "How about you, Mr. Carmichael?"

"What about him?" said Peeta. "He saved our lives."

"It's to my understanding that you took orders from your sister?" said Thread, ignoring Peeta.

"Are you kidding?" said Peeta, and Katniss had to smile at his brazenness. "He told me what he was going to do, he-" he lowered his voice and leaned into Thread; Gloss looked down the hill at the train as though not paying attention "-killed her for us."

Thread pursed his lips as though he'd taken a bite from a lemon.

"All right. Mr. Carmichael, but you will be expected to give a report upon our return to the Tribute Center."

Gloss nodded at him, and Thread marched down the hill to join the other Peacekeepers. They were interviewing the other Victors, who were all in shock of varying severity.

The absence of Thread left a pressure on Katniss as Gloss stood silently before them. She owed him, they owed him, everything.

To her surprise, Gloss was the one to break the silence.

"She wasn't always like that."

"I'm sorry?" said Katniss.

"She wasn't always like that. Violent and angry and scary like that."
Katniss didn't know what to say to that. From the silence, she could tell Peeta didn't either.

"I mean," said Gloss, stumbling a little. "I know what you must think of us. Of her. But she was a really sweet girl once."

Katniss thought of the girl she'd seen on the couch with Caesar, her dismissal of the boy who'd crushed on her, and found it hard to think of her as sweet.

"I think she was sick-that is-ill, Gloss," said Katniss, as gently as she could. Gloss met her eyes for a moment and she was taken aback by his intensity.

"It was those damn Games," he said. "I told her and told her and told her. Please, Cashmere, don't do it. It's horrible, training doesn't prepare you for it, not really. But she stuck out her tongue at me and did it anyway, because she couldn't let me have all the glory. She didn't get it."

Gloss's eyes were red-rimmed and he was staring down at his hands. The disgust Katniss might have felt for teenaged Cashmere melted into something more complex. Gloss had loved his sister. She had been a person once. Awful in some ways maybe, but not evil.

"This must sound so stupid to you," said Gloss, looking up at her. His mouth was quivering slightly. "But I think she really liked you, Katniss, admired you, deep down in there. She never got over the Caprice thing. And the two of you-" he broke off and looked down the hill again. "I'm sorry. I'm going to go make sure Johanna's okay."

Katniss watched him go, and felt her hatred burn for the Capitol.

"You're crying," said Peeta, touching her cheek.

Katniss nodded and looked at the ground. She tried to chuckle, but the sound came out strangled. When Peeta wrapped his arms around her, she buried her face in his shirt and soaked it in seconds.

They stood like that a long while, and when Katniss recovered and drew back, she was embarrassed.

"Sorry, I don't know what that was about."

"It's okay."

Maybe it was that they were free and alive; maybe it was that she knew she could go home now. Maybe it was just that she knew what it felt like to have your past taunt you. She had Peeta still, while Gloss, quiet and noble and brave, no longer had anyone.

The thought made her grab hold of Peeta's hand and squeeze it tight.

"Wanna sit? You look like you might pass out," said Peeta, and she accepted his invitation readily. "You were brilliant in there," he said once they were seated on the grass. "Brilliant. I always knew you were, though."

"Thank you," she said. "But you... You saved us."

"No, it was all Gloss. He whispered to me that I should..."

He trailed off. Katniss noticed his hair waving softly in the breeze.

"Peeta?"

"Yeah?"
"Would we have done the same as her?" she asked, putting her head on his shoulder. She had a feeling she already knew half of the answer.

Peeta would take no life he didn't have to. He valued it too much. It was too difficult to ask the other question, though: \textit{would I?}

"I hope not," said Peeta, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear with his right hand; his left was still clasped in hers. "But I don't think you would either, if that's what you're wondering."

\textit{You've got some selective ethics, my dear.}

"Hopefully not," she agreed. "At least not as long as I have you to keep me sane."

"Always," he said, and he kissed the back of her hand softly, as though she were something delicate and precious.

"My dad used to do that," said Katniss, lifting her head from his shoulder and studying his face. "Kiss the back of my mom's hand. All the time."

"I know, actually," he said, after a moment. "I used to see them together, sometimes, when they picked you up from school."

He was staring into the grass and it struck her that he was embarrassed. The years Peeta had watched her in their youth were not an often discussed topic.

"You paid attention to my parents?"

He lifted his gaze to hers, but his smile was small and shy.

"My dad told me their story, remember? They looked so happy," he said. "And you were so happy when you saw them."

Katniss thought about Peeta's father. Kindly and unassuming, he'd been a consistent customer of hers back when the pickings were thin, despite his awful wife... \textit{And bang}, it hit her, Peeta's childhood with a mother who beat him and a father who let her. If there was one thing Katniss had always been able to count on as a young child, it was that her parents loved her and wanted her.

Now, she imagined an eight or nine-year-old boy, standing in the corner of the classroom and watching Katniss's father pick her up and set her on his shoulders, their mother holding Prim, and all of them disappearing back to the Seam. What could the boy have wanted more than to be a part of that?

"I remember standing there before they called my name, thinking I'd never seen love like that. Didn't know there were people who really loved like that."

Suddenly Katniss wanted to cry again. Unable to form words and hesitant to ask questions, her thoughts turned to another topic that needed to be addressed, and as soon as possible. This, she could give him.


The grass waved in the breeze.

"Yeah?"

"I've decided what to do."
"And?"

Katniss lay her head back on his shoulder and sighed.

"I don't want to do this halfway stuff anymore. It's exhausting. I can't go around pretending for the cameras that it's you and me and then go back to a life where it isn't. So, even though it's not ideal... I think we should... at least try... to make it real."

"What do you mean by real?"

"I mean... we should be together. I'll be your wife, and you'll be my husband. For real. It doesn't matter anymore that we wouldn't choose it for ourselves. I mean--" she held up their clasped hands "this is good, right?"

She rotated her head so she could see his face, and found his expression hard to read. It was decidedly neutral and neither disbelieving nor euphoric.

"Katniss..." he said. "The last thing I want for you is to be with me because you feel you have to. I told you you shouldn't settle—"

"I'm not settling," said Katniss. "I'm saying I don't want to fake anymore. I want something real, with you, and I don't have time to wonder about what else I could be missing. You said to me once that marriage is supposed to mean something, and I agree."

His blue eyes bored into hers. She reached up and smoothed down a lock of his hair.

"You're sure?"

"Yes," she said, glad to find her voice did not waver. "I'm sure. Like I told you, We'll make the best of it."

Peeta bit his lip, and he nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, a real marriage."

What she had been expecting, she wasn't sure. But it wasn't this measured, levelheaded response. This was supposed to be what he'd always wanted.

She leaned in and kissed him. It was a sweet kiss, simple, nothing to inspire armies or topple nations. Peeta accepted it modestly and then broke from her as she pulled him closer.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Nothing," he said, brushing a hand down her cheek so lightly it made her shiver. "It's fine."

"Fine? No. Tell me."

"It'll sound mopey out loud."

"Tell me anyway," she said. And then, "I... sort of thought you'd be happy."

Peeta locked eyes with her.

"I am happy, Katniss. I am. I just... need a minute." He hesitated and looked down, picking at the grass.
"Sometimes I think back to what it was like, in the cave," he said. "When you'd risked your life for me even though everyone could see I was dying and useless. I think back and I remember realizing that I had more than just a crush on you, and then when we got out alive, how lucky I was that you —"

He swallowed and fell silent.

"Sometimes I wonder... It's stupid really... what would have happened if I'd just manned up and asked you out when we were in school together."

"I would have said no," said Katniss, and they both laughed. "I would have said no and thought you were trying to trick me somehow."

"Well I wouldn't have given up," said Peeta, still smiling. "I would have hounded you until you believed me. I had a lot of years invested in that crush."

Katniss tried to picture the scenario he was talking about, but couldn't. It was too bizarre. The idea of pre-Games Peeta, well-to-do and popular, pursuing her, a Seam girl, made her snort. What would his friends have said? What would her mother think, or Prim?

"Why does that make you sad?" asked Katniss, and Peeta's smile softened, becoming wistful and distant.

"I don't know. I just wish that... if we were going to be together, it would be because you'd wanted me. Not because you looked at us and said, 'this will do,' but because you wanted it."

"I do want it."

Peeta said nothing, only watched the Victors down the hill as they chatted in the sunlight and warm breeze. He didn't seem to have a response for her.

"Told you it would sound mopey," said Peeta at last, and when she looked at him again he was smirking, probably trying to lighten the mood and not place a burden on her.

She opened her mouth to say something, anything, but Haymitch's voice interrupted her.

"Hey, you two, are you coming? If you don't get down here we're leaving without you!"

"Yeah!" called Peeta, standing up and dusting himself off before helping Katniss do the same. "Be right there."

***

"Oh my lord, I am so pleased I might just faint!"

The moment Katniss and Peeta stepped foot back in the Tribute Center, Effie had flung herself on them. Indignant about her restriction from seeing them and appalled that anyone thought District Twelve's team would get anywhere on time without her, she squawked for nearly half an hour about how she had been plagued by that dreadful Symphony DeLuce (another District's escort) and how she'd endured a useless silence from the Tribute Center.

Luckily for them, she was also aware they were tired and spent, and allowed them all to go to their
rooms relatively unmolested. Before leaving, she kissed them all on the cheek and exploded in unintelligible gibberish about the timing of their departure the following day.

Katniss and Peeta invited Haymitch to join them at their room, but he said he wanted to take a long nap. Katniss caught his eye as he left, and saw the curt nod that Peeta missed.

"I'll be so glad to be out of here," she said as she passed the threshold to her and Peeta's room.

Peeta nodded and went to close the door, but someone slipped through before he could. It was Johanna Mason.

"Hi," she said, winking at Peeta and strolling past him without permission. Finnick appeared in the doorway behind her, and Peeta let him in before closing the door firmly.

Johanna sank into the plush chair as if she owned the place, all traces of subdued-Johanna gone. This was the Johanna who had arrived at the Capitol a month before.

"We left Blight in time out," she said. Finnick chuckled as he fell onto the bed beside Katniss. "He'll be there awhile."


"He could have come up with a better way to get his message across, though," said Peeta, taking a seat on the bed as well. "And, well—"

"I was right, anyway," said Finnick, smirking.

"Don't go patting yourself on the back," said Johanna. "Katniss is the one who put the pieces together."

"Is that praise, Johanna?" said Katniss, "Or am I hearing wrong?"

"You're hearing wrong."

Katniss kept waiting for Finnick and Johanna to get to the point, to say what they were going to say, but it didn't come. She was expecting some comment about Cashmere, seeing as she'd been their friend, but no words came. Johanna joked and Finnick flirted, and when they got up to leave Katniss thought maybe their avoidance of the subject was an attempt to shove it under the rug.

"Let's go, Jo," Finnick was saying. "Katniss and Peeta are plain old vanilla. They already turned down my threesome request."

"Oh," said Johanna, in a mock-sultry voice. "Don't want to share? I see how it is. Greedy greedy, Katniss."

Katniss blushed as Finnick and Johanna cracked up. As the door swung shut behind them, Johanna called in once more to call Katniss a rude name. Then the door closed and Katniss and Peeta were alone again.

"What was that about?" demanded Katniss.

Peeta walked up to her and wrapped her up in his arms, smirking.

"You're still so suspicious," he said, planting a kiss on her forehead. "We're—well, we're in their group now."
"What?"

"We've proved ourselves. We're in their club."

"I didn't even know there was a club."

Peeta laughed again, and Katniss even smiled.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get some food and go up to the roof. We're going home tomorrow."

"Mm, sounds good," she said. She leaned her forehead against his collarbone and took a deep breath. Silly as it was, it gave him butterflies. "You smell nice," she said.

"I don't know how that's possible," said Peeta. "I've been sweating buckets all day."

Katniss snorted and looked up at him, smiling.

"Well, I like it."

A funny thing happened then. There in his arms, with her sweet, small smile, Katniss was intoxicating. The urge to kiss her was so strong, and so immediate, that he removed his hands from where they'd been resting on the small of her back. It was his habit, whenever he started wanting too much what he couldn't have.

But then he remembered.

Her eyes went wide when he kissed her, but he saw them flutter shut a moment later.

The feeling that arose within him then was new. Her lips were wet and soft, and she was kissing him slowly. She sucked briefly on his lower lip before opening her mouth to take in a breath.

He was intently aware of the taste of her saliva, that it was saliva, and yet didn't repulse him. Rather the opposite. It tasted like her. It tasted like acceptance, and peace; long afternoons in spring and soft, sweaty skin.

"Hey," she said, when they came up for air. "I, um... thought of something."

"Shoot," said Peeta, a bit dazed. Katniss was blushing, getting brighter red by the second, and he knew what she was going to say a second before she said it.

"I don't want my... first time... to be on camera," she said.

"So..." he said, letting the word hang in the air.

"So we should, like..."

"Practice?"

Katniss dropped her gaze to the floor.

"I guess, yeah. Practice."

*Careful, Mellark,* Peeta thought to himself.

"That sounds good to me," he said breezily, pressing his lips to her temple. "But not here. I don't want it to be here. Not the first time."
He saw Katniss release the breath she'd been holding in. No matter what she thought, she was no good at hiding anything.

"We'll do it when you're ready, Katniss," said Peeta. "We'll wait until you're ready. We've got plenty of time, don't we?"

"Yeah," said Katniss, and she placed a quick kiss on his lips and another on the tip of his nose. "Thank you."

"I'm not even used to kissing you yet," he said, and thank God, she smiled again.

"Well, get used to it."

They stood there for a long time, standing still, arms around each other. Eventually, Katniss asked:

"Is it enough?"

Peeta tried not to tense. Enough? Enough was such a loaded word, filled to the brim with pressure and expectation. What did enough even entail for him? After so many years of wanting her, what could ever be enough?

"It's not about that," he said, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's about making due with what we have, like you said. Finding a way forward together. Learning how to be happy." Katniss nodded, and silence fell upon them again like a blanket. It was a nice silence, but also a frightening one. It carried the expectation that someone would answer it with words like and so, or now clearly.

"You really were incredible," said Peeta, breaking the silence at last. "I can't believe you figured it all out."

"Yeah, yeah," said Katniss, pulling back from him and smirking. "How about that rooftop picnic? I stole a bottle of wine while you were in the infirmary."

Katniss went to shower, and Peeta flopped down on the bed and closed his eyes. He wasn't exactly sleepy, but so much had happened today, and he'd tossed and turned the night before. As he dozed, random thoughts floated around his head. About Katniss and Cashmere, Chaff and Cressida...

Peeta bolted upright. No wonder Katniss had brushed off his compliment. He'd assumed she had told him the whole story, but there was one tiny little detail that didn't make any sense. Katniss hadn't laid the whole thing out after all.

It was probably nothing, he decided, but his gut told him it probably wasn't. He would ask Katniss about it later, he decided, once they were home. He trusted that there was a good reason she hadn't already brought it up to him.

After all, she knew what she was doing. Probably.
So I was about fifteen minutes late with this one, oops! I think that's the latest I've ever been, though. As a sidenote, I'm so sorry for answering my comments so late this week- - I really have been swamped. My last exam is the day after tomorrow, and then at last I will be freeeeeeee.

One chapter left, y'all.

I'm so sorry Cashmere is the killer. I was sad about it too. Her friendship with Katniss made me happy.

see you next week for the FINAL INSTALLMENT of Within These Walls
Chaff was released the same day, without fanfare. Early the next morning, the Victors were escorted to their respective trains without opportunity speaking to each other. Katniss had wanted to at least speak to Chaff, but she figured the Capitol probably wanted them to act like the whole thing hadn't happened.

Effie, surprisingly, was the first to bring up the ordeal as the train pulled out from the station.

"You know," she said. "It is quite a relief to be away a bit. It's been quite the disaster."

"Effie, what are you saying?" asked Peeta, smirking. "You don't want to be in the Capitol? Are you planning on staying with us in Twelve?"

Effie's eyes widened as though he had suggested that she swallow a tracker-jacker nest.

"My goodness me, no. The Capitol is always—"

But she broke off, visibly confused.

Katniss, Peeta, and Haymitch all laughed at her, and once she recovered herself she managed a small smile as well.

"I must admit, though," she said, "there is a sort of rugged charm about the place. Very rugged," she added, in response to Haymitch's smirk.

From Effie, this was the highest of praise.

"It'll be good to be home, for sure. Now that all of this is over," said Peeta, and Katniss was overtaken by a wave of feelings. Prim was just a few hours away now.

"About that," said Effie. "Did you say Cashmere Carmichael poisoned the cup when you were talking to the other Victors, just before the fika began?"

Katniss nodded, and Effie continued speaking without pausing to breathe.

"I could have sworn she stayed in her corner the entire time."

"Nobody really noticed her," said Katniss, shrugging. "That's why it was the perfect disguise."

Peeta met her gaze and she looked away.

"Speaking of things being over," said Haymitch, standing up and approaching the table of food and beverage. "It is time I broke my long spell of sobriety."

"You drank plenty at the Tribute Center, Haymitch," said Peeta.

"Did I?" he asked, pouring himself a drink from a bottle of amber liquid. Though Effie huffed with disapproval, the sound was much less harsh than it might have been a year before.
At half past seven the next morning, the train pulled into the station in District 12. The shabbiness of the station was a welcome sight to them as the three Victors stumbled, puffy-eyed and groggy, from the train.

"Katniss!" called a voice, and she turned to see her sister rushing toward her. Katniss ran to meet her and gave her the tightest hug she could. Gale waited a few paces back, actually smiling.

"I'll see you later," Peeta said, once Katniss and Prim had released each other. "I'm going to help Haymitch get home."

Their mentor stood behind him, grimacing and shrunken as he nursed a hangover, and Katniss bade them goodbye and told them she'd see them both very soon. As the attendants handed Katniss her bag, she saw Gale and Peeta nod curtly to each other.

Prim chatted most of the way home, telling Katniss about how she'd gotten better at knitting and how there was a boy at school who had told her he liked her. Gale got in only a few words while Prim paused for breath, but still, he seemed relaxed in general and pleased to have Katniss back.

When they got to Katniss's house in Victor's Village, Prim dashed inside, muttering about helping her mother prepare dinner. Gale and Katniss paused in front of the steps. They stood staring at each other silently, each waiting for the other to speak.

"Did the bow come in handy?" asked Gale, after a while.

"Yeah, actually," she said, grateful for the opener.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too."

Gale looked down at the pebbled ground and kicked it absently.

"I was a little worried, Catnip. Maybe it was stupid of me."

"Peeta was there with me," she said. "And Haymitch and Effie," she added hastily, but it was too late. She knew what her words had implied.

"Peeta huh?" he said, the corner of his mouth tipping upwards.

Katniss stayed quiet. There was something accusatory in his question that made her uncomfortable.

"I never thought... you and a townie, I mean..."

"He's not just any old townie, Gale," said Katniss, though she knew he was already too aware. He nodded and sat down on the step. She joined him a moment later.

"Look," she began, looking out in front of her instead of at Gale. "For a long time, you were the only person outside of my family who meant anything to me. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't been reaped, and I'm sorry things are the way they are but—"

"They don't have to be," said Gale, and she heard him turn to face her. "You're still here. I'm still here."
"I'm engaged," she said quietly. The last time she'd said it, it had been an excuse to not address anything to do with love and stay in her comfortable limbo. Now, even with her resolve stretched almost to its breaking point, she could feel the skin of Peeta's palms and the warmth of his breath; she could still remember her terror as he'd collapsed to the ground, poisoned, with her unable to do a thing to help him.

Now, her words were an answer. Gale heard it too.

"It finally got to you, in the Capitol," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

She looked down at her hands. Her left pointer finger had a hangnail.

"You're buying into the whole star-crossed lovers thing," said Gale. "Giving up on me, and yourself."

"Gale," said Katniss, closing her eyes. "I'm not giving up. I'm making a choice. You just don't like what I'm saying."

She could feel Gale's eyes boring into her. She didn't know why it was so difficult to look at him. There wasn't anything to feel guilty for.

"I'm not the same person I was before the Games," she said. "You want me to go back to how it was — before — but I can't. It's the past. It's done."

She braved a glance at him and found him staring, but he broke eye contact immediately to look ahead, as though she wasn't there at all.

"I bet he's thrilled," he said.

"Actually, he isn't," said Katniss. "He suggested I be with you. Even... in the future."

"But you said no."

He turned his head back to her and she saw betrayal in his face, and sadness. She opened her mouth to find some explanation but couldn't.

"I wonder what would be happening if some other guy had been reaped with you," said Gale, looking forward again.

"Then I probably wouldn't have won the Games," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder. She knew what he was asking was something entirely different. Why did both Peeta and Gale insist on wondering what might have happened? It didn't matter, anyway, so what was the point of worrying about it?

She took Gale's hand and squeezed it, trying to figure out what exactly had changed and when. During all of those months of his being on edge, of being suspicious of Peeta and jealous of him, she'd dismissed his worries. His assumption that Peeta was a threat had struck Katniss as an odd sort of insult upon herself, but here she was, choosing Peeta, just like he'd always feared.

"So what happens now?" he asked.

"We go to the woods on Sundays, like always," she said, and paused. "I need my hunting partner."

For a long time, he said nothing, and Katniss was afraid he would say no, or walk away, or just
disappear and never speak to her again. But then he spoke, at last, and his voice was lighter, less weighed down.

"Yeah you do," he said. "Otherwise you'll never hit a damn thing."

"Shut up," said Katniss, and she shoved him. "My aim is crazy good, and you know it." He looked back at her, smiling ever so slightly.

He looked down at his watch and stood to go, but she threw her arms around him and hugged him to her tightly.

"Can you stay a while?" she asked into his shirt. "They're probably making dinner for you too."

He nodded and followed her into the house. Inside, they chatted like old times, and Katniss released the breath she'd been holding in. In her relief, she reached for the phone to call Peeta over, but she laid the receiver back on the hook before dialing, thinking about how much she'd seen Peeta lately and how maybe it was good to spend some time without him in the company of her best friend.

***

Thunder shook the house as Katniss tiptoed from her room into the hall. She avoided turning on the light in case her mother or Prim saw it. At two in the morning, they would probably be asleep, but it didn't hurt to take extra precautions.

She groped for the railing so that she could descend the staircase without falling down and making a lot of noise. She'd managed complete silence until the bottom step betrayed her by letting out a loud creak, and she waited for a second to make sure neither her mother nor Prim appeared at the top of the staircase to ask her where she was going.

She opened the door and stepped into the deluge, cursing herself for having left her umbrella upstairs in her room.

But Peeta was right on time, and he offered her his umbrella immediately.

"Thanks," she said, locking her door. "Thanks for coming, too."

"Any time," said Peeta.

"You don't seem very surprised that I asked you over here so late."

"I have a feeling I know what it's about."

Katniss raised her eyebrows as they walked down her front steps.

"You do?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "You didn't tell the whole story, on the train."

"So do you know where we're going?"

"No," he said, and he took her hand. "Lead me."
Katniss nodded and said nothing as she took him the twelve steps across the square to Haymitch’s door, though when she knocked on it, his face betrayed his confusion.

Katniss was sure there wouldn’t be an answer, not this late at night, but she was proven wrong when the door opened and Haymitch’s haggard face appeared in the doorway.

"I almost gave up and went to bed," he grumbled. "Let me get my coat."

Katniss and Peeta waited patiently without saying anything; Haymitch slid on a rainjacket and joined them under the umbrella. They walked down the lane, all three of them silent.

The rain was loud enough that there was no risk of being overheard. Even if the square were filled with bugs, the downpour would drown everything out.

In front of the fountain, Katniss said:

"So do you want to tell Peeta, or should I?"

Haymitch pulled a flask from within the raincoat and took a large gulp. Grimacing, he replaced it and turned to Peeta.

"Has she figured it all out before you, then, Peeta? I thought you were supposed to be the smart one." He looked at Katniss again. "What gave me away?"

Katniss could tell Peeta was looking at her, too, but it was too dark to see his expression.

"Blight," said Katniss. "Because—"

"Because he didn't write the first letter," said Peeta. "I was wondering about that."

Katniss nodded and took a deep breath.

"Cashmere wasn't working alone, was she, Haymitch?" she asked.

"Don't ask a question you already know the answer to."

The three Victors stood listening to the rain. Katniss opened her mouth to say the next words but could not find them, and Haymitch did not volunteer them for her.

"Effie was right," she said eventually. "Cashmere didn't leave that corner. She poisoned my cup then and there—and then you called me over."

"To where I was talking to Seeder, correct," said Haymitch.

The next pause was longer than the first, and Katniss could feel the tension rolling off Peeta in waves.

"What if Katniss had drunk from that cup? What if-?"

"Why do you think I carried that antidote? You think it was coincidence I had it on me when you were poisoned? I had one job: get Katniss over to me and make sure she stood on Seeder's left side."

"You're a rebel spy," said Peeta.

"Rightio."
"You were working with Cashmere?"

"Yep."

Peeta paused to take a breath.

"You were lucky," said Katniss. "Cashmere didn't have time to elaborate on her partnership with you."

"Are you asking me something?" said Haymitch.

Katniss clenched her jaw.

"I want you to tell us the whole thing, from the bottom up. We deserve as much."

She expected another sarcastic come-back as it thundered loudly overhead, but her mentor surprised her by saying:

"It was supposed to be clean and quick. Assassination of Seeder for her assassination of Woof—"

"So Woof was a—?"

"Quiet," said Haymitch. "Woof's death was the beginning of all of it. Seeder was dangerous and ruthless. It was necessary. Lavinia and Cressida... were never supposed to be part of it. The Olvidia was just to knock Lavinia out, make her forget her day. Cashmere was never supposed to kill her. But that's what happens when Thirteen puts this kind of thing in the hands of someone so... unstable."

Katniss frowned at him.

"Thirteen? What do you mean?"

"District Thirteen," said Haymitch. "It's not gone like they've always said."

It was as if he had slapped her across the face.

"What?!" she said. "What do you mean it's not gone?"

"I don't know the details," said Haymitch, "but the citizens of Thirteen went underground somehow. There's a whole organized effort toward bringing down the Capitol, starting with a gigantic espionage effort."

"The terrorists," said Peeta.

"What?" repeated Katniss.

"The Capitol was talking about a group of terrorists because Thirteen is getting to people all over the place. I mean, Haymitch, Cashmere, and Woof, that's three Victors."

"And it's not just us, either," said Haymitch. "You'll be glad to know that Cinna's perfectly fine. He was evacuated to Thirteen, presumably when his assignment got too dangerous or the Capitol started getting suspicious."

"Wait," said Katniss. "Cinna's okay?"

"Unless he's caught some tropical disease or had a bizarre sewing accident, then yes, I would say
"So."

"And Mrs. Etheridge?"

"Seeing as I requested that they pick her up, I would say she is as well."

"You requested? You had contact in the Capitol?"

"Not really, but when there's an emergency..."

The rain was starting to let up a bit, and the square drifted back into focus. Katniss stepped forward to get moving, sure that the square would not be safe once the roar of the rain no longer sheltered them. Peeta and Haymitch hurried to get back under her umbrella.

They'd come about a hundred steps from the entrance to the square in Victor's Village when Katniss turned abruptly, nearly colliding with Peeta.

"You could have told us, Haymitch," said Katniss. "You could have just told us about Seeder and the rebellion and everything."

"No I couldn't have," said Haymitch.

"Why not?"

"Because it would never have worked if you'd known," he said. "Don't you realize that Thread and Snow suspected rebels right away? You threw suspicion off of us, even off of yourself by not knowing. That's why it had to be your cup."

"I could have handled it!"

"I couldn't be sure of that, sweetheart," he said. The nickname stung. "I sent the letter so you would be completely in the dark; it was the only way you were safe."

"Safe!?" cried Katniss. "Cashmere poisoned Peeta, she tried to kill him. She—"

"She didn't try to kill him, Katniss," said Haymitch. "She just didn't really care whether he made it. She knew I had the antidote, and she knew I'd use it."

"But that was just luck!"

"She was trying to get you to stop digging," said Haymitch. "That's why when I tell you to leave things alone, you leave them alone."

Katniss was fuming. She was about to begin yelling again when Peeta quietly said:

"So why are you telling us now? It's not like they're going to watch us any less now that we're home."

There was a short, tense pause.

"Oh no," said Peeta. "You're not serious...

Haymitch did not reply.

"What?" asked Katniss. "Not serious about what?"
"You've reasserted yourself as the smart one, Peeta," said Haymitch. "I'm sorry to say that it's necessary."

"What are you talking about?" Katniss asked.

"They'll be here any minute," said Haymitch.

"Is the Capitol going to punish the District for this?" Peeta asked.

"Hello? Answer me!" said Katniss, stomping her foot.

"They might," Haymitch said, continuing to ignore Katniss. "But there's an evac team on it in case."

Suddenly it all came together for Katniss.

"Thirteen's coming to get us?" she asked in disbelief.

"Has to," said Haymitch. "There are uprisings everywhere, dangerous things going on. The President's not going to let you guys—"

"Good evening!" called a voice behind Katniss, and she whirled around to see a man in a large black jumpsuit with a neon 13 printed on the lapel. She couldn't make out his face, but she knew this voice: it was Finnick Odair.

Katniss blinked.

"Finnick?" she said. "You—you are in on this?"

"I am now," he said, touching the 13 on his lapel. "Was just recruited this morning."

The rain had almost completely died down now, but it was still too dark to see much. Still, she could make out movement behind Finnick; there would be more black jumpsuits and neon lapels.

"Odair!" came a gruff voice from the darkness. "We don't have time for lollygagging. Get them and let's go!"

"Yep, coming Captain," said Finnick, and then to Katniss and Peeta: "Come on then."

"What? No!" said Katniss. "I've got my family, and—how are you even here? How are you not tripping some Capitol security system?"

"It's all thanks to Beetee," said Finnick. "I know," he added, when she raised her eyebrows. "You didn't even have a clue, did you? Me neither. Apparently that's what he's been up to on his computer this whole time: finding loopholes and weaknesses to open up. That's why all of their surveillance has been down."

"Odair!"

"Yeah yeah. We gotta go, guys," said Finnick. "The holes don't stay open forever."

"We can't go," said Peeta. "The Capitol will lose their minds. They already thought she was in charge of this rebellion stuff. Our families are still here—what's going to happen to them?"

Katniss nodded vigorously as he spoke.

"They're safe," said Finnick. "We've rounded them up just now. They're on their way to Thirteen as
we speak. It's just you three holdouts."
"I'm not holding out!" protested Haymitch, and he passed between Peeta and Katniss and disappeared into the dark behind Finnick.

"The Hawthornes," said Katniss. "Snow will kill them if we leave, just to get at me!"
"We don't have time for anyone else," said Finnick. "Come along now, or I'll have to make you."
"Make me? It's not up to me anymore?"

Peeta stepped in front of Katniss, shielding her with his body.

"We're not going," he said. "What do you think is going to happen the minute the Capitol realizes we're gone? They'll kidnap or kill or maybe even bomb the whole District. If we go, the jig is up."
"We can't be instruments anymore, Finnick," added Katniss. "We'll do whatever we can from here but—"

"ODAIR!"
"Yes Captain," said Finnick with a sigh. "I'm really sorry about this guys."

"Sorry about wha-?" began Peeta, but he'd suddenly dropped like a stone. Katniss saw the gun in Finnick's hand.

"What did you do?!" she demanded.

"Tranq dart. Are you going to come with me or do I need one for you too?"
"You piece of shit, we can't leave these people here to-!"

But then there was a pinching in her left arm and she tumbled into darkness.

***

When Katniss woke up she had trouble placing where she was. She was not in her bed in Victor's Village, nor was she in the Tribute Center, but in a room with dingy metal walls. There were rusty bolts on the ceiling.

The memory of last night appeared in her brain, foggy and vague, and she could not tell at first whether or not it had been a dream. She checked her arm and saw the puncture mark from the tranq dart, and fury rolled through her. The next time she saw Finnick she'd be giving him a serious black eye, at least.

After trying to sit up and being smacked in the face by a pounding headache, she lay back down and covered herself with her blanket. She was going to kill Haymitch, too, as soon as the headache went away and she could summon the faculties to find him.

As Katniss waited there, head pounding, she slowly emerged from the blanket to examine her surroundings further. There was a simple nightstand beside the bed, which was narrow but comfortable, and shelves built into the wall. Everything, including the sheets and blanket, was a dull
After about a half hour, with no improvement in Katniss's headache, the door slid open, and Finnick Odair entered, still wearing his black jumpsuit.

"Good morning, Katniss."

"Get away from me," she croaked. Her voice was scratchy and weak.

"You're much less scary when you first wake up," he said, grinning. Katniss glared at him.

"What did you shoot me with? Olvidia?" she asked.

"No," he said, approaching her and sitting on the foot of her bed. "Olvidia is illegal here in District 13 now, thanks to our good friend Cashmere."

Katniss tried to kick him to knock him off the bed, but he stayed where he was, looking amused. She struggled to get the proper angle and force, but the movement made the pounding in her head worse.

"Where's Peeta?" she asked him when she finally gave up.

"His room is just next door. He woke up a little while ago. By the way, take this," he said, offering her a white pill. "It'll help with the headaches. Nasty side-effect, I know."

Katniss snatched the pill from him and swallowed it. Almost immediately the tension in her head vanished. Her shoulders loosened as well and provided another wave of relief, though she hadn't even realized they had been tight to begin with. Before she could stop herself, she sighed loudly.

"I know," said Finnick, "incredible, right?"

"Uh-huh," said Katniss, but then she remembered that she was still angry with Finnick. He seemed to sense it and stood from the bed before she could commence another round of vicious kicking.

"District Twelve, what happened to District Twelve?" she demanded, jumping from the bed herself. Finnick's expression turned somber.

"You were right," he said. "The Capitol... they bombed it. Everything. Burned it to the ground.

Katniss blinked and stood motionless for a moment. Then, she launched herself at Finnick, so that he just barely managed to get out of the way in time. She crashed into the wall and turned to locate him.

"I told you!" she cried, barreling towards him again. "I told you we couldn't go!"

"Wait!" he cried, dodging her again. "Just wait a minute they're—they're okay!"

Katniss crashed into the bedframe and banged her shin so hard that her eyes swam.

"Who's okay?" she asked him through clenched teeth.

"Everyone," said Finnick, breathing heavily. "I transmitted a message to Gale Hawthorne. I knew you would..." he trailed off. "I got in loads of trouble for it."

"What then?" asked Katniss, still glaring.

"I had to explain myself to the Captain and I told them that you refused to cooperate unless they sent
an evacuation fleet immediately, at least for the Hawthornes, and seeing as they couldn't ask you and they knew they'd only have a few hours, they sent one. In the morning the security systems all tripped in the District, but your friend had already collected a good group."

"Eight thousand people got on one hovercraft?"

"Of course not. But they managed to get everyone into the woods before the bombings started."

Katniss sat back down on the bed.

"Where are they now?" she asked.

" Everywhere," he said. "It's a little bit of a problem, actually, Thirteen's population rocketing up like this. But they're alive, at least."

Katniss fell back onto the bed and breathed deeply. Gale was okay. Hazelle was okay. Madge too. She lifted her head to look at Finnick.

"Sorry for trying to attack you," she said.

"No worries. Women often throw themselves at me with violent force."

"Get out of my room."

Finnick chuckled and began to withdraw, when Katniss remembered something else.

"Wait!" she called. "What about Chaff and Gloss and Johanna and Blight?"

"They'll be gradually rounded up," said Finnick, standing in the open doorway. "But they're not affiliated with us yet, not officially. I've put all their names down on the list of potential rebels, though."

"Could you add another one for me?"

"Name?"

"Edna... something. She was that Peacekeeper they were out looking for, or said they were."

"Oh her," said Finnick, "She's here already. Now that you mention it, she says hello."

"Oh," said Katniss awkwardly. "Thanks."

Finnick nodded and withdrew, the door sliding closed behind him. Maybe she wouldn't have to kill him or Haymitch after all.

***

Peeta trudged back up to his room from the briefing quarters where more people in jumpsuits had talked to him as though he was a small, stupid child. They'd offered to escort him to the cafeteria for lunch, but he'd declined with the excuse that he was still feeling queasy from the tranquilizer.

His door slid open and he entered to find Katniss alert and awake, sitting with her legs crossed on the
"Hi," he said, as the door slid closed behind him.

"Hi," said Katniss. "Where have you been?"

"Briefing. You're going to have to go in a bit too, once they realize you're up."

Katniss nodded and fiddled with the end of her braid, and Peeta went to sit next to her.

"Did they tell you the Capitol bombed District Twelve?" she asked him.

"Yeah, but who told you about that?"

Katniss told him that Finnick had already been to visit her and spilled the whole thing. The only part that was news to Peeta was that Gale had been the one to round up the first group of people. He told Katniss what they'd told him in the briefing room about Chaff: that he'd been plucked out of Eleven in the early hours of the morning, and would be sitting trial for espionage against rebel forces. A deep line appeared between Katniss's eyebrows as he spoke.

"I know," he said. "I had that reaction too, but Captain Boggs told me that if you and I testify to his defense, he's likely to be cleared. Haymitch too, he'll be a key witness."

"Haymitch," said Katniss. "Have you seen him, by the way?"

"No, not yet."

Peeta watched Katniss pull the band off her braid and start to loosen it.

"Can you believe that he knew exactly what was going on that whole time?" she asked.

"No," said Peeta. "Though I was thinking about how drunk he got after Cressida died."

Katniss stopped running her fingers through her hair for a second.

"That's right," she said, and went back to brushing.

They were silent a while as Peeta continued to watch her while she rebraided her hair, missing a piece on the left side of her head. To brush it from her face, or leave it there?

"So..." he said. "I do have to tell you something. I know you'll be supremely disappointed."

"Okay?" she said.

"I'm breaking off our engagement," he said, giving her his best nonchalant grin.

Peeta had whiplash from all the changes. For a while, he'd been sure Katniss would take him up on his Gale plan, but then she'd surprised him with her choice. Once again, for a brief, beautiful day, she'd been his. He'd been too picky and idealistic to appreciate it fully, but the loss of that new, common future clawed at his heart. Here he was again, giving her up.

Katniss grinned back at him.

"I can't believe it," she said. "After all my time and effort planning that wedding."

"I know. I'm heartless."
Both of them laughed nervously, and Katniss brushed the piece of hair behind her ear.

"Quite the back and forth, huh," she said, her gaze darting about the room.

"I was just thinking of that," said Peeta. "But don't worry. Now that we're done maybe I can capitalize on the whole Victor thing. Play the martyr card real hard. You think the girls here in Thirteen would fall for that?"

He looked at Katniss and saw her open her mouth and close it again. Probably she was deciding whether or not to play along. Who was he kidding, anyway?

He took her hand though he was unable to meet her gaze.

"I..." he said, looking at their clasped hands. "For what it's worth, I would have done everything to try make you happy. I'd have gone to the moon and ba—"

"Peeta, don't," she said, cutting him off. "You don't have to-"

"I love you," he said. "I know I shouldn't, but I just..."

"Peeta," said Katniss, "shut up for a second."

Then she reached across the space between them and ran her fingers along his cheekbone, the touch soft and bittersweet. He closed his eyes, covering her hand with his, and all of a sudden she was kissing him.

For a few moments he tried to break away to ask her what she was doing, but she was having none of it. Every time he pulled away, her lips and tongue were there again, crushing his resistance to dust after a few attempts.

He had kissed Katniss a thousand times, but this was the first time his brain completely shorted out. Confusion floated briefly through his awareness before folding in on itself. He couldn't tell anything, except that he was still kissing her and she was kissing him back, and there were no cameras in sight.

She pushed him onto his back and scrambled on top of him, the weight of her body on his sending jolts through his system. This was the kiss he'd always wanted to have with her: uncontrolled, untroubled, uninterrupted.

He thought Katniss must have sensed his need for air, because she drew back and studied him, one hand resting on his chest and the other on the bed. Peeta's own arms were still clasped around her waist.

"What was that for?" he asked her, unable to keep the stupid, childlike grin off his face.

In answer, Katniss turned a deep red.

"Even your forehead is blushing," he said, still grinning.

She laughed and rested her forehead on his chest, and he wondered how loud his heart was in her ear. It was pounding at a mile a minute, and for once he was allowing it, not worrying about the consequences and meaning of the last few moments. He was done with that kind of worry.

"I don't want you to try to impress the Thirteen girls," she said.

"Why's that?" he asked her.
She looked up at him again.

"Stop," she said. "Don't make me say it."

"You're going to have to, because I have no idea what you're talking about," he said, wagging his eyebrows at her.

She sighed heavily.

"I told you. I..." she reached back and grabbed his hand, entwining her fingers with his. "I'm serious about the choice I made. I still want this... and you," she said.

"Hmm," said Peeta, ignoring the butterflies in his stomach. "But maybe I don't want you anymore, now that I'm free."

Katniss rolled sideways and off of him.

"Ugh. Never mind, I take it back," she said, but he could see her smiling.

"No you don't."

He reached for her the way he'd done in the field the day Cashmere had attacked them, and she folded into his arms again.

"I'm going to ask you something really stupid," Peeta said. "Don't laugh at me."

"What?"

"Would you... will you, um, be my girlfriend?"

Katniss laughed aloud, but even though he'd been the one to tell her not to, he did as well. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so happy.

"Yes," she said.

Peeta kissed her again.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, when they'd broken apart.

"I'm sure," she said, beaming.

He kissed her a third time, slowly, without reserve. This was a dream, and he'd be waking up soon, he was sure of it.

A moment later, he heard the noise of the door sliding open, followed by Haymitch's voice.

"Not now, kids," Haymitch said. "There are a lot of things that need to be done. Katniss, get down to briefing; you're late."

"Ugh," Katniss grumbled, sitting up. "All right, I'll be there in five minutes."

"No. Now. I'm tired of making excuses for you."

She rose and smoothed down her shirt, then turned and kissed Peeta again.

"See you soon," she said, and then she trudged out and into the hall. Haymitch yelled at her to pick up the pace, then turned to Peeta.
"I swear," he said. "That girl!"

"Uh huh," said Peeta.

Haymitch couldn't maintain his scowl, a smile replacing it as he approached Peeta and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Good for you, kid," said Haymitch.

Peeta's smile was huge.

THE END