Abeyant

by ETNRL4L

Summary

Katniss had witnessed more loss in fifteen years than most people saw in a lifetime. At five, she’d suffered through a crippling illness that had decimated almost all her friends—killed just about all the children in her small, secluded mountain valley home. She’d never felt special to have been counted among the few survivors. Even at that young age, she’d known feeling anything but sadness at that was wrong. But, as is the way with the very young, she adapted. New children came. She moved on. Then, she lost her father at eleven, and there was no moving on. It wasn’t fair.

Now, at fifteen, Katniss senses something new, something different, looming just over the horizon. It charges the air around her, pulling at her. It will be up to those spared the horrors of the past to brave the nightmares of the future.

Or take part in the destruction.

Banner courtesy of loving-mellark
I was listening to Axwell/
Ingrosso-Something New while I wrote this chapter and the song is perfect for this fic.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

Eggs.

Romaine lettuce.

Salad dressing…

_Uhm…_

Milk. Definitely, she’d used the last drop on her overly dry cereal that morning.

Speaking of which…

Cereal.

Cereal was a basic staple of absentee-caregiver-imposed self-sufficiency and pointedly essential to one tragically lacking in but the most rudimentary of culinary skills. Forgetting cereal would be tantamount to forgetting Pop Tarts.

Hmm.

Pop Tarts.

Mac & Cheese.

Ramen noodles. (Yup. This didn’t read like a college freshman’s diet, at all.)

What else?

_What else?_

Christ! What else was it her mother had asked her to get at Dalton’s after school?

Some pesky food poisoning epidemic running rampant through town had her mom pulling double shifts twice a week the last month. Now her child was going to starve because Katniss couldn’t focus long enough to remember the grocery list her sleep deprived mother had coaxed out over the phone that morning.

Her bottom row of teeth mutilated her upper lip, forcing the sigh she heaved to hiss its way out. The resulting breeze propelled that stubborn strip of hair that always found its way out of her braid straight into her right eye.

She quickly tucked the offending strands behind her ear. In the same motion, she shifted her gaze from the impromptu grocery list scribbled onto the margins of her Algebra notebook—_in lieu of actual notes_. Because heaven forbid she could actually focus on Ms. Atala’s lecture.

Her eyes settled on the large pane glass window over her left shoulder.

Ominous swirls of dusty gray, coal and navy collided, tingeing the midmorning sky a false twilight. The charged air coated her tongue with a coppery tang—the taste not really unpleasant, if peculiar. The stormy weather coaxed the fine hairs on her arms, and at the nape of her neck to spike in anticipation.
For the nth time in the last few years, Katniss wondered, In anticipation of what?

The bridge of her nose wrinkled as she glared at the increasingly threatening atmosphere beyond the glass.

She couldn’t place when she’d become aware of this phenomena. From what she gathered, it had started sometime between the middle of fifth grade and the start of sixth. Her recollections of those months was spotty at best. Likely, her mind had blocked out a lot. That tends to happen when one's existence implodes. She did know the awareness hadn't come all at once, though.

It had crept in slowly, unnoticeable, until it was too acute to ignore. It was an odd, expectant sort of... anxiety. It struck whenever a storm threatened. It horripilated her skin and knotted her insides.

Over the last eighteen months or so, the sensation had sharpened to a level where she could discern minute differences between one storm and the last, as if each storm had its own personality.

It made her wonder if maybe Dr. Aurelius was onto something when he’d told her that, statistically, children who’d suffered traumatic loss at a young age were much more likely to develop other neuroses. Maybe, she was going insane. Maybe her brain was volunteering false realities as a warped coping mechanism. Maybe this was her way of grappling with her father blasting himself to nothing in a freak lab accident.

That was a reasonable conclusion, right?

One flaw in that theory, though. She didn’t feel unstable.

Not that she entertained the theory that psychotic people were aware of their insanity. She could very well have been certifiable and blissfully unaware. Still, about ninety-five percent of the time... she felt perfectly normal.

It was just that remaining five percent…when she sensed storms. Or, something within them, anyway... pulling at some unexplored nook inside her… something that wanted out during storms.

Yeah, that would never feature among the topics of discussion at the monthly psychiatric sessions she'd been subjected to since she was eleven, courtesy of her father’s overtly magnanimous employer's ridiculously comprehensive life insurance plan.

Time seemed to lose all sway on her as she stared out the window. Her reverie snapped only when a decidedly different—and about just as familiar—paresthesia swept over her. Her eyes narrowed at the boy whose desk stood at the front of the three-table row opposite to hers.

The only indication she got—the only indication there ever was—that Peeta Mellark’s sapphire gaze had been on her, was the subtle shift of curls settling over his golden brows. The same golden brows that, at that moment, pinched in an impressive show of looking enthralled in his note taking.

Another slow breath escaped Katniss’s flared nostrils.

Tribute High School prided itself in being progressive, and the seating arrangement in the classrooms spoke to that. Instead of having row after row of seats, lined one behind the next, the seating was arranged into five rows of three desks on either side of the space. The opposing rows faced each other, separated by a five foot wide lane that ranged from the teacher’s desk at the front, to the back wall. This allowed the instructors to pace the length of the room as they spoke. In theory, the arrangement encouraged better surveillance of the learning environment.
Katniss had considered that at the start of the school year. She’d chosen the most remote seat in the classroom, her custom in every class.

Her desk sat tucked in the furthest corner from the door, at the end of her three-table row. The location had appeared the most conducive to a measure of solitude and seclusion—just as she liked it. However, because the single Honors Algebra class only had nineteen students, the first and middle seat in her row stood unoccupied.

This left her with an unobstructed view of Peeta. And he, in turn, had the same vantage. She often tested the limits of her fraying sanity toughing out the logistics of that.

The odds of Peeta—or anyone, for that matter—finding a seat angled to provide an unimpeded view of her should have been quite the feat. But, forfeiting unlikelihood, there they were. And this phenomena wasn’t isolated to third period, either. In the other two classes they shared in the course of the school day, he’d claimed desks at the head of their respective rows (because, yeah, he was a total teacher's pet), with the most improbable of angles, bizarrely placing him at almost perfect line of sight to her.

It wasn’t just his obtrusive position that galled her; it was how her awareness of his placement affected her.

Her logical brain understood his seating choice could have been completely coincidental. This made her feel pompous and foolish for thinking she’d had any bearing on it. But, then she’d feel his eyes on her and the flustering doubts would creep in.

It shouldn’t have bothered her. It wasn’t as if everyone didn’t feel entitled to gape at her... all the time.

She was quite the novelty. In a town of less than three thousand, where everyone said ‘hello’, ‘good morning’ and ‘good evening’ to everyone they crossed because everyone knew each other… she was a social outcast. The sullen girl who couldn’t bother with congeniality, whose resting expression was perpetually etched in a scowl. The whispered comments were impossible to ignore: “Such a lovely girl, if only she’d smile...” “It’s been years, why is she still so forlorn?” “Surely, in a community like ours, there should be a pharmaceutical solution to her antipathy...”

Ugh!

Still, she did take issue with where Peeta Mellark chose to sit. It aggravated her that his glare infringed on her awareness whenever the urge struck him, but she’d never once caught him when she’d flinch his way, no matter how fast she was. And it vexed her that she couldn’t decipher why he chose to torment her.

Was he trying to drive her mad? Was the town’s bane really so fascinating?

Katniss couldn’t fathom another explanation for his interest, not when he’d made every effort to avoid speaking to her for years… ever since the fever. And that had been a decade before.

When all but a few of the then-fledgling scientific community’s children under the age of of eight had fallen ill and never recovered, Katniss and Peeta had barely been older than toddlers, a couple of years removed from mastering speech.

That was what had made the illness so cruel. It had targeted almost exclusively the very young. Even the few pregnancies in progress when the fever struck were lost to miscarriage or early term stillbirth. Only one adult victim had been lost to it: Peeta’s mother.

Once the blight had run its course, Peeta’s father, CapCorp Laboratory’s head of research and one
of the country’s foremost gifted bioengineers, retired at the unimaginable age of thirty-six. Grief-stricken, he took over one of the shops in the town square that predated the fabrication of the sprawling research center: his parents’ bakery. The only one in town.

Katniss wondered if that was why Peeta fixated on her. Did he blame her for that? Did he think his father’s breakdown was her fault? Did he resent her for surviving when his mother had not?

*Well, Katniss scoffed inwardly. If that’s how he feels... he should blame his brothers, too.*

That notion, even in passing, only succeeded in triggering a swift bout of grief and guilt, however. Because it hadn’t been a seven and six-year-old’s fault that disease had ravaged their little town, leaving a death toll of dozens—mostly infants and toddlers.

And it hadn’t been Peeta’s fault—or his father’s—in stark contradiction to what the grieving parents had insinuated after the tragedy, when the scientist failed to save the bulk of the town’s children but somehow miraculously had his own boys pull through.

And it certainly hadn’t been Katniss’s fault.

But Peeta made figuring out any motives beyond those impossible. Outwardly, he showed no signs the trauma of his early life had damaged him. Not even after his father pulled him and his brothers out of school, home tutoring them until the boys’ protests became so that he’d had to allow them to rejoin the public schooling system when they reached middle school age.

It had taken only weeks for CapCorp to replace (and even add to) the many distraught researchers who’d deserted after the fever swept through. Most in the science field would have given anything for the honor of a position at Twelve Glades. And the greenhorns brought their families: hundreds of new children. Katniss had grown up, studied and played with many of them—until her father’s accident, anyway.

Peeta had been as gregarious as ever from the moment their sixth grade teacher had introduced him to the class: the new kid in their grade, who almost no one knew because they had migrated to town after he’d left.

His charisma—punctuated by a dimpled, disarming smile—forced even the most reticent of wallflowers to migrate toward him, enticed by the warmth he radiated. Within weeks, he was a welcome fixture in every clique, always surrounded by friends, telling jokes in the hallways between classes.

Of course, he never smiled at *Katniss*. The few time’s she’d caught his attention in the halls, always at unguarded moments, his blue eyes quickly dashed away to volunteer a witty retort to whatever someone in the group around him had said. Then they’d all chorus laughter.

No, he didn’t share his warmth with her. She was only spared the radiated heat of clandestine glances. The kind she could neither confirm nor ignore. Because Peeta obviously did not find her worthy of more than the kind of furtive glimpses not even he wanted to acknowledge.

Well, she didn’t need his gawking. She didn’t need his judgment or his ambiguous contempt, and she definitely didn’t need his smiles.

Because, when all was said and done: Peeta Mellark was *nothing* to her.

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In Twelve Glades, the longest it took to get anywhere on foot was an hour. And that was a slow foot. Driving, one had to venture forty miles south to reach the middle of nowhere, otherwise
known as Crayston, the next closest of the same kind of Podunk town. Which was only marginally bigger because it boasted a Target® and a half dozen car dealerships.

And the only megaplex for a few dozen more miles.

Heading north led straight into the mountains, which offered little more than patchy roads that dead-ended at the handful of boarded-up entries to the abandoned mine. Less than a dozen almost impassible trails, monopolized by a bevy of wild animals, hedged the mountain range from east to west—a couple for hundreds of miles.

Two decades earlier, before CapCorp built their pharmaceutical research facility, Twelve Glades had been little more than a dying mountain village. It had been the kind that—in its heyday—had housed and catered to a thriving population of miners who’d worked in the recently closed mine, many for generations. When the only real source of income dried up, anyone still able-bodied moved on, taking their families with them.

After the exodus, barely anyone besides the two dozen business owners composing the town square remained. They were a tiny, mostly aging, cluster of merchants and artisans who’d inherited their craft and trade from their forefathers, usually from several generations back. Those few townsfolk stubbornly held to the town’s traditions and their ties to the wilderness surrounding their valley home.

It wasn’t the kind of site a multi-billion dollar syndicate like CapCorp would customarily scout for their newest lab, but their board had been cajoled into considering the region by a hotshot, newly contracted bioengineer, who’d been born and raised in the secluded township, back when it had been a thriving mining hob. The man had been very vocal about how the influx of population and job diversity would breathe life into his hometown’s struggling economy. The positive PR practically wrote itself.

Dr. Dannel Mellark had been very persuasive.

And CapCorp had been hard pressed to keep their enterprising young theoretical bioengineer content. The prodigy had caused quite the stir in the scientific community with his thesis on countering infertility through selective gene sequencing and manipulation. Then he’d stunned them when his theories panned out in preliminary trials. Dr. Mellark was their proverbial cash cow.

The tiny town had provided a very rudimentary infrastructure for CapCorp, mostly a single highway leading through the square into the mountains, flanked by miles and miles of ancient wooden electrical and telephone poles... and a functioning well system.

Prior to constructing their facility, it had been necessary for CapCorp to plumb and update the sewer system along the road running through the square, as well as those servicing the homes that made up the village’s perimeter, for several miles in circumference. They’d also paved the old dirt roads leading from the orbiting Craftsman style homes to the center of town. The renovations rounded out with the installation of a communication tower a few miles outside the town’s boundaries, much augmenting the availability of Wi-Fi, internet and cellular connectivity.

Once the infrastructure was laid, CapCorp had gone to work on building the expansive, multi-structure research facility on five acres of land, almost at the very base of the hills. Roughly five miles southwest, within easy commuting distance, they’d broken ground on a residential community, envisioned to house the hundreds of researchers, technicians, assistants and support staff the lab would need.

There, at 451 Tribute Lane, sat Katniss and her mother’s modest, ranch-style home.
Her parents, like most scientists who lived and worked at Twelve Glades, had been drawn by the promise of spearheading cutting-edge research; the kind that lead to unequaled breakthroughs in medicine. Though her mother had also felt motivated to transfer for more personal reasons.

During pre-med school, Katniss’s mother had learned that she and the Mellarks were several-generations-removed distant kin. The young medical student had made the discovery when she’d studied with, and briefly dated, Dannel Mellark, during a genealogical lab project they’d been assigned as partners.

Back before Katniss’s father died, her mother had enjoyed riling him up, retelling stories about her college days, when she’d been beguiled by Dr. Mellark’s keen intellect and magnetic personality. “It never led anywhere”, her mother would recount with a sigh. “At that age, all the real estate in Dannel’s heart was occupied by his work. But it turned out better for me. I met your dad.”

Katniss’s mother had transferred to a teaching hospital closer to her elderly parents for her trauma medicine residency. And there, she’d met her father. From how they both told it, they’d been inseparable from the moment they’d met. And, they were married eight months later.

The invitation from Dr. Mellark had come four years after and, at that point, every attempt on the young couple’s part to conceive had met with failure. At the time, it had been rumored in certain scientific circles, that Dr. Mellark was holed up in his new state-of-the-art facility, cooking up a radical new fertility treatment, something experimental—not yet slated for human trials. It only fueled speculation that Dr. Mellark had very quickly married his fresh-out of-grad-school lab assistant and she’d given birth to two sons within twenty-two months—coinciding perfectly with the length of time the mystery procedure had been speculated to be in existence. There was even talk the researcher’s wife was already carrying their third child.

Katniss’s parents hadn’t harbored any false hopes when they’d migrated to Twelve Glades so her father could take a position as head of theoretical neurological studies and her mother could join the staff of the newly built hospital. However, before her parents had celebrated their first anniversary in the community of Victor’s Promenade, they’d driven home with Katniss swathed in a fluffy yellow blanket she kept until she was nine.

Katniss could never get a straight answer from her parents when she’d asked whether Dr. Mellark assisted in her conception somehow or not, but the families had remained close.

Right until the fever swept.

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Katniss huffed out a breath, hiking the large vinyl shopping bag further up her shoulder as she trailed her way home, cutting behind the line of quaint shops to avoid the main avenue. Not that she’d have to worry about encountering other commuters that afternoon. No one was insane enough to venture out in rain so intense, it stung like needles wherever it touched uncovered flesh.

Each time her gait shifted her soaked through underwear with a disturbing slush, she’d yearn for the day she’d turn sixteen and get her license.

She would never have heard the end of it if her mother learned she’d been out and about in the storm. She could envision the woman’s voice hitting that ungodly pissed parent pitch as she harangued about how Katniss would one day catch her death of pneumonia through sheer disregard of the elements.

Well, it wasn’t as if she’d really had a choice. For the last few weeks, whenever her mom managed a few hours to come home, she was too exhausted to do little more than sleep. It’d been
well over a month since their last proper grocery run. Their fridge was bare, excepting a questionable aged label-less bottle of mayonnaise and that jar of brine juice with the one last pickle neither of them was eager to have, but somehow perpetuated the existence of the container in the fridge.

It was either chance-it through the rain to get some food, or gnaw at her cuticles while immersing herself in a paperback to ignore the hunger pangs. Katniss chose the rain.

Besides, when she managed to ignore the abusive, pelting deluge—the storm had its allure. It had begun thundering a few minutes after she’d left Dalton’s and lightning brightened the darkened late afternoon sky every few seconds.

She’d slowed her pace through the sprawling meadow behind the shops to revel in it. Every current arcing down to impact the ground seemed to reverberate through her veins, temporarily rushing superheated blood through every blood vessel.

A few yards past the hardware store—the last of the shops on that side of the main avenue—she stopped, palms lifting upward as if pleading with the storm.

Pleading for what, she could not fathom. All the same, she felt the current in the air spike in response to her eagerness. The lightning that had previously split the sky randomly, interspersedly, began streaking with something akin to… uniformity.

Katniss watched as swirls of brilliantly charged light kissed the ground, ranging from the copse of trees a few miles off on either side of the road to a few yards from where she stood.

The strikes were steadying into a pattern—something familiar—that seemed to thrum from deep in her chest outward. Every bolt reaching land, splintered out immediately with an echoing burst. Then, a split moment after, within a few yards of her, the event would repeat.

Zrr…thrap! Zrr…thrap! Zrr…thrap!

It became irrelevant, where the bone-rattling cacophony was coming from. Whether it was a product of the dangerously near surges or her skyrocketing pulse, Katniss was far too enraptured in the light suffusing her to care.

Lost in the euphoria, she was only vaguely aware of the increasing tempo to the lightning strikes around her, how each clash made impact inexorably closer, inch-by-inch. Until her head swung back, glistening gray eyes riveted to the dazzlingly illuminated sky.

The blinding, scorching white forced her lids to flicker, but they widened a fluttered heartbeat later... when the swell pierced her chest.

It could have been a second or it could have been eternity. Time became immaterial as the supercharged particles surged through her, saturating every cell.

There was no pain, no shock—only utter completion.

And, then, everything went still. In the deafening silence, the surge ebbed, bleeding into the ground beneath her, leaving her at once relieved and bereft.

Her lungs aching for oxygen, a gasped breath escaped lips she had failed to notice hung parted. Awareness settled in far more slowly than reasonable, with a strumming of pins and needles across her still extended arms.

When had she fallen to her knees?
When had she closed her eyes?

Those opened with her next intake of breath, only to narrow with a flinch at the unexpected sting of heat and smoke. It took another moment for the haze blanketing both her mind and vision to clear enough to realize she was staring at something a few yards off, in the alley behind the last shop.

No. Not something, her addled mind struggled to process. Someone.

The body-shaped mass, silhouetted by the rain-haloed light from the street lamps of the square beyond, was growing. Another heartbeat lapsed before she could reconcile that meant it was coming closer. Fast.

Whoever that was, they were sprinting toward her through the still-bruising storm.

Some synapse far in the recess of Katniss’s mind tried to spark, communicate that she should feel panicked. She should react. Her predicament was precarious. But movement was unfathomable to the rest of her mind and her barely there motor function.

Therefore, there she knelt, staring lackadaisically; her splintered thoughts fading into an apothic void that encroached at the edges of her vision.

Numbness bled through her, a welcome companion.

As the shadowed form filled her quickly abridging visual spectrum, one last cogent notion surfaced: How odd those eyes—such opaque a hue of blue—could glint so bright through the darkness.
Ninety-seven days. That’s what it took to decimate Twelve Glades’s population of children.

From the Tuesday morning seven-year-old Caleb Jacobsen’s mother entered Regional’s (then seldom used) emergency room, him whimpering feebly into her chest with a blinding headache and a body temperature spiking well into the triple digits, to the Saturday night when Rye Mellark’s fever finally broke—the tiny township had been beseeched.

By fear. Loss. Helplessness.

And a tide of outsiders.
The horde had trickled in gradually. When the first eight cases presented within days of each other, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention sent a four-person reconnaissance team.

With the death of Caleb and a three-month-old baby girl within seventy-two hours, they’d called in another two dozen virologists, nurses and containment support staff. Upon their arrival, they called for a quarantine of the town and a hundred mile circumference of its perimeter.

The virologists worked tirelessly to trace the epidemiology of what they believed to be a new, not yet characterized, mutation of the lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus; its rodent vector somehow removed from the transmission chain. That was the closest they could come to cataloguing what they found plaguing the children of Twelve Glades.

It quickly became clear that the new contagion targeted the extremely young, with no victim over the age of ten. The single exception to that pattern had been a woman in her mid-twenties, whom the strain afflicted far more viciously than all the children. So much so, that it had only taken thirty-nine hours from the onset of symptoms to cataclysmic neural atrophy.

The medical investigators chucked both her unique case and its aggression to the fact she’d been exposed to a considerably higher inoculum—seeing as all three of her sons had succumb to the disease.

That assumption had made perfect sense. None of the other sick children had siblings. The Mellarks were the only family with more than one afflicted child.

When the men in faded green uniforms showed up, the CDC was puzzling out the reason the boys’ father, who’d had the same exposure to the sick kids, had yet to show any signs of infection. That had been twenty-three days into the outbreak.

No one had to guess the Brass’s purpose there. CapCorp Laboratories made no secret of their numerous government and military grants, geared toward pioneering advances in combat medicine. Insuring the sustainability of their investment had to be priority. But, it turned out, they needn’t have worried. It wasn’t CapCorp researchers losing hundreds of neurons with each hour that lapsed.

The military’s presence in Twelve Glades during the crisis was logical, expected even. The same could not be said for the coal colored SUV’s with blackened windows that drove into town a fortnight after the uniforms arrived, in blatant disregard of the quarantine. The SUV’s delivered a squad of severe-looking men and women in conspicuous white suits.

No one knew the purpose of the white-suited people, but they exuded control. Even the Brass deferred to them. They were blank-faced shadows, lurking near anyone exposed to the few remaining sick children. And, through some unspoken accord, it became protocol that all data on the virus and victims go through them.

These individuals lingered the longest. Months after the last of those who’d tried and failed to contain the devastation had long gone—they had remained.

Most made headquarters of CapCorp’s facilities. For what purpose, no one knew. There was plenty of speculation, of course, by those not devastated by loss—those who had no children to mourn. Murmurs availed about the suited men being CIA or FBI, but no one was brazen enough to confirm this and the white suits were not forthcoming.

While the others took on the role of remote overseers, one man remained close to the four survivors, still quarantined and recovering in the ominously silent children’s ward.
He was tall and his tailored suit poorly veiled his athletic, defined frame. Deep angles darkened his demeanor, making him appear older than his actual age—somewhere in the late thirties. The buzzed low, prematurely silver hair peppering both temples did not help.

The children would come to know him as the man with the kind eyes, who asked odd questions about inside out shapes, told stories he'd beckon they supply the ending to, and always had a new puzzle for them when he visited, though he never indulged them in joining their play. He’d always smile and offer a quaint, “I just want to see you kids work it out.” Then he’d stay nearby, kind eyes always on them.

He’d been the one to stay the longest.

Then, over the six months proceding the epidemic, as all the other suits deserted and new people with children steadily boosted the town into a semblance of normalcy, his visits with the children became more and more rare. Until, one day, he’d faded out completely—almost unnoticed.

The children went on with their lives, the memory of the kind man in white misting away along with the curiosity of where he’d come from.

As is the way with very young children.

And, maybe, that’s how the men in white had meant it to be.

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Katniss emerged from that purgatorial state between sleep and waking—the one inhabited by quasi-formed snippets of id-supplied fancy—to find countless spheres of blue dancing before her. The palate blurred and intercalated, progressing from midafternoon cloudless skies to the near black of deep oceanic waters. It reminded her of a monochromatic color wheel.

“Huh. So she salvaged enough neurons to gain consciousness after all. I owe you a Porterhouse, Peet.”

“Know where you can shove it?”

Peeta Mellark’s voice registered through the dissipating fog of her thoughts. Whomever he’d responded to sounded familiar as well, if hard to place through the grogginess.

Moaning, she blinked several times to get the swirling images to coalesce into the discernible shapes of three pairs of curious eyes. Each set glinted with odd, dim light. She brought a hand to her eyes to rub the haze out.

Or, tried, anyway. Her breathing hitched when her arm refused to cooperate.

“Woah! No, don’t freak out. You’re okay. You’ll be okay,” soothed the boy with long, platinum blond bangs. “I just need you to stay still for a little while longer, all right? Purging your system becomes very hard if my focus splits to regulate your blood pressure. We lose control of your blood pressure and you lapse into shock... again.

“Rye’s holding you really still so we can make you better. He’ll help you up as soon as you’re good again.”

Katniss’s breathing slowed. The longhaired boy possesed a soothing, strumming baritone, and the inconsistent lighting made his eyes hypnotic.
“You’re at our place—the guest bedroom downstairs, to be exact,” Peeta offered, when her gaze scanned her surroundings and a sneer threatened at the edges of her mouth.

“This is the only place I could think to bring you.”

Katniss’s gaze shifted to him and Peeta quickly explained. “The guys had a student council thing after school, so they kept the car, and I’m iffy about where in the Promenade you live. Besides, I didn’t think you’d like the attention we’d garner if I hauled you there on the main road. You seem…the type of person who really values privacy. So I brought you here. A trail through the woods behind the shops leads to just about our front yard. Anyway, I figured you’d be more comfortable with this—”

Peeta clipped the statement, color surging his neck. His arms shifted and hesitated in the act of crossing before one hand settled over the opposite bicep, fingers tapping a disjointed beat. His gaze pointedly avoided hers.

Katniss took a deep breath and allowed her eyes to list closed. Her head throbbed, as if an aneurism loomed if she didn’t regulate her scattered thoughts and the resulting physiological response.

After a few moments, she opened them languidly and focused on Peeta again. The hoarseness of her voice surprised her. “You carried me... what? Three, four miles?”

Peeta’s hand shifted to the back of his neck. He stared down at her with a small, one-sided grin. So, that’s what it was like being on the receiving end of one of those.

Pleasant.

“There are ways to get around the trails—we have off-roads,” explained Peeta. “But even if I would’ve had mine, which I didn’t, I would’ve carried you. You weigh less than most things I lug around the bakery’s storage room. And, after what happened out in that field, exposing you to anything with an electrical power source and gasoline would’ve been insane.”

His demeanor grew uneasy. “I mean, I figured it would drain out of your system in the half hour it took me to get you here. But you still managed to blow out the bulb in the porch, the foyer, and this room before I could get the main shut off—”

“Wait, hold up,” Katniss broke in, growing flustered. “What was supposed to drain out of me on the way here? And how do lightbulbs play into any of this?”

A scoff escaped the third teenager in the room, who had shifted to the foot of the bed. Katniss tensed to sit up for a better look at him. When her body again failed to comply with the command to lift, she craned her neck—relieved that much was not lost to her—to zero a scowl on him.

The shift in position broadened her field of vision and her eyes, instead of finding the teen at the foot of the bed, drew away to fixate on the arm stretched across the eldest Mellark’s thigh.

Whatever remark she’d prepared died on her lips.

With a set jaw, the boy with long hair she now recalled was named Flax edged a hand over her arm, keeping a distance only the length of her spiking body hair from making contact. Dozens of tiny, brilliant white threads sparked in the infinitesimal space separating his skin from hers, triggering a prickling sensation Katniss’s addled mind had failed to register until that moment. She shifted her gaze to find the same dancing rivulets coursing his other hand, which he held over an outlet on the wall.
“Wh-why… Wh-what… H-how are you doing that?” Katniss asked in a shuddered breath.

Flax tilted a grin toward her, his attention never breaking from his task. “Which of those would you like answered first? They’re all kind of interconnected…”

Katniss wrinkled her nose at the evasion. “Try me. And while you’re at it,”—she gestured with her chin toward the foot of the bed—“explain how he is supposed to be holding me still from all the way over there.”

As soon as the words were out, a pressure rolled up Katniss’s chest. Air forced its way out of her lungs as a brief wave of vertigo overtook her. She clenched her eyes shut to stave off the bout of nausea and opened them on an exhale to find her perspective had shifted. Her upper back lay against the headboard, cushioned by a soft pillow.

Poorly disguising her shock, she quickly took stock of her surroundings, noting the tiny dimensions. There was barely room enough for the full bed, the two nightstands, the wardrobe in the corner, and the three hulking teenage boys flanking her. The wavering light emanated from a half dozen liquid paraffin candle jars decorating the few flat surfaces available.

Her eyes narrowed as she refocused on Flax, but found she was no longer the center of his attention.

“Rye, you idiot! What part of, ‘She’ll electrocute the crap out of me if my concentration shifts’, was lost on you?”

Rye snorted and crossed his arms. “Oh, please. You’ve been siphoning it out for ten minutes. Whatever’s left in there has earned its right to stay, far as I’m concerned. It can’t possibly be enough to hurt any of us, anyway.

“Besides, she was struggling against the hold,” he finished with a lopsided smirk at Katniss.

“Daddy raised me right, firefly. Struggling means stop.” The smirk grew predatory. “Unless confinement is your kink— who am I to judge? A gentleman accommodates.”

Peeta turned a dirty look on his older brother. “You’re vile.”

“Nope, just candid and considerate,” Rye countered with a nonchalant shrug. “Don’t hate the superior game.”

Finding she could now move the appendage not still in Flax’s grasp, Katniss brought a hand up to run gruffly over her face and into her hair. It came away soaked. She stared at it befuddled, working to dredge up a memory to account for that, before turning back to the siblings.

“Okay,” she huffed. “Can you people please tell me what is going on?”

The answer came from Flax. “What’s the last thing you remember before waking up here?”

Katniss’s brow pinched. “I was walking home…” she ventured haltingly, “from Dalton’s… in the storm…”

Her attention listed to an empty stretch of air over Flax’s left shoulder. “Then it started to thunder… and there was light…

“So much light,” she breathed, glazed eyes shifting back to Flax, not really focusing.

“Yeah, Sleeping Beauty? Your dumb a— O-ouch!”
In a move too swift for her to follow, Peeta’s fist collided with Rye’s ribs, effectively stifling whatever gibe he’d been gearing to deliver.

Rye started chuckling, rubbing at his side. “Oh, like I’m supposed to laud her for overdosing? And you all say I’m moronic?”

“She didn’t do it on purpose, ass.”

Rye executed an exaggerated eye roll. “Oh, like you’d know that? For all you know, this is how she gets her rocks off. None of us know anything about her—you especially.”

Peeta shifted closer to Rye, tension coiling both their frames as they faced off.

“Guys, stop!” Flax’s voice sliced through with an edge of authority. “Katniss is right here. How’s about we aspire for novelty and actually direct comments about her to her? Stop the pissing contest.”

He turned back to Katniss with a sigh and far gentler tone. “Ignore them. They’re savages. They wouldn’t know how to act around a pretty girl if it bit them in the ball sack.”

The younger teens mumbled colorful words of dissent.

Flax ignored them.

The smile he bestowed on her radiated such empathy, she unwittingly found the edge of her own mouth inching up a tiny bit.

“You summoned an enormous amount of raw voltage into your body—”

“No! What? No,” Katniss countered reflexively, in a breaking voice. “I was just watching it. It’s not possible—I can’t… no one could’ve—”

“But you did, Katniss,” Peeta argued softly, moving to sit on the bed opposite his oldest brother. His thigh grazed hers and his hand twitched. Conflict flickered in his eyes as if struggling over whether physical contact would overstep an unspoken boundary.

Good call.

Amidst the mounting belligerence, it couldn’t end well to have someone else she barely knew touching her. It was bad enough Flax had yet to release her arm.

What was he doing to her, anyway?

Peeta settled on intertwining his fingers on his lap. “I saw you. You seemed…entranced. You were so wired in class, jittery. Then I found you in that meadow…You harnessed the voltage, made it pulse to some rhythm inside you… It was amazing.”

“Right until you zapped yourself fifty IQ points simpler,” Rye supplied with another scoff.

“You weren’t there, prick,” Peeta rounded on him.

Rye’s expression shifted to boredom. “Did I need to be? Spending the last twenty minutes resuscitating Twitchy here, painted a pretty vivid portrait.”

“I don’t even know why I bothered bringing you in on this. God knows I knew you'd be an ass.”
That hardened Rye’s stare.

“Oh really, ingrate? Like this is what I wanted to be doing right now? How’s about the next maniacal text about dragging some possibly dying girl home... Yeah, leave my contact out of it. I don’t need your drama.”

“Stop!” Katniss’s fist came down on the bed... hard. “Look, I don’t want you guys arguing because of this. I’m grateful for whatever you did to help me, really I am. And I will find a way to make this up to you. I just really need to get a bearing on what happened tonight before I lose my mind.

“And by ‘bearing’ I mean something within the realm of possibility,” she added, pointedly.

“Whatever you think you saw out in that meadow,”—she turned hard eyes on Peeta—"you’re wrong. It was pouring, zero visibility. The light played a trick on you. Maybe you were tired from school. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. I didn’t do that. Nobody can do that and surv—”

A hardcover flew off the chifforobe and thudded none-too-gently against Katniss’s sternum, landing in her lap. She stared at it as if it would scorch clear through the thin quilt covering her.

Then, a small vase with three wilting daisies lifted off the nightstand to her left. It sliced through the air, stopping to twirl before her, before crossing to settle on the nightstand on her right.

“And, following your logic, no one can do that, professor. Got any more theories?”

Jaw slack, Katniss swerved impossibly large eyes at the teenager at the foot of the bed.

Rye leaned both palms on the footboard, a glare countering her nonplussed expression. His voice lost all traces of humor. “Let’s lay this out clear. I can buy that you were oblivious to what you are—what you can do—until today. You’ve cloistered yourself into a sort of delusional agnosticism. Which makes sense, because if you opened up to the average person about whatever it is you have been going through the last few years... they’d label you a lunatic. But, as you just saw, we,”—he gestured at his brothers surrounding her—“are not ‘average’. We know you can feel it. We all can. Because we’re like you.”

He shifted to fold his arms again and his tenor lost some of its severity. But not much. “You don’t understand what it is, and that has to scare the crap out of you. We get that. Fear is healthy, but denial is not. After what happened today, you can’t hide from this. You can’t shut yourself out and pretend you’re normal. You’re not. What you can do is potentially dangerous, to both you and others. Working to control it is the only way to ensure you don’t inadvertently maim or kill someone. So, you will accept this. There is no alternative. And, really, how else will you rationalize what happened tonight? Waking up confused, soaking and shirtless in our house?”

Katniss’s mind whirled. Was she truly so removed she’d failed to notice this?

As loath as she was to accept it, everything Rye said rang true. She did feel... something. Deep within... in the recesses of her mind. A skein of energy—stirring for release.

And, now that the concept was tangible, she became aware of something similar in the teens around her. Each resonated a unique... wavelength? It pulsed more insistently every second. How had she not noticed before?

A thought struck and she turned to Peeta. Yes. She had sensed this in him before. All those times she’d sat flustered in class.

Because his eyes had been on her.
What was that? For that matter, what was she?

Lost in the turmoil of her inner conflict, it took far longer than it should have for the last part of Rye’s diatribe to settle. The instant it did, shaking fingers hitched the edge of the patchwork quilt tucked around her chest and under her arms.

Unbidden, a whimper escaped her and she crushed the cover back, inching it up to her neck. “What happened to my shirt?”

“Your little dance in the rain set the field ablaze, Pyro,” Rye replied with acerbic humor. “Cotton’s flammable, and you sent enough voltage to light a village through the piece you had on. Be grateful it was pouring too hard for the flames to catch for more than a few moments... and that Peeta was out there to see you. Because, regardless how much amperage your cells have adapted to take, I’m pretty sure you’re not impervious to actually setting setting your butt on fire.”

Set on fire.

Oh, god.

Flickers of memory were edging back. The light had called to her, eager… and she’d called it back.

And, together, they’d set the meadow ablaze.

Bedlam ruled Katniss’s mind. An endless stream of resurfing thoughts and emotions clashed, vying for preeminence—for ratification. She wanted to ask so many questions—needed to know so much. But, ultimately, humiliation and unfocused frustration dominated and what had to be the least pertinent question took forefront.

“Who… which one of you—?”

She could scarcely get it out and she damn sure could no longer hold eye contact with any of them. She pressed her thumb and forefinger into her eyes.

Flax released her arm and shifted closer. Even through her clenched eyes, his caution was noticeable.

“It had to come off, Katniss,” he said in barely above a whisper. “Please understand. When Rye and I got here, you were unconscious, chilled to the bone, and covered in soot. It was impossible to assess how badly you’d been injured with your tattered shirt still hanging off you. Your mother is a trauma physician. She must’ve told you the first step in assessing damage is getting the injury field clear. I’ve seen her do it.”

She couldn’t bring herself to lower her hand. “You’ve seen my mother work?”

“I volunteer as an orderly twice a week at the hospital,” he replied, a note of pride in his voice. “I’m only supposed to change sheets and empty bed pans, but your mom knows I’m heading off to State’s pre-med program early admission this fall. I think she’s taking it upon herself to make sure I have the most practical experience of any freshman in my class. She lets me shadow her as long as I don’t practice procedures on actual patients. But she did teach me some. Want me to draw your blood? I have perfect accuracy hitting just about anyone’s veins. I cheat and selectively manipulate blood pressure so the vessel surfaces…but I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

A snort tried to escape her tightened lips. She trapped it quickly. Instead, her hand lowered, silver
eyes searching Flax’s for any sign of deception. “And you’re the one who undressed me?”

A soft smile stretched across Flax’s face and the allaying quality to it further calmed her. “I promise you. The guys waited outside while I checked you and—don’t take this the wrong way—but noticing what you look like shirtless took a distant back seat to trying to normalize your vitals and figure a way to get the foreign electricity out of you.”

As an afterthought, he added under his breath, “And, trust me, I’d get hell from Madge if she ever found out I was gawking at a helpless, potentially dying girl.”

One of Katniss’s eyebrows hiked. She knew only one Madge. She was Marshall Undersee’s daughter. They were in the same grade and she’d been one of only a handful of children in their age bracket not to get sick when they were little.

“Here you are. You’ll be swimming in it, but at least they’re dry and warm.”

Katniss shifted to find Peeta extending a folded bundle to her. She hadn’t noticed he’d stepped out of the room to get them. Or, had they been in that dresser in the corner?

Tentatively, she reached out for them, with a mumbled, “Thanks.”

He’d given her a pair of sweatpants she could only envision keeping on if she folded the waistband several times, and a hoodie in a matching burnt orange color. And a bath towel.

“They’re mine from a couple years ago. The clothes, I mean. Pretty sure the towel’s new,” he said, moving a hand to the back of his neck. “Usually, Dad asks us to put all our old stuff in a bag once a year to give to the needy, but I kept those because they’re my favorite color and the pants are comfortable for sleeping in, since the waistband is crap. New stuff takes a while to wear into ‘sleep comfortable’ territory, you know?”

Katniss looked up from the clothes to Peeta, really scrutinizing him for the first time since she’d woken in that room. He was still in the khakis she’d seen him in at school. They were stained a darker tan from the rain. But the faded denim button down was gone. In its place, was a white undershirt.

The storm had soaked the thin cotton translucent and coated it to his torso like a second skin.

Nothing was left to imagination.

Her isolationism notwithstanding, it would’ve been impossible for Katniss not to know what girls around school murmured about the Mellarks. Some of the more imaginative depictions she’d overheard in the hallways over the years had made her blush. And, she’d be lying if she said she’d never noticed the way Peeta’s arms and broad shoulders filled the shirts he wore. Not to mention how he filled out pants.

She was reclusive, not dead.

But, catching glimpses of him from several yards off had nothing on his being two feet away.

Because she’d never been this close before, and god knew when the opportunity would resurface, Katniss let her eyes follow the woven butte of his shoulder, across the line of his clavicle, to the hollow of his neck. There, a defined ravine plunged between the tightly coiled sinew of his left and right pectorals. There must have been a chill to the room because twin puckered dunes of crimson distended the nothing shirt on either side.

Her eye accompanied the ravine’s descent as it cleaved once, twice, three times to cut trails
through the ebbs and swells of abdominal muscle. Then it hedged off at the dip of his belly button, re-appearing further down to frame a ‘V’ into his narrow hips, before fading into the waistband of his pants.

Unbidden, a mental image formed, of a shirtless Peeta, arms and stomach muscles clenching with the gesture of rubbing sleep out of his eyes... the orange pants Katniss held riding precariously low on his hips...

The reverie broke at the sound of breath catching, a throat deep gulp. It drew her attention back to his face. Their eyes locked and Katniss felt that pins-and-needles sensation ghost over her—the one she’d become intimate with.

He’d been staring.

Working to read past the intensity of the navy pools, she found a hint of humor mixed with something she had no benchmark for categorizing.

And a glint of what look like... vanity?

Heat coursed up her neck to color her cheeks.

The bastard knew.

He knew she’d been ogling. His eyes beamed with conceit.

She should’ve been mortified, averted her eyes to save face. But that open, soul piercing stare—the otherwise unflinchingly austere demeanor—made it impossible to look away.

Rye cleared his throat. “Um, okay,” he said, an unplaceable note to his voice. “We are all going to step out so you can change.”

He pulled a phone out of his jeans. After a fleeting glance, he pocketed it again and said, “If I set the oven to three-eighti-ish, I can hopefully avoid ruining dinner in the time it’ll take to get to Dalton’s and back.”

Katniss’s attention shifted back to Rye, brows knitting. “W-wait, wh-what?”

He rolled his eyes grandly at her, causing her to wonder if the condescending gesture got painful, what with how much he affected it.

“Well, you were walking home from from Dalton’s, so I’m guessing you’d bought something there. And nothing survived your lightshow in the meadow, darling. Electricity at lightning volt speed becomes super-heated plasma. Your phone fused to the inside of that leather jacket you had on, which, by the way, is scorched beyond salvation. And a vinyl-slash-plastic clump we scavenged may have been your wallet in another incarnation. So, whatever it is you got from the market needs replacing. If we time it right, dinner should be waiting when we get back.”

Aware she was comically slow on the uptake, Katniss rubbed a hand through her matted hair again, brows furrowing. “I thought— weren’t you pissed at me just a second ago? And my money… my debit card… I need to go to the hospital... borrow Mom’s before getting any more —”

Flax rose to his feet and headed for the door. “No one’s pissed at you, Katniss. We’re trying to figure out what’s happening to you—try to help you, hopefully. Rye’s vagina chafes when his blood sugar drops. I already told you to ignore him.”
Rye countered with a single-digit wave.

Flax was undeterred. “The grocery trip’s on us tonight. It’s bad enough you have to explain to your mother about ‘losing’ your phone. I’m guessing she has no more idea this has been happening to you than you did?”

Katniss shook her head.

“Well”, Flax continued. “If you want to keep her in the dark until you get a grip on it yourself, we understand. And we can help. Once we get back, you can use one of our phones to report the card lost. They’ll mail you another one within a few days. Same goes for the phone if you had insurance on it.”

She took the hitch to his eyebrows as nonverbal request for reply. “Yeah. Mom always gets it. We’ve lost too many to public toilet incidents.”

At the curious stares from the boys, she waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t ask. It’s a very gross story. Just be grateful you get to stand.”

The boys started out, but before they made it to the threshold, Katniss had to get in her final peace. Just to make things clear. “I will be paying you back, you know— anything you guys spend. And gas money. I’m not… I don’t want…

“I don’t stay owing… ever,” she finished with a vehement glare.

Laughter exploded from the three boys.

“Way to mutilate chivalry, Sparkles,” Rye choked out. “If we pull out a chair, will you crack our skulls open with it?”

Katniss’s lips tightened into a thin line. “It’s not like that…” Her arms crossed high on her chest. “I just don’t want to feel like anyone has anything hanging over me. If you do this, we square it as soon as I get my card back and get to an ATM. Otherwise, I’m heading home—now.”

The amusement didn’t leave the teenagers’ expressions.

Katniss let out an indignant breath. “And stop it with the stupid nicknames, Rye. You know my name. Call me that or don’t call me anything at all.”

This caused renewed laughter from the Mellark middle child. He rubbed at his eyes as he walked out of the room, still chortling.

“Oh. My. God. She’s adorable. Can we keep her?”

Katniss wanted to throw the book at him, but wasn’t sure how effective that would be. For all she knew, the freak could intercept it midair. And she doubted he’d be conflicted with lugging it right back at her. She settled for burning a stare into the side of his face until he’d walked through the doorway.

“You know, he thrives on getting under your skin. If it gets to you, it becomes a twisted challenge to weaponize it,” Flax said with a smile as he followed his brother out. “Don’t give him ammo.”

Katniss scowled, fighting the urge to pout. She turned her attention to Peeta who’d made no move to leave and found him staring at her, smirking.

Again, that unsettling fierceness interlaced the humor and whatever else roiled through his eyes.
“So, are you standing around thinking up a witty one-liner to accentuate your departure?” she spat irate.

Peeta tilted his head slightly, analyzing her. Then his smile widened and he made for the door.

Katniss swung her feet over the edge of the bed, turning her back on him. She waited for the click of the door that would cue the go-ahead to let the quilt drop. Instead, she heard Peeta’s amused voice.

“I don’t care if you look at me, Katniss.”

She snapped her head around, a retort on the tip of her tongue, but found him gone and the door closed.

She scoffed and reached for the button on her uncomfortably soggy jeans, more than ready to be free of them. Mid gesture she froze when an image suddenly crystallized in her mind, far more detailed than anything she could conjure.

It was Peeta Mellark, standing next to an unmade bed, in a bedroom she’d never seen before, his hair disheveled in an oddly appealing way, clenched knuckle rubbing at his eye.

Burnt orange sweatpants hung obscenely low on his hips.

And those were all he wore.

Katniss fluttered a blink and the vision vanished, leaving her with the aggravating ambiguity of not knowing if it’d ever really been there, at all.

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It’d taken under five minutes to change into the clothes Peeta had left her.

He’d been right. She’d been in tents with a tighter fit.

She waited five more minutes after changing (as per the antique hand clock on the nightstand) for one of the teens to come back for her. She killed a minute of that blowing out the waxless candles around the room.

She found herself encased in near darkness, save the weak early evening moonlight filtering in from the large window behind the bed. The gloom served as stark reminder of what Peeta had told her she’d done to the bulb in there.

At the end of ten minutes, no one had shown.

It was appreciated, the Mellarks trusting she didn’t need babysitting. But directions around a strange house would’ve been helpful. Something about navigating blindly through someone else’s home felt invasive.

Katniss sucked it up. If they treasured privacy, they should have sent an escort.

The tiny bedroom lead into a short hallway. There was another door adjacent to the one she exited and a third at the far end. A quick check of both led to discovering a bathroom and a home office with odd dimensions.

Katniss followed the hallway to where it opened to a large foyer, furnished with overstuffed armchairs in black and white brocade, mahogany conversation tables, and other rustic bric-a-brac.
A Baby Grand sat in a corner.

She mused briefly as to who in that home played classical piano (maybe the baker?), as her eyes scouted the area. She admired the intricately carved oak double doors before tracing a look a few yards across at the landing to a wrought iron and oak banister staircase.

She entertained the notion of going upstairs for all of a second. The likelihood she'd walk in on one of the siblings in the shower or changing was not appealing.

Instead, she crossed the foyer toward a doorless arched entryway, following the sounds of running water and clanging metal. It led to a spacious kitchen, with an island at its heart and a large breakfast nook with a bay window at the opposite end.

Although it was warm and welcoming, Katniss noticed—as was the case in the foyer—the decor screamed ‘testosterone’.

The traditional, rich cherry cabinetry accentuated the muted tan of the undecorated walls. The countertops were butcher board. Beautiful, but utilitarian. The island sported a stainless steel surface and a glass bowl of fruit. Same effect.

Aged brick served as backsplash, and no drapes softened the lines of the imposing bay window. It sat framed in intricate white wood molding.

Very male.

The Mellarks were all there. Peeta had changed out of the wet clothes she’d seen him in last and into a navy, long sleeved Henley and jeans. She tried to remember when she’d become aware what Peeta Mellark wore. Probably middle school. Hormones.

Flax and Peeta sat opposite each other at the breakfast table, both engrossed in laptops. Various textbooks decorated the table’s surface.

If they realized she’d walked in, they didn’t acknowledge it.

A shrill whistle came from behind and she swirled to find Rye leaning against the refrigerator, lazy gaze roaming over her. His debonair smirk hinted at appreciation, but the laughter in his eyes shattered the facade.

“Nothing sexier than a girl borrowing your clothes after waking up naked, soaked and worn out in your house, huh Peet?”

She choked on her next breath and couldn’t tell whose blush came in faster: hers or Peeta’s.

The aforementioned slammed his laptop shut so hard, she doubted it’d ever open again.

“You’re a classless prick, Ryeland.”

He then swung his attention toward Flax, none of the enmity abating. “Let’s get this over with. We need to get her home.”

Ouch.

Peeta’s aura of contempt was so acute—so unexpected—the hairs on her arms spiked when he shoved past through the arched kitchen entryway, almost trampling her. He kept his eyes fixed forward.
The spasmodic change in temper was disquieting, but she could hardly fault him his anger.

From what little she’d seen of their dynamic, it was beyond her how Peeta and Rye had managed to live in the same house their entire lives without murdering each other.

After all, hadn’t the thought of causing bodily harm to the Mellark middle child flitted through her mind less than fifteen minutes earlier? Apparently, Rye had that effect on people.

But it hadn’t been lost on her, the way the exchange between Flax and Peeta had gone down. Whatever tentative impasse they’d achieved in the guest room was forfeited to the reignited hostility, and the siblings were back to speaking through her as if she wasn’t there.

Perfect.

Telling them to shove it mid-dash for the door was tempting, but Katniss fought the compulsion. It was dark, still raining, and she wasn’t familiar with the stretch of wilderness surrounding the Mellark property. Not to mention, she was still fighting off grogginess from her ordeal earlier. If she stepped out their door alone, she wasn’t sure where she’d end up.

Besides, they were her only recourse for getting some answers about what was happening to her. She had to play it cool until she could get more out of them.

“All three of you don’t have to come,” she said, eying Rye warily when he flung the strap of his apron over his head.

Separating the two quarrelling siblings seemed like a good idea.

“Peeta’s sixteen, right?”

She was pretty sure she’d caught a glimpse of him driving out of the school parking lot a few times. “I’ll ask him to drive me. I’ve inconvenienced you two enough tonight…”

Flax scoffed, sidestepping her to reach for the keys hanging on a hook by the entryway. “I have no idea what the aftereffects of what happened tonight are, Katniss. For all we know, you can lose consciousness in the middle of the store. I’ll feel better if I can keep an eye on you for a little while longer.”

“And,” Rye chimed in with a lopsided grin, “—it’s not every day we have such fascinating company.”

He stepped closer—personal space invasive closer. Her eyes narrowed on him, and she fought the urge to shirk backwards.

“In a town this small, everything interesting merits… closer inspection.”

Her nose wrinkled at the seductive lilt to his voice. Flax’s warning about Rye’s predilection for getting a rise echoed in her head.

She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. With a mute sneer, she turned away from him and followed Flax to the door.

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The journey to the grocery store proved useless in learning any more about what had happened earlier in the meadow.
Rye and Peeta’s dour mood choked the atmosphere in the boys’ Range Rover the entire drive. The tension kept the teenagers unnaturally quiet, and speech wasn’t a forte for her on a good day.

Thankfully, that didn’t last far beyond breaching the automatic doors to Dalton’s Supermarket.

Katniss quickly learned Rye Mellark had the attention span of a gnat, which made perpetuating the grudge beyond his eyes landing on one of the many displays at the front of the store impossible.

Maybe that’s how they got along, she figured. One arbitrarily lost all interest in the argument, so the other had no choice but to drop it.

That had to be so frustrating: never achieving resolution to an argument.

Three minutes into the first isle, Rye commandeered her cart, aggravatingly pulling out things she’d just thrown in. Because apparently nothing in her diet lived up to his lofty standards.

“That’s nothing but processed sugar, babydoll.”

“That comes organic. Old man Dalton has a hook-up with a co-op somewhere southwest—gets shipments three times a week. The truck hauling that chemically enhanced crap comes every week and a half. Don’t look at me like that. Pesticides are poison.”

“Have you ever read the labels on that frozen trash? That’s all sodium.”

When she had her fill—she snapped, and it all came tumbling out. How she couldn’t cook to save her life. How that ‘crap’ he took such issue with was delicious and convenient. How the peanut gallery could kindly shove the unsolicited commentary...

Rye just stood there, arms crossed, looking bored, while spectating shoppers rushed their carts past them, murmuring their outrage at the tantrum. She was too pissed to register the embarrassment she should have felt at that.

When she ran out of steam, Rye straightened away from the cart, clicked his tongue and shook his head with hyperbolic pity.

She was going to hit him. Something was going to fracture or dislocate in her hand, but she was going for it.

Then he spoke and she was too shock to maintain the violent thought stream.

“That’s it. I’m teaching you some basics,” he said, setting his massive shoulders.

“Don’t shake your head at me, lady.” She hadn’t noticed that was her body’s instinctual reaction to those words. Apt.

"Did that sound like you had a choice? You’re going to stop self-mutilating with this stuff, like it or not.”

She was at a loss. Learning the muscle-bound Varsity linebacker and All-State wrestler had a closet Rachael Ray complex had been surprising enough. Now he wanted to subject her to cooking classes? His cooking classes?

She would’ve laughed if his eyes weren't dead set. He'd just met her an hour ago. Did he not see how weird it was, insinuating himself into her life like that?
She swept a pleading glance at the other boys, but they were no help.

Flax was doing piss poor at suppressing a grin. And Peeta stood leaning against a display a few feet off, arms crossed; his attention rapt on a young mother trying to wrangle a cranky toddler and soothe the fussy infant cradled in the handlebars of her cart as she attempted shopping.

If Peeta Mellark ignoring her existence hadn’t become as commonplace as the school cafeteria serving tacos on Tuesdays, a tiny part of her would’ve sworn he was trying to avoid her. The larger part realized how ridiculous that notion was a second after it materialized and dismissed it.

He kept his face turned away, but the profiled intermittent tightening of his jaw was indication enough of his mood.

She’d never pegged him for a sulker. But she was learning all kinds of things about this clan of psychopaths tonight, wasn’t she?

She ran a hand through the somewhat dry, yet still matted hair that’d found its way out of her braid to frame her face annoyingly and released a resigned breath.

Christ, she was caving to it.

Rye was relentless, unapologetically blunt and needlessly crass.

And, god spare her, she was starting to understand him. Even like him.

She tried not to dwell on what that spoke of her ability to judge character.

The rest of the shopping was relatively amicable and, by the time the boys had packed her bags (and several of their own containing what Rye had insisted their pantry was running low on) into their trunk, the sibling dynamic had returned to what Katniss figured was normal.

Once they were all situated in the vehicle, Flax began working through his take on what had happened to her.

“You have very stubborn physiology, Katniss,” he explained as he turned out of the parking lot into the main avenue.

“I had a hell of a time coaxing the foreign electricity out of your system. Your cells fought me every step of the way, which was honestly galling because my system isn’t adapted to carry that much voltage. Neither’s yours, for that matter. Not really.

“At least, not for as long as you kept it. I’m thinking you’re more a biological particle accelerator than a battery.”

He believed some of that made sense to her. She could tell he did by the candor in his eyes. She arched a brow at him through the rearview mirror, wondering how disappointed he’d be if he knew how grossly he’d overestimated her.

He took the hint and tilted his head with a soft smile. “Okay. I’m going to try to explain this the most simplistic way all of us,”—he swept his hand in a circular motion—“and Dad could piece it together.”

Katniss perked in her seat, leaning forward eagerly. “Your dad knows?”

Flax’s brows furrowed. “Of course Dad knows. He’s the first person to realize something was… off about me.
“It’s hard to remember a time when I didn’t sense the... um—inner workings?—of people around me.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “I didn’t think anything of it. Never occurred to me that everyone else couldn’t. Then, one day, I was maybe ten? We were on a shopping trip to that mall off Route Eleven in Seeder Hollows. Dad was buying us all new clothes and shoes and stuff because we ‘ruined everything well past handing-me-downs’, and we’d stopped for lunch at the food court.

“Halfway through my hotdog, I made an offhanded comment about the baby’s heart beating so fast. Dad laughed and asked what I was talking about.

Not three seconds later, a shrill had cut through the court, Flax went on. A man had been standing at the other end of the court, near the restrooms, trying frantically to bounce the little bundle in his arms. It hadn’t done much.

“Dad turned to me and I could see the question in his eyes, so I shrugged and told him her heart had been going nuts since her mom walked away and I didn’t think she liked her dad holding her as much.

The baker had accepted this easily and, the next Monday, took Flax to the lab— saying they were going to visit one of his friends from when he worked there.

Flax’s gaze fixed pointedly on hers.

“We went to see your dad, Katniss.”

Her breathing became halting. He more than had her attention.

“Dr. Everdeen was super cool,” Flax continued. “He talked with Dad a little while, speaking too softly for me to pick up on any of the conversation. Then he talked me through a CT scan, MRI, EEG and a half dozen other tests, as if I hadn’t run the gambit of those three years before when we’d all gotten sick.”

Once the tests were completed, her father and Dr. Mellark had led him to a room with a floor to ceiling mirror on one of its walls and toys littering the floor. Her dad set him up with a cherry Coke and the Xbox before stepping out to speak with his dad again. Flax didn’t think they’d realized they left the door cracked or that he could feel their heart rates through the thin walls. They didn’t bother whispering. Her father had been upset. He’d said something about ‘the same anomaly as before’.

"I had no idea what that meant. My dad asked a bunch of technical gibberish no ten-year-old could follow. Eventually, their heart rates and conversation calmed. And both were smiling amiably when they came to get me."

After that day, their father had gone to the lab every other week to visit hers. The retired biologist would bring home different exercises for Flax, geared at enhancing focus and concentration— so he could learn how to manage his growing adaptation. Sometimes he’d come home with medicines— shots usually. Those mostly made him queasy. "Dad said he and Dr. Everdeen were working on making sure I never hurt myself or other people.”

His gaze shifted toward Rye in the front passenger seat. “A year later, when he woke screaming in the middle of the night with his window smashed through, we had a solid procedural foundation established to help him deal.”

“We found my desk chair in the bushes, sprinkled in glass. I couldn’t even remember what I’d dreamed. But it must’ve been epic.” Rye beamed, turned in his seat with a delirious grin.
A scowl pulled at the corners of her mouth. She had no idea how to address… well… any of that, really.

Rye shrugged, as if confessing his childhood night terrors culminated in objects catapulting through his room were tantamount to discussing weather. “So, Dad took me in to Dr. E. and they developed a regimen to keep me from demolishing my environment subconsciously. I got some shots, too. Most just made me too groggy to focus. Others made me skittish.”

They did figure out how to keep him from influencing objects in his sleep, though. And, as he got older, they tweaked his regimen to discipline exercises and a lot of studying the science of what he did. As he said this last bit, Katniss realized the kid's jibes and sarcasm veiled what had to be a superlative intellect. How could he grasp the skewed physics of his abilities otherwise?

She sat back, eyes falling on her fidgeting fingers as she assimilated the newly acquired information. After a moment of contemplation, she directed her next question at the driver. “So… what exactly is it you did to me, Flax?”

“Well,” Flax said. “Theories have abounded for years that this stems from proteins in the eyes or parts of the brain.”

He met her gaze in the rearview mirror to make sure she was following. “The four of us kind of proof that theory. We have a... tweak—I guess you could call it—to our brain chemistry. At a certain point in our development, a specialized chemical trigger affected a change in our cells. That change enhanced what you would call our sixth sense, making us attuned to an existential spectrum not normally accessible to human beings.”

“What’s the spectrum?” The question left Katniss without forethought.

“Electricity.”

Her brows arched, a cox for further explanation.

Flax obliged. “We can detect, interpret and interact with electrical fields at a subatomic level. To be more precise, we affect electrons within atoms: direction, speed, order—each in our own specialized way.”

“My adaptation allows me to… sense? I guess that’s as good a term as any. I sense the biomolecular electron transfers between nerves in the body. I can read them, interact with them, sway them. That kind of thing.” He waved the hand not on the wheel dismissively, as if she could ascertain the details from the gesture.

“That’s how I managed to stabilize your vitals,” Flax elaborated.

“I manipulated the ionic signals as I needed to repel the incursion of outside energy. However, like I said before, your cells… they were bent on retaining the electrical current you took in from the lightning. The raw voltage was incompatible with your body’s normal electrical conductivity. This shorted your nervous system, sending you into shock.

“Now, normal biology… the heart stops at one-ten milliamps of ten volts in half a second. You took a current about three-hundred thousand times that for two milliseconds. No one survives a hit to the chest like that to start. The heart dies. Yet here we are. And your cells were hellbent on
keeping the charge that would eventually overwhelm your system. I had to force it out to restore balance. Very slowly. Otherwise, I risked accelerating the current and upping the voltage, which is what I believe your adaptation allows you to do to ambient electrons. Your cells have developed an infinite sink for charge. So, hypothetically, they can withstand any amount of current. It’s just not healthy for you to store it.”

“My cells,” he continued. “Also have the capacity for higher amperage than the average person. All of our physiologies adapted a similar peculiarity in order to accommodate our... quirk. But nowhere near to the extent yours has. The adaptations conform to ability. I function within the human electrical spectrum and people, at most, generate about two-thousand watts of electricity, and the amperage is negligible... harmless. Because I don’t have the biological electrical insulation you developed, manipulating what you stored from that strike could have potentially killed me.”

Katniss inhaled a slow breath through her nose, nostrils flaring. She contemplated this a moment. It was a lot to take in. Once everything Flax had explained settled, she turned toward Rye, who still sat backwards in his seat, watching her.

“How does electricity factor into what...um... you do?”

“Electromagnetism,” came the swift response, paired with a self-righteous grin. “Explaining it in detail would be even more convoluted than that crap Flax just spewed, so I really will keep it to small words.

"What I do involves quite a few laws of physics, all of which I had to learn when the adaptation surfaced. Understanding the science of the thing proved necessary to understanding how my ability bent and broke that science. Through study, I achieved control. So, this is the simplest explanation I have: I selectively displace electrons within atoms in both the air and objects. This polarizes them. It creates magnetic fields. I compress, expand and interact those to shift the position of objects and stabilize trajectory as they move.”

She knew that was a very rudimentary explanation. They’d studied electromagnetism that year in second period. What Rye was describing would require thousands if not hundreds of thousands of fields. They’d all have to interplay and synchronize with mind-blowing precision and coordination.

He was right.

She couldn’t handle a more in-depth explanation.

She was having a hard enough time coming to terms with what Flax had implied she could apparently do. Getting the Cliff Notes on someone else’s freak ability was appreciated.

As she reflected on this, something jumped to the forefront of her thoughts and she turned to Peeta, who’d stayed eerily silent throughout the conversation.

He sat with his face turned away from her, tracing the patterns raindrops trailed down the window.

“What… what is it that you do, Peeta? You’re the only one who hasn’t done anything yet. How do you… what can you do?”

He did not turn to her, but the thyroid cartilage in his neck throbbed notably before he answered. His voice was a hoarse whisper. “I do pretty much the same thing as Flax.”

“That’s an evasion if ever I heard one,” Rye snorted, turning back to face the windshield.
Her eyebrows rose, interest piqued. “So… what? You can slow someone’s pulse?
“…make them void their bowels at will?”

“Hey! That’s a pretty debasing oversimplification,” Flax grumbled, sneering at her through the rearview mirror.

She sent him a pointed look, wordlessly pleading with him for help cajoling his little brother. Brows drawn, Flax beamed an eye roll at Peeta through the mirror and released a harsh breath. “Tell her what you really do, Peeta. Or I will. Me and Rye came clean. It’s only fair, man.”

An irritated sound rumbled deep in Peeta’s chest. His eyes remained adamantly glued to the window.

“Selective cerebral synaptic ion transfer manipulation.”

*Was that English?*

“Excuse me?” Katniss pried.

“He screws with people’s heads, babydoll.”

“What?”

*Oh, god!*

“Is that why so many people like you? You’re in their heads, controlling them?”

“Shut up, Rye!” Peeta’s fist flew at the headrest with such violence, his brother jerked forward, skull crashing back… hard. He swung around with murder in his eyes, but Peeta’s focus had already shifted off him.

“Is that why you’re always staring at me?” Her voice broke and she was shaking. Fury and stomach churning defilement made that remarkably easy to ignore.

“Christ, Katniss. No—” Peeta was completely turned to her now, craning forward so far, he was no longer sitting.

Her mind registered the body shift as aggression and she flinched away instinctively.

Hurt twisted his expression. “God, Katniss, I swear—” His hand flexed forward, fingers almost, almost coming in contact with her shoulder, causing her to recoil impossibly further.

That pleading, hurt look warped into frustration. The hand that almost made contact with her slammed into the back of the seat she’d vacated when she’d painted herself into the door panel. Peeta’s other hand buried in his tangle of curls and pulled.

“Damn it, Katniss. Stop!”

The sharp vehemence in his voice caught her off guard and her chest tightened. She thought she’d learned what a pissed Peeta Mellark was like earlier, when he’d squabbled with Rye, but this was on another level.


The muscle in his jaw jerked frantically. Every inch of sinew in his broad frame coiled with the
effort to rein in a temper she’d never envisioned him capable of possessing. The sight was imposing, and part of her she would never acknowledge found it beguiling.

Ugh, why would that even rate at a time like that?

“You can read, right?” The sharpness of his baritone iced across her skin. "Do you go in a library, randomly pick up every book and dive in—no regard for genre or content or complexity?"

She managed a handful of rapid blinks. The question was that unexpected.

“Answer me!”

“Peet, chill, man. You’re scari—”

“Just pay attention to the road, Flax.” Peeta’s eyes didn’t waver from hers.

“That wasn’t a suggestion,” Flax hissed. “Want to learn just how chill hypoxia will get you?”

Peeta didn’t flinch, but his eyes darkened.

“Want to figure out how well you tough through a concussion? Just get us home, Flax.”

His gaze sharpened on her, unsettling and fierce.

“Answer, Katniss.”

She couldn’t be sure if the jerk of her head was volition or a nervous spasm. Had she really just heard them threaten brain damage on each other?

“No?” Peeta scoffed. “Why not?”

It was her turn to scowl. Was that condescension? The ignited quality to the blue of his eyes disparaged the notion. But, she’d be damned if she’d let him domineer this… confrontation… or whatever this had deevolved into.

“Because that’s freaking insane!”

Peeta backed off, but only marginally. His posture remained rigid, defensive.

“Is it?”

The calculating undertone to his voice chilled her. “Then why would you presume I have any interest whatsoever in wading through the random bramble of strangers’ minds? There are countless things any given person is capable of—doesn’t mean they have the slightest inclination to do it. What you’ve assumed I do casually and with zero regard for the agency of others—actually takes time, centered concentration and precise control. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of people don’t rate that kind of effort. And very few deserve that level of violation.”

At some point during his diatribe, her focus on his words and the passion fueling them had compelled her back to her seat. Without realizing, they were now so close, the heat of his ragged exhales ghosted her cheek.

“... Oh, and people like me because I don’t live in a bubble of self-appropriated misery, by the way—”

Once again, she found herself trapped in his stare, lost for words. Deep down she knew. She couldn’t possibly understand it… any of what he’d experienced, coming to terms with what he
was—what he was capable of.

Much like most everyone at some point, she’d spent a good portion of childhood musing what it’d be like to have superpowers: to fly, become invisible…read minds. To her infantile fancy, that’d been the epitome of remarkable—so cool.

Peeta had lived this. He’d had this idiosyncrasy imposed upon him—without pomp, without thrill, without choice. And listening to him voice what negotiating that kind of ability day-to-day actually exacted…that was sobering, to put it mildly. Humbling to put it truthfully.

Contrition warred with empathy, and the remnants of anger. The defensive, less rational part of her couldn’t look past the years of scrutiny—of whatever power he wielded invading her consciousness. Rage demanded answers.

“So, why do you stare then? If you’re not in my head, why do you constantly gawk at me in class. And don’t pretend you don’t do it. I feel it, whether I catch you doing it or not.”

A clipped laugh came from the front passenger seat. “Yeah, that’s not creepy at all, stalker.”

Peeta closed his eyes and took a handful of slow breaths, that muscle in his jaw shuddering spasmodically.

His eyes reopened on the last deep exhale. “If ever there was proof positive I’m not capable of what you believe I am, it has to be the fact this prick is sitting in this car and not splayed on a hospital bed somewhere, drooling and pissing himself, with just enough brain function for his lungs to expand, but not enough to regulate bodily functions.”

“It’d be so easy to do, too,” Flax agreed with a mock disappointed sigh.

“That kinda crap’s why I have to get those god-awful IQ tests every year.” Rye released a sharp, humorless laugh.

“Dad really thinks you’ll do it. He’s just waiting for one of you to snap and follow through.”

That wasn’t funny. It was morbid and disturbing. But Katniss still fought to keep the edge of her mouth from inching up, a tiny bit—grasping at the centering thread of her dwindling anger.

The boys’ brand of madness was catching. She had to refocus the conversation.

“You dodged my question, Peeta,” she pointed out, silver gaze intent.

He didn’t put nearly the same effort into suppressing his smirk as she had. And it was decidedly lopsided.

In an unexpected show of boldness—considering his manner a few moments prior—he breached the space between them the tiniest bit further, making her solitary audience to his whispered response. “Maybe I don’t feel the need to share why I stare at a girl in mixed company.”

That didn’t figure whatsoever in the list of responses she’d psyched herself for, and heat rushed up her neck, even as a scowl weaved her brow.

What was she supposed to make of that?

Every other word he said left her off-balance. She was back in Honors Algebra, trying to puzzle out how Peeta Mellark ended up sitting in the one seat within view of her.
She hated it.

Peeta’s smile broadened and that insipid dimple made an appearance.

“Shh. Calm down,” he placated, with a touch of saccharine to his voice she found simultaneously endearing and infuriating.

It caused his words to have the precise opposite effect and she stiffened. His eyes broke their hold on hers for the first time since he’d turned, just long enough to flit down at her lips before refocusing. Her mind spun to analyze the significance of that, as well.

She needed to slow her thoughts the hell down.

“Remember what I said about most people not being worth the effort to read? Well, you fall into the point-one percent,” Peeta said.

Oh, yeah. That helped heaps. She scrunched her nose, punctuating her tone with sarcasm. “So, that means I’m—what?—interesting?”

He let out a short laugh, further irking her. “It means you’re just about impossible to ignore, sweetheart.”

The scowl deepened. She didn’t like Peeta’s use of a petname any better than Rye’s.

If he noticed her distaste, it didn’t faze him. “Electrical fields aren’t tangible—not in the literal sense. Not even to us. The way each of us perceives it is inherent. Individualized. Unique. What I perceive is kind of like heat radiating off cement on a very hot day. Imagine a halo of that coming off every person. The... electrical aura?... each individual projects is fluid, like a rainbow reflected on a pond’s rippling surface.

“...The ripples form threads of mental activity I can read like the covers of books. And, much like the covers on books, that is always...visible to me... accessible. But, with most people, I have to actively follow the threads deeper into the mind to string things together: cohesive thoughts, complex emotion, motivations, intent, memories. The covers don’t provide real insight, much like real books. And following the hundreds of overlapping, disorganized threads perceptible to me at any given moment is not appealing, trust me.”

A hand arched the air directly before her forehead as if sending ripples through that invisible, still stream. His eyes stared through her a second before he continued. “It’s different with a very tiny group of people, which you comprise. The process is backwards. Your energy field insists upon itself. You don’t have so much a book cover as a glaring LED screen with blaring surround sound that never shuts off. It’s more than distracting. After a while, it tests the limits of sanity.”

That had been what her father’s work with Peeta had centered around, he went on to explain. With her father’s help, he’d learned to create mental noise—blocks to wall out the onslaught of foreign mental energy. It had taken months before he could ban Rye and Flax’s thoughts completely. He’d mastered the technique eventually. Now it took only hours to vanish encroaching thoughts.

Katniss made the connection.

“People like us… those are the ones you have to block out as opposed to delving in?”

“And Dad,” Peeta assented with a slight nod. “Though the force to his field is much weaker. I think it stems from genetically predisposed brain chemistry. Something only a statistically insignificant portion of the global population has. I haven’t been close to your mom in years, but I’m guessing from the way Flax perceives her, she’d figure into that small percentage too.”
She nodded slowly, assimilating that. “And the staring?”

“Well, some of it has to do with your electrical field—how powerfully your thoughts project. When I came back to school and was exposed to you for the first time since the adaptation occurred, it took some time to build a filter to block you out. Synchronizing that filter to your specific energy wavelength was impossible without focusing on it—looking at you. But I always severed the connection when the flow between neuronic relays shifted, indicating you’d become aware of the influence on a subconscious level. That spike is only a nanosecond long, but gave me enough time to shift my gaze away.”

Katniss heaved a harsh breath. “Do you have any idea how infuriating that was for me? Having that feeling of your eyes on me and never knowing if it was just my imagination? Why couldn’t you just talk to me?”

“Oh, actually, I registered your, um, discomfort with the process… all the time.” His head tilted slightly, smile diminishing.

“So why didn’t you ever confront her, Peeta?” Flax asked. “If you knew she sensed you, if you knew it irritated her… why not just confront her about it?”

A hand found its way back into Peeta’s hair and his gaze flitted back to his older brother. “I-I should have. I don’t have any excuse for that beyond the fact that I was terrified of her reaction. And the longer it went on, the harder it became not just to stop, but to admit I was doing it and come clean.”

He refocused on Katniss. “When we were first reunited, your father had just died and you were just so...hurt...angry. The directionless bile… I’d never encountered anything like it and it scared the crap out of me. But it wasn’t just that. I was twelve. No guy is comfortable with a lot of things about girls at twelve, and no one wants to get rejected. I didn’t speak to you because I thought you’d be outright hostile. Nothing you projected dissuaded that notion. And I didn't want to repel you. I wanted us to be like before we got sick. I'd never forgotten the person you were when we'd been little, when we were friends. I figured once you started feeling better about your dad… your hurt would fade and we could be friends again…”

“But it never did,” Katniss supplied, voice catching. “The loss never dulled. And you assumed I didn’t want you talking to me.”

He nodded somberly.

He’d been right, to an extent. Friends were liabilities she’d stopped believing she could afford the moment they'd told her she was fatherless. Getting close, caring about people... that would only backfire at some point. She’d refused to make herself vulnerable to that hurt again. She had her mother. That was all the love she'd been willing to risk.

“Something like that.” Peeta gave a noncommittal nod. “But it’s more complicated than just that. I have to be careful around you. Losing myself in the thoughts you project—following the streams deeper, into places only you should have access— it’s too easy for me. So, I built walls to keep from delving beyond what you project on the surface. Even through my defenses, I can sense especially intense emotions and disjointed whispers of thought. But, deeper motivation, organized reasoning, more intricate emotional nuance… out of respect for your privacy… I worked to cut-off access to those. In essence, I suppress your energy field into something second dimensional—more like a book cover. The contents are off limits.”

Katniss heaved a sigh, remembering something. “You said ‘some of it’. Some of the staring was
that. What was the rest of it?”

Peeta wet his lips and her eyes drew toward the motion. But the gesture was fleeting and she caught the anxiety that flitted across his eyes.

“You need to not take this the wrong way.”

Yeah, because a statement like that always precursed good things. She let her arms fall into her lap, attention rapt.

“Okay,” he continued haltingly. “Our abilities necessitate concentration to manipulate fields, but that concentration doesn’t have to be on the field itself to affect it. This is why Rye moved things in his sleep. When his focus spiked due to heightened emotion, he subconsciously affected the electric field the way his adaptation allowed.” He paused to sear a meaningful look at her. “Katniss, your emotions are so raw, so intense—you do this. Constantly.”

“What?”

Peeta rushed to get the next words out. “Almost from the day I first came back to school, I started noticing the effect your suffering had on the air around you. You were so cocooned in your own despair, it never registered: the kids fooling around, zapping each other with the static around you.”

Her ears pulsed with the force of her escalating heartbeat.

“Katniss,” Peeta gave her a commiserative smile—a small one. “…whenever you’re wired, or anxious or sad, or any other strong emotion… the electrons in the atmosphere around you accelerate—charge. You create electricity.”

“That’s not—” But words could not form to finish that statement. Because the truth was blaring. She’d been doing this for years? And remained completely oblivious?

“Yes.”

She started at Peeta’s voice on her skin. Her gaze searched his again. “I’m projecting my thoughts at you again?”

He sighed. “Yes.”

“Well, stop them,” she huffed, defensiveness etching her tone.

Peeta gave a small laugh, hand moving to pinch the bridge of his nose. “It’s almost impossible to keep you out when you’re this close. I… we haven’t been this close since before the adaptation. I don’t have any filters strong enough to withstand the intensity of your thoughts at this range—specially with your emotions running so high. It takes some time to form new, stronger barriers and my concentration’s off tonight, what with thinking you were dying earlier and all.”

Her arms wrapped across her chest and she ground her teeth, trying both not to think of anything and figure out how to keep her thoughts from leaking out.

“Actually, they’re closer to light than water, so ‘leaking’ is not quite the right term. More like streaming. But you got the principle right.”

She sent him a dour look, which he countered with a grin and a shrug.
The smile faded as he continued. “You have to understand something: keeping out of your deeper levels of reasoning, I had no way of realizing you weren’t doing it on purpose—that you had no idea what you did at all until tonight. Without access to motivation, which puts actions into logical context, all I registered was that your anger or anxiety or sadness would spike and the electric field around you rippled with charge in response. You could have been doing it to lash out at the universe, for all I knew.

“And, yeah, it was harmless the first few months. Kids had a laugh, thinking it was the carpeting or a particularly intense storm. But as time passed, you got stronger.

“Until one day, midway through sixth grade, Amber Leeg absently tapped her foot into the metal rung of your desk and jolted back three feet with tears in her eyes. She was right next to you and you were so lost in what I believed at the time to be your own sphere of indifference that her grunts of pain, the teacher escorting her out to the nurse’s office… nothing registered.”

No! Had she really— God!

A hurt expression crossed Peeta’s features but his voice took on an edge. “After that, I took it upon myself to stop it from happening again.”

Her chest constricted painfully. She could sense the next words would devastate her. She tried to bolster against the onslaught.

“So, I bent my rules, ever so slightly… to muddy the waters… to break your focus.”

A gasp escaped her, and he was already speaking again—barreling through the words. “It’s not necessary to delve into a mind to do that. I swear. The moment I lower my blocks, I have access to the currents you radiate. Remotely, I traced and manipulated the threads of your wayward thoughts when you were especially volatile—to break your concentration, keep you from hurting people.”

That’s why she’d found her mind wandering so often over the last few years. He was screwing with her head. Air shuddered past her parted lips.

“People were getting hurt and you couldn’t—you didn’t…” Peeta ran a hand raggedly through his hair.

“...I had to stop you.”

Her own hand came up to rub over her face gruffly. “And that justifies it, doesn’t it?” A bitter laugh choked her next words. “You’ve invaded my thoughts, played with them as you saw fit for... what? Four years? And I have to accept it, because the means justified the ends. You stopped the monster.”

“God, Katniss, no.” He grasped her shoulder gently, but she was too numb to care. The fingers on his other hand tapped a spasmodic beat on his thigh as he sighed harshly. “You're not a monster and you’re more than entitled to your anger. What I did—god, I swear I thought you knew what you were doing and just didn’t care. I never would’ve… if I had known—”

His hand lifted from her shoulder to rub gruffly over the back of his neck. “We could’ve found another way to control it if I’d known you didn’t know you were doing it, Katniss. But your dad and mine made it priority that I understood my boundaries when people’s thoughts came into play. Digging is forbidden. It’s a violation, Katniss. I couldn’t—”

Her hand dropped and she locked eyes with his, searching. The anguish, the shame, the earnestness coiling through the blue pulled at something in her chest.
She believed him.

And, regardless of the hurt she still felt at what he’d done, she knew intrinsically he’d done what he’d believed had to be done. What he believed he had no choice but to do. Even if she had been unaware, she’d become indifferent, heedlessly relinquishing control of something potentially devastating.

Someone had to stem the damage.

Peeta Mellark had hesitantly become that someone.

“It really never occurred to any of you to ask me about this?” Her voice sounded small to her. “None of you ever noticed besides Peeta?”

“An what if we had?” Rye had turned in his seat again, voice edged. “How do you figure that conversation would’ve gone down? ‘Hey, girl we barely know, we think your frying classmates is very uncool. And, on that subject, how are your pubes coming in? Was that first time you found your panties soaked in blood gnarly? Are your tits tender now that you’ve obviously graduated out of training bras?’”

Just like that, outrage outstaged hurt and anger. Her jaw dropped. That was a whole other level of —

“Yeah, exactly,” Flax waged in. “Adaptation gets triggered by puberty, along with all the other,” —he waved his hand in a circle—“body changes that come with hormones. It’s not any less personal than having to start using deodorant. And, to the likes of us, just as natural. You’re about as closed off as a person can get. What would make any of us comfortable approaching you about something we consider so intimate? Peeta just admitted to being overtaxed as it was just keeping out of your thoughts and punishing himself every time he was forced to influence them, while you were actively electrocuting everyone around you—as far as we knew—through conscious apathy. What would you have done differently, Katniss?”

Nothing. She would have done no different in their shoes.

Katniss drew her bottom lip between her teeth. The logic mitigated the anger some, but a stubborn part of her fought relinquishing it. And an element of shame blended in with it.

Peeta had been dealing with this part of her for years. He must’ve thought her a sociopath.

“Not really.”

His voice startled her again and she turned the scowl that had unwittingly spread across her face on him.

“Sorry,” he offered sheepishly. “You’re metaphysically screaming in my ear. I’ve never encountered the mentally unstable, but I always figured their energy wavelengths would be messy, because they have an atypical dynamic between the parts of the mind that control fantasy and emotion, and those which control reason. Your streams are organized. Just very intense.”

Something clicked in the back of her mind and a wave of nostalgia and longing overtook her suddenly, causing moisture to pool at the corners of her eyes. She could envision it: her father with a younger Peeta, Flax, Rye—explaining things to them, helping them shoulder their burden, telling them things she was cheated out of hearing him say.

“If Dad knew about you guys,” she asked no one in particular. ”—why didn’t he ever tell me this
kind of thing could potentially happen to me too? Why didn’t he try to help me?”

“I don’t think he got the chance, Katniss.” Flax’s saddened eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. “We all manifested before... well, you know. And it took Dr. Everdeen weeks to find and attune treatments to help us, because we are all so unique. If he predicted you’d manifest an adaptation too, he would’ve had to wait to see how your adaptation took form. I’m guessing you were ten or eleven when you started changing. I don’t think you were at the point he could help when he passed—”

She refused to let the threatening tears fall. She swallowed thickly so a sob couldn’t escape. The pain of loss was still as fresh as it had been almost five years before.

A pregnant silence fell over the car, as Flax turned off the side street and into the thirty yards comprising the Mellark driveway.

Rye unbuckled and turned back to her once they reached the home. “So, do you have something nice to wear on Sunday, or do you need a ride to the mall to pick something out?”

The question was so out-of-left field, she sat blinking numbly.

“To the school carnival,” Rye said, as if that clarified his previous remark.

It did not.

Katniss’s brow furrowed.

“That’s his warped way of asking you to the carnival,” Peeta said in a curt tone. “He can’t do things like normal people—not even mundane things like asking out a girl.”

That wasn’t much better a clarification. Her hand came up to apply pressure to both eye sockets. That little throb behind her right eyeball was intensifying.

“You’re asking me to go somewhere with you?” She enunciated each word as if that would make them more comprehensible.

“Wh—that’s so out of... We were just discussing something so... And you just shifted...”

She released an exasperated breath. “I can’t deal with the bipolarism.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” Rye agreed with a completely sincere smile and half shrug. “Mostly from my girlfriend.”

Katniss’s eyes widened, her hand dropped like a brick on her lap.

“You have a freaking girlfriend?”

Albeit, she was no expert in the subtleties of adolescent courtship... but that sounded pretty messed up.

“What are you asking me out then?”

Another aloof shrug. “You’ve just had a lot dropped on you. I figured you could use the diversion. I’m very entertaining...”

Peeta muffled a cough that sounded remarkably similar to “bullshit” into his hand.

Rye pretended he wasn’t in the car.
“...and my girl and I... we’re technically on a break at the moment. Trying to work through a misunderstanding, you see.”

She knew she would regret asking, but curiosity was a vicious little bitch. “What’s the disagreement?”

Rye clucked his tongue, a hand swinging dismissively. “Oh, you know... something silly. She believes I should not ask other girls out while we’re technically,”—he emphasized the word with air quotes—“in a “committed relationship”. I, of course, do not follow this belief system.

“...The normal disagreement you’d expect two people with diverging philosophies would have.”

She knew her jaw had fallen slack somewhere midway through that, but she was too outraged to care. “What the actual hell is wrong with you? I’m not going to be party to you cheating on your girlfriend, guy!”

Rye turned further in his seat, his smile slanting deviously. “What were you planning to do to me that would constitute 'cheating', baby girl?”

Heat rushed her face and she stuttered a few nonsensical sounds, looking for a pertinent response. She had zero intention of doing anything with Rye Mellark. She barely knew him. He’d asked her out. Wh—

“Fine, Christ!” Rye huffed, as if it were his patience this conversation was testing. “All women are part of some subversive monogamy proselytizing cult. If you’re so keen on keeping me honorable —you can go with Peeta.”

“What?”

“What’s wrong with Peeta? He’s a perfectly decent guy...”

What was happening? Too fast. Her mouth... her brain couldn’t keep up...

“No! That’s not wh... I have no problem going with Peeta. I’m not even—”

“Great,” Rye broke in with a beaming smile before she could finish or gather her thoughts. “It’s outdoor dressy casual. So something in a maxi or summer dress will be perfect. We’ll be at your place at ten. You can give me your exact address once I get dinner served...”

Katniss sat with a vacant stare; only half listening to Rye’s rant about drive time and comfortable walking shoes. She was too busy trying to work through the bizarre conversation shift of the last few minutes.

Apparently, she’d agreed to go somewhere with these people? At what point had that even happened?

She didn’t hang out with people. Before waking up in their home that night, she’d had no intentions of making friends with this clan.

So, how had she gotten herself into this?

She ventured a glance at the boy by her side, since his older brother seemed oblivious to her lack of attention.

Peeta was slumped in his seat, arms crossed. He was staring out his window again, but—from...
what little she could see of them—there was a hard edge to his eyes.

No help there.

Okay, this is what she knew:

- She was going out with Peeta Mellark that weekend.

- She had no clue how he felt about it, or if he wasn’t arguing the agreement out of some misplaced sense of chivalry. He’d been given no say in his brother’s blitzkrieg set-up, after all.

- She wasn’t even sure she wanted to go, at all. Crowds of teenagers were definitely not her scene.

*Perfect.*

The next couple days looked just peachy.
“Be with you in a sec,” the baker called in response to the knell of the entry chime.

He didn’t spare a look over the counter, eager to finish restocking ahead of the midafternoon rush. After another moment, he finished and straightened out of the kneel, aiming his customary smile at the figure in his periphery. The gesture wavered slightly as he recognized the man peering through the glass display case at the chocolate confections.

“Mitch?”

If the steel-haired man in implacable white Armani business attire heard the slight hitch to the baker’s voice, an impassive masque borne of a long tenure in his profession concealed any reaction.

“Danny, for the love of all that’s holy, how do you keep in such great shape running this fortress of temptation?”

Dannel Mellark leaned a hip casually against the counter, one shoulder hitching upward in a careless shrug. “Gotta keep pace with the younger generation… I jog regularly… try to work out a couple times a week, there’s the boy’s calisthenics regimen—

“...Why are you here?”

Looking up from the display, Haymitch’s right eyebrow hitched high as they locked eyes across the ten odd feet separating them. “I remember your mother used to make the most decadent little chocolate peanut butter mousse… things.” His voice grew wistful as he gesticulated with his hands in a circle, as if painting the object in air.

“I guess I have a craving.”

Dannel huffed out a laugh, bringing his hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “You traveled god-knows-how-many miles to the middle of nowhere because you crave the tortes made by a woman you know retired to Florida a decade ago?”

His hand dropped to the counter, weight settling onto that elbow.

“You do know I’m one of the sharpest people in the world, right Mitch?”

Haymitch’s corresponding smirk held the same edge of challenge. “Well, I figured a guy like you… you’d want to keep the tradition alive.”

With a sigh, the baker turned to a cooling rack just behind him, and used a wax paper napkin to retrieve a tiny puff pastry. The one he only ever made on the third Sunday of every month.

Of course, Haymitch Abernathy was well aware of this; likely banked on the tidbit before breaching the Twelve Glades town limit.

Abernathy always had an angle... or three.

Information was the man’s business. Part of the man’s business, anyway.
That didn’t make it less unsettling that he was that aware of the baker’s routines.

“What are you really here for, Abernathy?” Dannel asked, shortening the few steps to hand the man his treat. He didn’t bother charging.

This dance was too practiced for pretense.

Haymitch’s smile stretched, becoming warmer. “That’s what I always liked about you, Danny. Always one to cut through the bull.” He paused to shove the entire pastry in his mouth, then mumbled, “Right to the quick.”

The baker crossed his arms high on his chest, waiting for the other man to swallow and continue.

After a moment, Haymitch casually wiped nonexistent crumbs with a white handkerchief he produced from his breast pocket. “I’m here for a change of scenery. Figured it’d do my boy good, the slower pace and traditional values of rural living. Enrolled him in the high school just yesterday. Starts Monday.”

Dannel tried and failed to veil the derision in his voice. “You’ve been here long enough to do all that and you’re just now coming to see me? Should I feel slighted? And, your boy? Really? Taking in one of those kids under the guise of giving him a ‘better home’”—he mimed sarcastic air quotes—“doesn’t justify using him as a pawn in whatever games you’re still playing. Kid had it rough enough before you came along, don’t you think?”

The man in white stood straighter, the only reaction to the jab. “Well, you were such a shining example of paternity. How could I not follow in your hallowed footsteps?”

“I love my sons,” the baker snapped. “I’m willing to die for them. I would never use them like—”

“And who says I’m any less willing to bleed for mine, you self-righteous prick? At least I’ve never kept his nature from him. He knows what he is, his purpose. He’s been given every choice in my power to afford him. And he chose this way of life—to help me.

“So, we don’t share the same ridiculously esoteric bloodline. That doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. He’s my son. I’ve gone above and beyond to make sure he’s exceptional—like any other parent. Job aside, that boy’s my pride and joy.”

Dannel let out a resigned huff. “Fine. Let’s assume I believe you actually capable of caring for this child. That still doesn’t explain why you dragged him here, of all places.”

Haymitch shrugged casually and kept his tone mild, congenial—almost bored. “I wanted him to meet your boys…”

Haymitch noted Dannel’s immediate tensing and quickly added, “He’s a paradigm of yours and Moira’s work, Danny. Strong, assertive, brilliant. A born alpha. He assimilates information at a phenomenal rate, is fluent in seventeen languages. His agility and balance rate off the charts—”

“And how much of that is inherent from the original sequencing?” the baker broke in, voice edged. “How much of it is enhancements after adaptation?”

The man picked at non-existent lint at the cuff of his immaculate white suit. “Eight of the languages learned preceded linguistic enzymatic enhancement. You know catalysts won’t assimilate to systems without specific targeting of pre-existing alleles. Same goes for the enhancements to his structural soft tissues, tensile tissues, and metabolism.”
“You still refer to them as ‘systems’?” The baker’s eyes narrowed, a line tracing his brow.
“You’re glowing with paternity, Mitch. Please enlighten me, exactly how much agony did the research to discover that particular catalyst cost your system? Oh, wait. I meant your son. My mistake.”

With a scoff devoid of merriment, Haymitch supplied, “You’re really going to sit there and judge, Dr. Mellark? Who do you think would fund the cost of their continued existence if nothing could be gained from it? These kids’ very viability is contingent on grants. They’ve never had it as good as yours stateside.”

Dannel’s scowl deepened into a sneer.

“There shouldn’t be cause for experimentation at all! There was no reason—no reason whatsoever—to expose the rest. You knew. After what happened here… you knew. And you still exposed them all.”

The baker’s voice dropped to a shuddering whisper. “I take responsibility for the blood of the hundreds staining my hands. Those lives lost through my incompetence, my hubris…

“My Moira…”

He locked eyes with the man before him. “But you knew. And you still exposed them to it. For every one I lost to my errors, you knowingly took ten. That’s not on me, Abernathy.”

“They were all dying, Mellark.” Haymitch’s forehead creased, barely noticeably, the first crack in his otherwise stoic mask. “They were all dying. Don’t pretend your investigation lead to any conclusion that differed.”

The baker lowered his eyes.

“We did what we did because it was all we could do,” the man in white continued in a softer tone. “It wasn’t until every trial failed that the truth became clear: they had always been and always would be susceptible to it. There was at least one in every pod, Danny. After they’d been triggered at the embryonic stage, every other catalyzed system before and after was compromised… consigned to the same end. Just because the catalyst presented in its virulent state here first, didn’t preclude the same thing from happening elsewhere.

“The beta inoculation triggered the control group epidemic. But without the testing, we had no way of knowing if something as simple as the pubescent shift in hormones and brain chemistry wouldn’t have triggered it too, same as it triggered the adaptations. And even if we’d somehow known, what would you have us do? Segregate the carriers? Keep the rest quarantined indefinitely? What quality of life would that have been for them? They would all be prisoners. We owed it to them to try to cure it.”

“Your cure worked wonders.”

In a blink, Haymitch had Dannel pinned to the wall, fisting the neckline of his shirt. The vault over the counter was too swift to track. “Those children paid for your mistake with their lives, you prick. You have no right—no right—to judge us.”

“Moira paid the same price, Mitch. Don’t forget that,” the baker bit back. But the slump of his shoulders spoke of fight living him.

Haymitch released him, hands coming to tighten the Windsor knot of his tie, which hadn’t budged a millimeter with his abrupt movements. “Moira was Chrysalis, first and foremost. She knew what she was volunteering for when she took the assignment.”
In response to Dannel’s glare, he added bitterly, “And she was sure as hell trained well enough to
know better than allowing emotional attachment to influence her interaction with her mark.”

A sigh. “Such a hopeless romantic, Mitch.”

This caused a genuine chortle. “I knew I’d made a mistake placing her with you the moment I
read her first report—gushing over you like a starry-eyed groupie. One of the most brilliant young
minds I’d ever encountered, reduced to that by sophomoric infatuation. And you were a damn
filthy bastard to encourage it. She was a child, Mellark.”

“She was nineteen and consenting.”

Another snort. “And you had a decade’s worth of life experience on her, which meant you
should’ve known better… so you’re still a damned filthy bastard. Horny one at that.”

“She was well into the first trial’s second trimester first time I laid a hand on her,” Dannel
defended. “She was too involved in the mapping before and too sick up to then.”

The baker allowed himself a soft, wistful smile. Moira had worked out their backstory flawlessly:
the naïve prodigy lab tech falls head-over-heels for her boss, manages to get herself knocked up.
So they’d elope without anyone knowing, hoping to save face before the judgmental scientific
community. She’d even been the one adamant their marriage license be legitimate. She’d joke
about it occasionally over the years, hinting at getting a divorce whenever they bumped heads
over procedural minutia.

Dannel doubted she’d ever given real thought to making good on the threat. She’d loved him, too.

“Never did ask if you’d had any say in that cover, did I? Guess I always figured you too
Machiavellian to come up with something so practical. So elementary.”

“Pft, I did train her well, didn’t I?” Haymitch grinned, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“She was so beautiful, Mitch.” The baker brought a hand to rub the back of his neck. “We
complimented each other so seamlessly.” And he’d already experienced ‘the one that got away’.
There’d been no chanceing that happening again. A huge part of his life’s work had been dedicated
to cataloguing others like him—everyone who’d sacrificed their personal lives: a family, a legacy
—searching for that holy grail in their field. He’d refused to become another number in his own
statistical study.

Haymitch released a deep breath. “If she would’ve told me what she was planning… I would’ve
found her a surrogate. Hell, I would’ve found her twenty. Anything to keep things from going
down that way. You know that, right?”

“Like you said, we had no way of knowing the outcome,” Dannel muttered. “It had to be her. She
would’ve never accepted a surrogate. She wanted the culmination of her work—our work—to
come through her. She’d have never forgiven you if you’d interfered.”

They were both quiet for a moment, mimicking each other’s reclining posture against the glass
counter, gazing out the shop’s pane glass wall at the occasional pedestrian or car that happened
down the avenue.

Finally, the baker ran a hand gruffly over his face and ventured, “I’ll ask again, why are you really
here, Mitch?”

“Alma finally made a mistake, showed her hand.”
Dannel turned frantic eyes on him. “What? Where? Do you have her? Tell me she’s finally paying, Haymitch.”

The suited man shook his head solemnly, keeping his eyes set on the scenery beyond the glass. He explained how Alma Coin—one of Haymitch’s own elite recruits, formerly assigned as understudy and protector to Dr. Glenn Everdeen—had been keeping shop in some den in Bangkok. From what they could gather, her benefactors took out a contract on a local magnate as test run, and she was to use the hit to demonstrate her macabre merchandise.

An unpleasant shudder pricked across Dannel’s spine and he scowled deeply, an expression Haymitch caught out of the corner of his eye. “She’s adapted Everdeen’s research, twisted it. She found a way to reanimate the Sleepers.”

The next exhale lodge painfully in the baker’s throat, choking him. His mouth opened and closed a few times, but no words escaped. Until finally, after a few agonizing seconds, the words hurtled out. “They’re brain dead. How the hell did she—?”

The woman hadn’t bothered with higher reasoning, Haymitch explained. Her aim had been basic bodily reactions and enough cognitive function to make them ‘act’ awake. Anything more complex would’ve taken years… and even then…

A muscle beside Haymitch’s left eye convulsed.

“She just needed them mobile—with enough brain functionality to catalogue their adaptations. But, apparently the control mechanism she developed proved too primitive. We think it was biochemically based. It malfunctioned during her little exposition. What was supposed to be a surgical strike… let’s just say the damage was extensive enough to throw red flags all over our radar in that corner of the world.”

“But, in the eight hours it took to mobilize a team to intercept her, she managed to ditch—took the three Sleepers with her.”

“So you lost her again? You’re back to zero? Wait— three? She took all four when she blew the lab—”

“No, not back to zero. That’s why I’m here,” Haymitch released a deep breath, hand coming to rub the twelve-o-clock scruff on his chin, so at odds with his immaculate dress. He swallowed thickly, eyes averting back to the transparent wall. “We weren’t able to get to her in time, but we found her lab.”

That’s how they’d known she’d used biochem as the leash. Once Chrysallis broke the hard drives, they recovered a bounty of research, learned what Coin had been doing the last five years. Some pieces of an old puzzle fell into place.

“A couple years back, we recovered one of the Sleepers abandoned in a hospital in Minsk”, Haymitch said.

“Thanks to the notes found during the raid, we now know Coin had labeled it a failed attempt and ditched it when she couldn’t figure out the altered chemistry… after prolonged testing.”

The kid’s was ‘awake’ and they’d spent months figuring out how to engage the functions Coin never bothered with. But the damage was too severe.

“Whatever Alma did,”—Haymitch sneered—“that child is wrecked, Danny. Will never be right.”
“What does all that have to do with you being here?”

“The Thailand raid was seventy-two hours ago.” Haymitch now turned to lock eyes with Dannel. “We weren’t able to learn who Alma’s benefactors are, but we were able to ascertain what they hired her to do.

“They want her to create a task force— completely controllable, consummate biological weapons, unfettered by emotion or mores. And they want her to recreate Calcar. Once she proves control is possible… they want to make more. A squadron as large as they can manage. They hope to mobilize the new brood from the earliest age possible, likely right at the age of adaptation.”

“That’s homicidal,” Dannel sneered.

Whoever these bastards were, human life had to be a disposable commodity to them. They’d have to sequence and catalyze thousands to find a handful. Even then, they could all end up either Sleepers or weak adaptations. Calcar was flawed. The original mapping sequence was flawed. Alma knew that’s why they’d scrapped it and taken the entire project back to formula a decade before, used their failure to map a safer sequence and catalyst. She was insane, but she was not stupid. She knew no one would ever have access to the original formula again.

Dannel took a handful of deep breaths, forcing his speeding pulse to slow. “So you’re here to protect me? You think she’s coming to force me to redevelop it for these terrorists?”

“No, Danny,” Haymitch answered with a note of sadness to his voice. “She knows you destroyed every note, incinerated every hard drive, erased every file on your original work. And Everdeen never fully trusted her to begin with, only ever allowed her access to the studies he believed innocuous. All she has to work with is what little she pilfered from the servers during her short tenure assigned to him.

“You’re too visible to target. Even if you weren’t an icon of the scientific community, she knows we’re all over you. She’d have to keep you alive long enough to recreate the enzyme— something that took a decade the first time around. She’s likely figured, correctly, we’d outfit you with subcutaneous tags, so retrieval would take no more than hours in this scenario. Without knowing their locations, the exploratory surgery to find and deactivate them all would likely kill you and the procedure would still allow us time to find you. She won’t risk that. Her best bet now is to reverse engineer the formula. But to do that, she’d need—”

“She needs fresh samples from the survivors of the control group,” Dannel filled in, pulse racing. “She knows neither Glenn nor I would ever have agreed to tagging the children— not after everything they’d already suffered.”

The contrition in Haymitch’s eyes was his answer.

“That’s not all, though. The Sleepers… they all turned out to be Shifters. And all but the oldest have weak adaptations. The test in Thailand failed because their neurobiology is too atrophied. The cybernetic synapse transference system she used to stabilize them couldn’t adapt. She needs another method of controlling them.

“She needs a Seer, a strong one; strong enough to bridge the damaged connections and alter the flow. And, thanks to the notes she stole from Glenn, she knows of only one system in the study who demonstrated potential for adaptation with that differential.”

*Peeta.*

But the baker knew, Peeta had grown beyond Everdeen’s preliminary classifications, beyond
what Alma Coin could hope to comprehend, much less control. The very essence of the child prevented the perversion of his ability to suit her purpose. Altered physiology notwithstanding, every fiber, every impulse—Peeta’s half decade long struggle to ascend beyond the more nefarious applications of his own nature—rendered Coin’s ambitions null.

She would try, though, Dannel knew. Peeta was an archetype of goodness and she would ravage and dissect until nothing of him remained. She’d ruin him worse than their virus had ruined the Sleepers.

“So, how does Chrysallis intend to keep her claws off them?” the baker snarled. “And Everdeen’s girl,” he murmured as an afterthought. From day one, Glenn had made his involvement in the project, his research, conditional to the organization guaranteeing his child’s protection.

Haymitch released a slow breath through his nose. “We know something happened with the girl within the last forty-eight hours, Dannel. The sensors in town picked up a massive energy hike a couple days ago.”

Dannel avoided Haymitch’s eyes, mind working quickly to stall, find the words to understate Katniss’s recent discovery. Her father had labeled her as potential weak adaptation—hoped against hope that was what she’d be. No one would take notice if she manifested weak. There had never been reason for Chrysallis to question the prognosis. Katniss had reached and passed the age of adaptation without noticeable incident. Through his youngest he’d learned something had showcased in the girl, but Peeta hadn’t been particularly alarmed by the adaptation, and never saw reason to elaborate as to its nature.

It wasn’t until she’d spiraled out of control a couple days before that his sons had come clean about what they’d sensed in her for years. Not much he could do about it beyond making her feel as normal and accepted as possible at that point.

“It could’ve been the boys,” the baker lied smoothly. “They’ve set off the sensors before…”

“Sensors are synchronized to each of their unique wavelengths. You know that.” Haymitch turned sharp eyes on his old friend. “What did she manifest as, Mellark?”

The baker tried for purposefully obtuse. “Her father’s death devastated her. Her emotional turmoil masked her adaptation. Even from her. She was completely unaware of the change until hours ago. Whatever triggered the sensors could well be a fluke.”

For the first time since their conversation began, Haymitch’s aggravation showed. “What is she?”

“I don’t actually know what she is,” Dannel snapped. “Glenn was the one who qualified this crap.”

There was a long moment of terse silence where Dannel pointedly avoided Haymitch’s eyes. Then, a chest-deep breath rumbling out, he relented. “The boys were with her when she spiked, thank god. They’re the only ones who witnessed it. They can’t really make heads or tail of it, either. It’s not like what they are. That’s for certain.” He hesitated before adding in just above a whisper, “I’ve never known a weak adaptation, but I’ve seen the field where it happened. Whatever her father’s criteria for one was… there’s not much chance this girl falls within it.”

“Okay.” Haymitch straightened, voice taking on a no-nonsense edge. “This is Chrysallis’s proposition: All four children are to be interned into the training program. Their final adaptations are to be catalogued and assessed—their limits determined. We will train them to hone their attributes. We will ensure they grow prolific in self-defense, know how to protect themselves from assault by both non-altered persons and others of their kind.”
“You’re joking, right?,” the baker gasped. “This is some kind of sick joke? You’re not indoctrinating my children into your god-forsaken weapon-building program!”

“How effective do you think we can protect them if they can’t protect themselves, Mellark?” Haymitch challenged. “Do you want them to have a round-the-clock guard for the rest of their lives? What kind of quality of life do you think that will afford them? Chrysallis is the safest place for them.”

“No! These children are off limits. They won’t be mercenaries. You will not ruin them like you ruined Moira.”

Haymitch scoffed humorlessly. “Ruin them? The program was orchestrated around the enhancement blueprint their mother designed specifically for one of them. He was born to it. What do you think he would choose to be in a few years? You really think he’ll be happy as a concert pianist? A chef?”

The baker frowned darkly.

“What, Mellark?” the man in white continued acerbically. “You presumed we wouldn’t keep track as you traipsed them from state to state, country to country?”

“They’re my children! Just because I sheltered them from the town’s anger after what happened doesn’t mean I wanted them cheated out of culture and knowledge. They learned firsthand the beauty of their country, the wonders of cultures from all around the world.”

“And I made a solemn vow to ensure their safety.”

Haymitch slumped back, another harsh breath slipping through his nostrils. “I promised Moira they’d be safe, but she’d never want me to do this without your implicit blessing. You’re here, stateside. Your children were born here, which grants you all constitutional rights—not that those would make a lick of difference if someone were to leak to the public exactly what your sons are.”

“Are you extorting me?” Dannel snarled.

Haymitch leveled an icy glare. “I’m stating a fact. Chrysallis has worked for a decade to ensure your furthest-thing-from-normal kids have a perfectly mundane life. Kids like my son have bitten the bullet for yours. We’ve enforced confidentiality agreements, paid millions in compensation. All to keep your secrets, cover your mistakes. The plain truth is… you owe.”

When the baker started to object, Haymitch lifted a stern hand and continued, “I know we owe you no less. I know what you hold over us to keep us from murdering you in your bloody sleep. But, our agreement was with you and only you. Chrysallis will not compromise the entire program to safeguard your kids. If you don’t let me do this… I can do nothing more for them. We’ll both betray our promise to Moira. Alma is coming. She will find them. And what she will inflict upon them is beyond nightmares. I can’t do a damn thing to stop her.”

Dannel released a long suffered breath, a guttural sound of disapproval rumbling in his throat. His shoulders slumped.

“They have to make the choice themselves. I’ll authorize the cataloging and the training. But you have to pledge they will be given a choice to undergo the program. Flax wants to be a doctor, for Christ’s sake.”

“Chrysallis has the best physicians on the globe, Mellark. We can always use more—”

Dannel leveled a glare.
“Right, right. Not the same thing.”

Haymitch pulled a smart phone from his suit’s breast pocket and presented the screen to the baker, who quirked a brow at the fluorescent green fingerprint decorating its flat surface.

“You know it's procedure, Danny.”

Dannel hesitantly placed the pad of his thumb to the phone. Once a bright green light ran a scan over the fingerprint, Haymitch began dictating into the device.

“This shall serve as confirmation that Dr. Dannel Ilia Mellark gives his consent for the following to participate in The Abeyant Assessment and Training Program:

- Flagsgraad Mellark—Age seventeen – Born February 10th
- Malcolm Ryeland Mellark—Age sixteen – Born December 10th
- Peetraev Mellark—Age sixteen – Born October 10th

“Dr. Dannel Mellark consents to indoctrination in the program with the condition that each child give his willing consent to enrollment. Once said child has consented, Dr. Mellark understands he relinquishes his right to govern or object to any methods used in the training of each system and relinquishes parental authority and privileges for the duration of the program.”

“I’m not handing my children over to you, Abernathy!”

“Not a choice, Mellark. It’s this or nothing. We need autonomy over the children if this is to work. I’m putting it on the record that they will have a choice in the matter.”

“Fine,” Dannel relented with deep sigh.

“State it into the phone for the record, please.”

Dannel pierced Haymitch with hateful eyes as he leaned closer to the man’s phone. “I hereby certify that I give my permission for my sons to participate in The Abeyant Assessment and Training Program.”

As soon as the baker was finished speaking, Haymitch tucked the phone back into his suit. With a nod, he moved toward the gate at the end of the counter to take his leave.

“Abernathy,” Dannel called before the man in white stepped out the door. “What exactly is your plan to convince the kids to go along with this? No offense, but you’re not exactly charismatic nowadays and they haven’t seen you in years. They won’t remember you and I’ve taught my boys better than getting in dark vans with strangers. And what about Everdeen’s girl? How are you planning on getting permission for this from her mother? Ruth will never consent without an explanation you’re not allowed to give.”

Haymitch responded in a measured tone, that stoic mask shifting effortlessly back in place. “I only need consent for the program from one parent and Glenn gave it to us the day he catalogued Peeta—only in case she presented with an adaptation beyond what he could manage. He too wanted it to be her choice, however. So, I will… ask. Same as we will ask your sons. As far as Ruth is concerned, once Katniss has acquiesced, we will tell Dr. Everdeen we are temporarily quarantining her child because we have found a re-emergence of a virus similar to the one that decimated this town and wish to make sure she is not infected or a carrier of this new strain.”

Haymitch slanted a smirk at the baker, one etched with deviousness. “And, you forget, my friend:
in another life, the study of human nature was my calling. I’ve been in this game long enough to understand hearts and minds. And exactly what is needed to make them incline.”

He walked to the door and opened it, making his way out onto the avenue. His parting words sliced through the ring of the swaying bell.

“What kind of mentor would I be otherwise?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the ridiculous wait for this chapter. It was actually 4 times this long, but it's taking me forever to get the rest to where I'm satisfied, so... sorry. I'm trying to get the rest out ASAP.
The Undersee property spanned thirty-odd acres at the southeastern border of Twelve Glades.

It was not unusual for the elder, founding families to own expansive properties. Stakes on these lands dated back well over a century—to when prospectors first found the rich coal veins in the neighboring hills. Most people—the residents themselves included—considered their town small, namely because the central hubs of commerce, industry, education, transportation and public assembly, all orbited the town square, with its singular avenue, and LabCorp’s campus.

These landmarks combined were less than ten miles’ worth of the town’s area. But, when the cumulative land of these older families and the lab’s residential neighborhood factored in, Twelve Glades deceptively rounded out at over fifty square miles.

The remoteness of families like the Undersees had been the reason virologists stipulated the epidemic spared them. Just about every child who’d gotten sick, and eventually died, had resided in Victor’s Promenade - CapCorp’s residential community.

The Mellarks had been the only exception. To protect them, their parents had the siblings confined to their own property limits, miles from the square and surrounding community, the day the mayor announced the suspension of classes, due to the increasing number of ill children. The very day Flax manifested symptoms, all three were transported via an especially equipped ambulance to the hospital, also miles secluded from the community’s central hub and a couple miles recessed from the main thoroughfare.

The CDC was not taking any chances of the contagion spreading to town and the outskirt homes.

So, Madge Undersee—the town Mayor’s only child—was one of Twelve Glades’s tragically small group of children who’d been around before and after the fever ran its course—the only immune child left in town who’d yet to age out of secondary school. She was a sophomore, like Peeta and Katniss.

And she was the most classically beautiful girl in school. In their town. Arguably, for the next three counties over.

Her skin was porcelain: miraculously, never marred by adolescent acne. Glacial, doe eyes sat in perfect proportion to a delicate, elfin nose, flushed high cheekbones, and naturally pouting rose lips. She preferred to wear her amber hair pinned into a messy bun at school. The style matched her mien: practical, intelligent, reserved. But there were always those irrepressible, transient waves, falling to frame her heart-shaped face.

Nothing corralled those waves today.

Two large white daisies, secured by tiny barrettes at either temple, kept the hair from falling into her eyes. Otherwise, it cascaded loose down her back, reaching well past her waist.

Objectively, Peeta should have felt some level of reluctance, maybe even attrition, at this exhaustive a scrutiny of his brother’s girlfriend.

Nothing of the sort came.
Madge was unaware… safe. There was no chance his lingering eyes would trigger shivers at the back of her mind. Her subconscious would not spike at his ghosted metaphysical presence.

Yes.

Safe. Comfortable.

Polar opposite of the girl scarce inches to her left in the middle row of his father’s GL550.

Just a fleeting thought of her, and his eyes careened fleetingly, autonomous.

Quickly, he marshaled the traitorous organs back on Madge’s head.

_Eyes on Madge. Good, safe Madge._

They’d been in the car half an hour, reached the halfway mark of their journey, and he’d spent every second fighting the urge to gawk at Katniss.

He’d tried to think of something else: lose himself in the music his phone fed through the earbuds, studiously classify the different shades of greenery that dashed past, count the light poles, the grazing cattle, the infrequent farmsteads. But, inexorably, his thoughts returned to the events of the past Thursday night and the few encounters he and Katniss had had since.

Every moment until she’d gotten in the car today played in loops in his mind, twisting his insides with a thrilling kind of anxiety…

~*~

After Rye had managed to mind-screwed Katniss into pairing off with Peeta for the carnival on the trip back from Dalton’s, she’d clammed up. But the silence had been anything but empty.

True silence had become an alien concept to him years before. If anything, the faint background noise of foreign neural activity had become a comforting companion through the years.

But the violent blasts of confused half-thoughts, tangled with wary apprehension Katniss put out was anything but comforting. It had blanketed the fringes of his mind in a harsh, pulsing static that made him want to tear at his hair and scream.

Never had the need to build bastions against another’s thoughts been so pressing, and the task had demanded humongous focus.

He’d tried. God knew he’d tried, struggled to purge the influx of everything _Kaniss_ from his mind, even though she’d been _right there_. But he couldn’t. He hadn’t been strong enough.

He’d had no choice but to close himself off from her completely.

It had not gone unnoticed. Katniss’s confusion and embarrassment—a relentless assail, even as he hustled to erect stronger barriers—had let him know just how severely she had misinterpreted his distance.

She had no idea, the effect she had.

The one bright spot to the night had been their father’s having already reached home by the time they’d arrived from their groceries run. He’d ribbed Rye for leaving the oven going while no one was home to tend to it.

Even distracted with untangling Katniss’s consciousness from his own, Peeta had made out
something about Rye destroying the house and premature white hairs.

Thankfully, his family’s interaction had served to divert Katniss’s train of thought. Humor and curiosity had dominated for several blissful minutes, as she’d assimilated their dynamic and puzzled how a man with a completely shaven head had any notion of encroaching grays. Her brow had furrowed, eyes traveling over their father’s notably reddish blonde eyebrows and goatee, the only visible hair the man still had.

If only that respite could have lasted.

The evening’s tailspin had begun with Flax re-introducing Katniss to their father, adding a quick synopsis of the night’s events. His father had responded by welcoming her with literal open arms, crushing her in a bear hug and fretting over her ordeal. The gesture had been innocent, warm even, his dad oblivious in his concern.

Outwardly, she’d only stiffened, eyes growing round, large.

Inwardly, the reaction had been devasting.

Shock, surprise, embarrassment, alarm, familiarity, confusion, defensiveness, warmth, hostility, resentment, and longing, had crested and swept in a split second. All-consuming. Stifling. Smothering.

Before thought could compel action, Peeta had found himself taking the stairs two at a time, muttering something about cleaning up for dinner. He’d barely made it to the hallway bathroom, before slumping over the bowl, grateful to have kept enough presence of mind to hold his head as low as possible, hoping the thick porcelain would insulate the retching sounds from the audience just down the stairs.

After he'd taken a few moments to recompose, and swish some mouthwash, he’d willed himself downstairs, dreading the thought of forcing down dinner after that.

A relieved breath had left him when he’d found everyone already settled at the kitchen table, engaged in small talk as mashed potatoes and sautéed green beans made their round.

At that point, Katniss’s aura had been subdued, only an excited sort of awe had wafted his way as her eyes travelled from the large bowls of potatoes, to the still simmering skillet of greens, to the three roast hens centered on the table. Her eyes had been bright, nostrils flaring, as she’d hungrily inhaled the aromas of sage, rosemary, garlic and myriad others spices circling the table. Mingled in there had also been gratitude, a sense of owing, anticipation, excitement, curiosity, and longing... again. These had all been mild—easy to handle when compared to her previous tangle of dark thoughts and caustic emotions. It had made Peeta wonder just how rare that was for her: the opportunity to eat a scratch-made, home-cooked meal.

That had tightened his chest, making him unsure whether to feel ecstatic that his family’s hospitality brought these mellower sentiments out in her, or pity that he’d sat in school with her for years and she’d never projected anything close to those until that night. Something was intrinsically wrong with that.

He’d mulled that over as he’d angled his neck sharply, eliciting a satisfying ‘snap’. He knew that wasn’t good for the vertebrae, but it was cathartic and he’d immediately felt the tension draining, slackening his shoulders. Far more calm then a few minutes before, he’d made his way over to his usual seat, next to Flax, facing Rye. He hadn’t been hungry at all, but figured he’d needed to make a show of taking a few bites, keeping up the pretense that Katniss’s proximity wasn’t tilting his universe on its axis.
There his mistake had lain. That would later proof the catalyst to the night’s undoing: the softening of his heart, the lowering of his defenses, his complacency.

More at ease, he’d sat and served himself a fraction of what he usually ate. Then, he’d retreated inwardly with the ease years of practiced control afforded. The dinnertime happenings and chatter had faded into peripheral buzzing to allow all focus to center on slowing his pulse and navigating the infinite passageways of his id. Muscle memory had taken hold, guiding his body through the rote of cutting, lifting the fork, chewing, swallowing, bringing the water glass to his lips.

Dr. Everdeen had shown him the footage of this phenomena, taken during one of their calming exercises sessions years before. The doctor had asked him to find a peaceful place deep inside, and stay there, shut everything out until it was nothing but the faint swoosh of a breeze through an almost closed window.

On the video, Peeta had been playing HALO, his fingers moving dexterously over the control, eyes open and focused on the screen, shifting every so often with the imagery. But he hadn’t been there at all, he’d remembered. He’d been in the quiet place.

He’d always wondered if anyone watching him when he did this could see his eyes dull; if they noticed how wooden and mechanical his gestures grew. It’d definitely disturbed him when he’d seen the video.

But, there, in the quiet place, he’d always felt in control. There, he was the architect. His thoughts, his masterpiece. Each sweep of the metaphorical brush made the piece better, the colors richer, the textures keener. All focus was on the construct, each layer a bastion, thicker. Stronger.

S-s-snap!

He’d stopped breathing. For a torturous, eternity-spanning fraction of a second, his chest had tightened, ice blazing through his veins—freezing, scalding. His motor function had faltered, sending his potatoes-laden fork plummeting toward the table. It had landed with a dull thunk. His manic eyes had turned on Katniss.

Her essence had breached his inner being!

That wasn't possible! It’d never even crossed Peeta’s mind, the thought someone could prance through to his mental inner-sanctum like that. He'd spent nearly half his life specifically preventing that.

And it hadn’t even been intentional—not an attack.

A moan. She’d moaned. The innocuous sound of a throat-rumbling, pleasured exhalation had managed to breach every rampart he’d painstakingly erected to the very core of him.

And it had not stopped at that.

She was a force of nature, oblivious of the devastation left in her wake.

Most people experienced a minute emotional spike to things they enjoyed. When he’d first started registering bio-electric shifts, before he’d built blocks, these had been common for him. But, Jesus, in that moment… Peeta had felt everything. Every force-shared sensory stimulus cleaved skin, clean through to each nerve ending.

He’d known the moment her glands triggered, flooding her system with endorphins. Synapses detonated like fireworks, the resulting euphoria so intense, they might as well have been ...
“I can’t—!”

He’d catapulted to his feet, immediately moving for the arched entryway, his chair screeching in protest to the violent, jerking motion.

The noise jolted Kaniss and her eyes had turned on him, but there was no way he’d stop to acknowledge it. He was almost to the landing when he’d thrown over his shoulder as means of apology, “I don’t feel well. I’m skipping dinner. I’ll be upstairs…”

He’d lost the shirt midway up the stairs, his shoes went flying the minute he crossed the threshold to his room. He’d stepped out of his jeans just as the bathroom door slammed behind him. He hadn’t cared whether his boxer briefs made it into the hamper as he’d barreled into the shower, just about ripping the curtain from its rod with the violence of his tug.

Only one thing had mattered in that moment: the near-freezing water numbing his hyper-heated skin, cooling his molten blood, slowing his rocketing pulse… cleansing everything Katniss from his mind.

~*~

He’d sequestered himself in his room the rest of the night, feeling every inch a coward. But he hadn’t been capable of facing her— not until he was sure she’d never breech him like that again. He wasn’t strong enough.

When he’d sensed things winding down on the first floor, Peeta began sneaking peeks through the closed blinds of his window, which offered a view of the front lawn and the part of the driveway not immediately connected to the garage. Rye’s bedroom had the vantage over the garage, but he could see the driver’s side of the car they all shared clearly enough.

Apparently, his father had asked Rye to drive Katniss home, or the bastard had volunteered. Likely the latter.

Somewhere around eight, he’d watched his older brother walk Katniss out.

The prick had to have known— had to —that he’d been looking. What other reason could he have had to walk so close, surreptitiously bringing a hand to rest on her lower back, drawing unassuming circles there?

Peeta had wanted so much in that instant to make it so that hand never knew sensation again. Hypothetically, it should’ve been within the realm of his ability, seeking out that little specialized cluster of neurons, the system of relays, and shorting it out.

But Katniss had to get home safely. Partially lobotomizing the person charged with that responsibility had ultimately proven counterproductive.

So, he’d waited, stewing in his dark room, until he’d seen the car pull back into their driveway close to an hour later. He’d made his way into his brother’s room through their shared bathroom. He’d waited behind the slightly cracked door, listening as the deliberate, heavy gait had come closer.

When Rye had reached his hand in to turn the light on, forcing the door fully open, Peeta’d made his move, aiming a perfect punch at his jaw.

The hit never landed. Using the momentum of the blow, Rye had twisted Peeta’s arm painfully, wedging his broad shoulder into Peeta’s sternum, and flipping him clean and hard onto the
Brazilian Koa floor.

“Really, stupid?” Rye had bent over him as he’d struggled to fill his lungs with the air the impact had forced out. “Does she really have you so worked up you forgot we can all sense each other? You’re not biologically capable of sneaking up on me, asslick.”

Then Rye had snickered contemptuously, serving to further fuel Peeta’s rage. In a smooth motion, his hands had wrapped around both his brother’s ankles and, using the leverage to wrap his legs around Rye’s thick neck, he’d twisted to bring the massive teenager down.

Rye had hit the floor back-first, just as hard as Peeta had, but he’d immediately started guffawing. Of course he’d laughed. The sociopath knew exactly what would make Peeta’s blood boil.

He’d been on him in the blink of an eye, landing hit after solid hit to the older boy’s torso, ignoring the pain that had exploded in his knuckles with each impact. Hitting Rye always felt like pummeling a slab of frozen meat.

The bastard had kept laughing through the assault, not bothering to deflect the blows.

An incalculable amount of time later, the barrage had begun to take its toll on Peeta. Winded, he’d aimed one last hit at his brother’s nose to end it. That one Rye had caught in his beefy mitt of a hand, shoving back hard enough that Peeta had lost his balance and landed hard on his butt at his brother’s feet, the drawer banks of Rye’s desk digging uncomfortably into his back.

“Not the face, prick. We have the carnival thing this weekend,” Rye had said calmly, propping himself on his elbows to stare Peeta down. “Is it all out of your system, precious?”

Peeta had responded with a vulgar gesture.

Rye had blown him a kiss.

“You were touching her.”

“So you caught that, huh?”

For the thousandth time that night, Rye had rolled his eyes. “It fell on me, the responsibility of putting on a good show for your benefit—” He’d smiled.

“And it was a personal social experiment. I was curious how she’d react when she noticed. She didn’t though. Notice, I mean. Pretty sure she’d have tried slapping the pretty out of me if she had. We don’t all get off as easy as Dad.”

At Peeta’s narrowed eyes, he’d shrugged, adding, “You’re so arrogant, you know. Thinking I can’t notice this crap because I’m not like you.”

Effortlessly hoisting himself to his feet, Rye had grabbed the neckline of his polo shirt to pull over his head. “If it makes you feel any better, she was too zoned out to notice much of anything on the drive to her place. Didn’t even speak. Don’t think she’s much into human interaction… sucks for you.”

When the shirt had yanked free, he’d flung it onto a pile of laundry in the corner of the room, his jeans immediately following.

“How get out of my room.”

He’d kicked Peeta’s outstretched legs out of the way to get to their bathroom. “Oh, and you’re
welcome, by the way.”

Rye hadn’t bothered closing the door before stripping the boxer briefs off and dumping them in the hamper, as he got in the shower. Modesty was moot in a male-insular house.

“What exactly should I thank you for? Humiliating me? Humiliating her? Making a difficult, confusing process even worse by manipulating her into going out with someone she barely knows and doesn’t particularly like? Thank you, big brother. Thank you, for once again proving what a massive douchebag you are.”

Rye had paused the shower stream a moment to lean his torso through the curtain, hair dripping water all over the rug. “Who says she doesn’t like you?”

At that, Peeta had snorted, bringing his hands up to rub over his face. “God, I wish just once you idiots had access to what I do.”

“I can’t very well speak to what you have access to, peon,” Rye had mocked, swiping his dripping bangs off his forehead. “But I don’t trust for crap your interpretation of whatever you glean off her.”

The shower had started up again. And after a few minutes of aggravating silence, Peeta’s curiosity had gotten the better of him. “How do you figure?”

“Dr. E. always emphasized how important it was that you understood your own agency, your own emotions, your own psyche—kept it locked away, safe somewhere, inaccessible—so it could never get twisted up with those of the people around you, yes?”

Peeta’s head had inclined further to indicate he was following, before he’d realized his brother couldn’t see him in the shower. “Right.”

“Where it comes to her, that flies out the window. You let your own insecurity, your hang-ups, your emotions, corrupt your read on her. And since you’re too ‘noble’—” this he’d said in a mocking lilt “—to actually dig in her mind and find the source of that bubble of darkness she swathes herself in, your take on whatever you sense from her is biased.”

“I’m not violating her privacy any more than I already have, Rye.”

“Then you can’t trust whatever it is you skim on the surface. You’re flying as blind as the rest of us.” Rye had paused a moment as if contemplating. “Actually, you’re flying blinder. Flax and I learned to read cues chicks drop the old fashioned way, tracking subtle changes in body language or shifts in the cadence of their voice during conversation. Your ability spoiled you; let you read people based on their ambient thought patterns. You lack the most fundamental ability to tell what Katniss Everdeen really wants.”

“What does she really want?” Peeta’d hated the eager edge to his voice.

“She’s actually not that much of a puzzle. Her mind is keen, but her reactions are compulsive over rational. Her focus is on the tree, not the forest. Right now, her priority is understanding what’s happening to her. Her energies are centered on that. Can’t really blame her. She’s kind of a freak, even by our bizarre standards. Then there’s a lot of unresolved hurt and anger, confusion about her father. He must’ve been very important to her. Lord knows Doc E was salvation to us, so can’t really blame her there. There’s likely some resentment there, too. And guilt for resenting him. It’s complicated. I doubt there’s much room to spare thoughts on her social life, nor has there been in quite some years. But, if you want a take on that? She sure as hell doesn’t want to go anywhere with me. It had never occurred to her that she’d want to go to the school carnival, but
she’s intrigued by the idea of going now that the prospect’s out there, curious—” he’d hedged off thoughtfully.

Rye had purposely been dragging out his explanation to be aggravating. Peeta’d been ready to murder him.

“And…!”

“And—” Rye had started up again, with a sideways smirk. “—I don’t know in detail what she feels about you, but it’s not dislike. She would’ve outright refused to go out with you if that was the case. She’s not shy about voicing opinions. And, yeah, she could’ve only agreed because I put her on the spot and she didn’t want to hurt your feelings. But, would your feelings matter to her if she disliked you? Nah. I think you’re on par with this carnival trip. Wanting it never crossed her mind, but now that the opportunity has presented… she’s intrigued. That’s you, pricklick.”

Peeta had let his head fall back into the drawer bank of the desk, contemplating that. It’d always felt like a perversity of nature when Rye made sense. It'd made his skin crawl.

“Besides, even overwhelmed by everything life threw at her tonight, she still managed to check you out pretty blatantly downstairs. That proves she's a normal teen girl somewhere in there. Maybe it never occurred to her before: seeing you as anything other than the little fat kid she used to eat worms with in pre-school. But she definitely wasn’t seeing you in that light tonight. I think you have a decent shot.”

The water had stopped then, and Rye had stepped out onto the mat, wiping his hair with the towel, uncaring that what made him male hung low, slightly left, and less than a yard from his little brother’s face.

A reflexive action, Peeta’s disgusted attention had drawn towards the top corner of the doorframe.

“Jealous.”

“Hardly.”

Rye’d snorted and made his way toward his dresser, flinging the wet towel over Peeta’s head as he’d passed.

“I think Katniss would be impressed... lack of benchmark for comparison notwithstanding.”

Peeta had scoffed, too miffed to be baited. “As you've so poignantly explained, she’d be completely indifferent or mortified… likely disgusted. She's been so lost in her own head that I doubt she’s given much thought to her sexuality. She definitely wouldn’t spare a second on yours. She'd likely also subconsciously electrocute it on instinct. That would be in keeping with her trend the last few years.”

“She seemed to give your sexuality some consideration downstairs. Did she give you a jolt? Nah. I think that was all you, precious.”

To hide the heat rising to his cheeks, Peeta had thrown the damp towel back at the side of his brother’s face. “You’re a pig, man. For Christ’s sake, put some clothes on!”

It had connected, making Rye snicker as he’d scoured his dresser for a pair of sweats. His eyebrow had quirked pointedly at his brother as he'd pulled them on. “Don’t think this is for your benefit. It drags and pinches if I fall asleep nude. Hashtag: long schlong problems.”

“Jesus, what makes you think anyone wants to know that?” Peeta had snorted, fighting a smirk.
Rye’d continued chuckling as he’d plopped himself on the bed, scowling when it’d dawned that Peeta had ignored his command to leave his room and instead sprawled, cross-legged, in the same spot he’d landed after their scuffle.

“Leave if learning the intricacies of my superior endowment offends you,” he’d said, snidely. Then, he’d grown inexplicably quiet, still glaring at Peeta for a few long breaths before adding in a much softer voice, “You’d know if I was interested in her, I’d tell you.”

“Right. Because you’ve never targeted girls you knew I was into.”

“Spare me. You couldn’t have cared less about those other girls—”

When Peeta had tried to object, he’d cut him off.

“Don’t. It doesn’t matter. This is Katniss. I wouldn’t—” Rye’d run a hand through his damp hair. “I have no plans to stop tormenting you. That’s a fringe benefit of being born forty weeks ahead of you. And I like Katniss. She’s fun, in a gloomy, naive sort of way. I’m not going to stop using her to screw with you. But... you need to know…

“I’m not competing here.”

Realizing they were sharing some bizarre brotherly moment, Peeta had remained silent, nodding softly.

Rye had nodded once too, before interlocking his fingers behind his head, slumping further into his headboard and closing his eyes. They’d sat in companionable silence for a few minutes until…

“Oh, we need to talk about what my cooking did for this girl. Was it just my imagination, or did the rosemary garlic chicken get her o—?”

“Shut up, Rye!”

His older brother’s muffled laughter had trailed behind Peeta long after both their doors had slammed.

~*~

At school Friday morning, Peeta’s mind had kept running over the parts of his and Rye’s talk that weren’t horribly lude. It had bolstered his confidence some. He’d needed all the bolstering he could get. Facing Katniss—with everything that had transpired the previous night hanging over them—was going to be as hard as it was inevitable.

They had homeroom, third, and sixth period together. Avoiding her hadn’t been possible. Not that he’d wanted to avoid her, really. As much as her wayward thoughts and emotions affected him, he’d still felt a drawn to her. And he’d mastered keeping her out of his mind in a classroom setting years ago. He’d just needed to figure out how to interact with her now, using words. He hadn’t been optimistic.

Katniss had already been in class when he’d arrived. He’d always found it odd that he drove to school while she walked, but she’d always managed to beat him to homeroom.

She’d been sitting in her regular seat, off in the furthest corner of the room from the door, hunched over a paperback, legs folded under her, with one foot hanging off the edge of her seat and bouncing rhythmically. She hadn’t looked up when he’d found his own seat. There’d been no evidence of her tampering with the charge in the room, something he’d come to use as a gauge for
her moods. So, he'd busied himself with ignoring the anthem and morning announcements to finish the essay he had due for sixth period Creative Writing. The time passed quickly. He'd pretended he hadn't noticed her fly by when the bell rung, busying himself with getting his notebook in his bag.

First and second periods had been a blur, his anxiety over seeing Katniss again making concentration impossible.

She'd already been in third period when he'd arrived, as well. She'd been tapping her pen on her open textbook, elbow propped on the table, hand cradling her cheek as she'd stared out the window. His view of her in that class was better and he'd been able to appraise her in more detail.

She'd worn a gray and black plaid cotton shirt dress over thick, charcoal tights, finished off with Doc Martens. Her face had been angled so that it'd been impossible to see, but he'd imagined the gray of her eyes smoldering against those colors and the soft light from the window.

His musing had been derailed when Miss Atala begun lecturing, effectively diverting his attention away, forcing him to dig into his bag for his Algebra textbook and notepad.

Three minutes into taking notes, a balled up piece of paper had thumped softly against his chest to land on the notebook.

His eyes had drifted up to meet Katniss's from across the room. He couldn't read her. He'd had years of practice perfecting his barriers at that distance, in those surroundings. Without folding back blinders, her thoughts were barely noticeable. But there had been something to the intensity of her stare. Maybe there had been something to what Rye had said about learning to read body cues...

He'd unfolded the paper under his desk and read.

*Look at your phone.*

He'd arched an eyebrow at her briefly, noticing her own brows had pinched into a scowl as he'd fumbled in his pocket for his phone. There'd been a text from an unrecognized number.

*Borrowed Mom's phone till replacement comes in a few days. Rye gave me all your phone#s for this weekend. Can you tell what I'm thinking right now? Can we communicate with our thoughts?*

He'd glanced back at her, offering a subtle shake of his head. He'd noted her frown deepen before her face turned down to the phone she'd held in her lap. He'd attempted to camouflage their exchange by turning halfway back toward the board, his periphery still on his phone. She sat tucked into a corner with four other seats to shield her activity. But he was at the front of his row. He'd had to get creative to keep from getting caught texting during class.

Her reply had come after a few seconds.

*Why not?*

He'd shifted an arm under his text book, propping it to shield his other hand as he'd typed.

*You can't interpret neural energy fields. I can hear you, but you can't hear me. The connection's one-sided*, he'd typed, hit send, then had been looking back up at the board.

Her next text had come after a few seconds.
But I can feel you.

Peeta hadn’t known why reading that made his stomach tighten and warm. But, when he’d looked back at her, she had already been typing away. His phone had vibrated just as she’d lifted her eyes back to his, a desperate sort of intensity clouding them.


His eyes had snapped back on her and, for once, without the aid of tracing her thought patterns, he’d recognized what lay swirling in her eyes.

She had been terrified.

He’d never wanted more to hold her, whisper that everything would be okay. They’d figure it out. She wasn’t alone. He was there to help.

But, sitting there, captured in the vulnerability of her open stare, he hadn’t had it in him to be anything but honest. It was the least she had deserved after what he’d done to her for years.

He’d tighten his lips into a hard line and gently shaken his head.

And, he’d watched her scowl deepen, shoulders slumping as if no longer able to hold the nothing-weight of her small frame. She’d turned away from him with a sigh so deep, he’d heard it where he sat.

And, even though no other texts came, he’d read the message clearly.

I’m alone then.

~*~

He’d hoped to catch up to her at lunch, maybe talk things out, try to offer some kind of comfort.

An unavoidable part of Peeta’s daily routine included a stop at his locker before heading to lunch, since his fourth period was well across the building and on the second floor, he’d never make it on time if he stopped at his locker after. Knowing this, Rye always fetched him a tray of whatever he thought was good that day from the line. It was practical, since Rye made it a point whatever he took third period every year was easy distance to food. In two years of high school, Peeta had yet to pick his own school meal. But if anyone had to decide on his diet, he’d want it to be Rye. His brother was a prick, but his palate was impeccable.

He’d looked around the already bustling cafeteria the moment he’d walked in, seeking out Katniss, hoping to catch her in the lunch line or on her way to find a table. Tribute High School didn’t have a huge student body. All grades shared a single twelve-to-one lunch period, but the cafeteria was massive. Seating was never at a premium. There were also several picnic tables lining the promenade just outside the lunchroom for those who found the indoor accommodations stifling.

Katniss liked to eat outside when the weather permitted, he'd known. The back of the school backed into forested land. Her location of choice was the table furthest from the building, shrouded by the overhanging branches of a willow that sprawled just outside the perimeter fence. He knew that was creepy, his knowing her preferences so intimately, but it wasn’t as if anyone else knew he'd kept track of this stuff. He was certainly never telling her.

When he hadn't seen her in the dining area, he’d taken off for the doors leading outside. The
weather had been overcast, but the rain was holding off, so there’d been enough kids on the promenade that it wouldn’t be too obvious he’d been out there looking for her. Never mind that he and his brothers’ usual table was inside, close to both the entry doors and the beginning of the lunch line: a prime and coveted location.

Peeta had stopped short, just as the promenade doors had closed behind him, finding his brothers at the large round table nearest the entryway, the one that sat eight. Flax had been sitting on the table, legs propped up on the wooden bench below, roughhousing and laughing with some of the Varsity wrestling guys. Rye was sitting near, absently stabbing at a huge salad with his fork as he’d leaned over to speak with two girls to his left. Both girls had been giggling stupidly at whatever he’d said.

It had been Flax who had interrupted his conversation when Peeta had walked up confused. His oldest brother had fist pumped and shoulder hugged his teammates goodbye, promising to catch up to them later, before turning a cryptic smile on him.

“Thought you’d want a change of scenery today,” Flax had offered, jerking his head casually behind him and to the left. Peeta followed the gesture to where Katniss sat at the small, four seater wooden picnic table under the willow. But she wasn’t alone.

“You made Madge talk to her?” Peeta had tried to keep his volume to a harsh whisper, but he’d still garnered the sharp, interested stares of Rye’s lunch guests.

“Hey, show’s over, lovelies. I’m sure you can find others whose day would brighten at your presence.” Rye had gifted them a cavalier smile, snapping his fingers in front of their faces.

The girls had huffed in mock offense, but quickly picked up their trays to shuffle for the door. One had smacked Rye playfully on the shoulder as she’d left, the other had kissed his cheek when he’d tipped it at her. They’d both giggled as they were walking off. Rye had watched them go.

“No one makes Madge Undersee do anything she’s not predisposed to do, Peeta. You know that,” Flax had whispered just as sharply, through an infuriatingly bright, insincere smile, as he’d pulled Peeta down to the bench with a hand on his shoulder. To any onlookers, the gesture likely would have appeared playful, brotherly. In reality, he’d stimulated the suprascapular nerve at the base of Peeta’s neck and it’d hurt like a bitch.

Peeta had fought the urge to rub at the spot once Flax had lifted his hand. Rye had shoved a plate at him—brown rice, stewed ground turkey, baked beans and a spinach salad he knew Rye had handcrafted himself—before explaining why they were eating outside. It had been Madge’s idea to approach Katniss. They’d been friends before her father died. Madge missed her, and now that Katniss was forced to deal with who and what she was, Madge had volunteered to help her through it, reconnect, become the friends they once were. Katniss needed that.

“She’s going to need someone she can relate to on some level,” Rye had offered in an uncharacteristic show of acumen. “She’s not like any of us. She’s experiencing this on a completely different plane. Madge at least can relate on a psychological and physiological level. They’re both girls. They may have kindred sensibilities. Madge could be really good for her.”

Peeta had turned his attention back to where Katniss and Madge sat. Katniss’s words toward Madge had looked hesitant, stilted, her shoulders tense. Even without tracing their thought threads, he’d been able to register her struggle in interacting with someone, who, although not new, had grown distant and foreign to her through the years.

“Is she telling her she knows what we are? What she is?”
“No,” Flax had answered. “Lunch period’s just an hour, doesn’t really lend itself to existential conversation. She likely brought up safe topics, like expanding on our relationship, telling her how nice I told her it was to have dinner at our place last night... small talk. She’ll maybe mention the carnival this weekend and how glad she is Katniss agreed to keep her company. Madge is good at gauging people, has impeccable tact. A born diplomat. She’ll figure out the safest way to crack Katniss's shell.”

“I had wanted to come out here and try to reach out to her,” Peeta had confessed, turning back to scoop up another forkful of his lunch.

“And say what to her?” Rye had asked.

There was no edge or malice to question, but it had still rankled Peeta, inexplicably. He’d run a hand through his hair, tugging and reaching into his pocket for his phone. “I don’t know,” he’d huffed, flipping to his text history and shoving it in Rye’s face. “I just need to make that better, somehow. She’s going through hell, she’s terrified and I’m sitting here, useless.”

“We’ll find a way to help her, Peet,” Flax had offered with a conciliatory smile after Rye had handed Peeta’s phone over. “Dr. Everdeen went out of his way to help us. We’ll be to her what her father was to us, as best we can. We owe it to him. You’ll see. From now on, she won’t have to deal with this alone.”

~*~

He’d felt it the moment he’d walked into sixth period. The spiking of fine hairs across the expanse of his exposed arms, at the nape of his neck. The charge had not been too harsh. Likely no one but he could’ve even noticed it. But it had been enough that anyone unfortunate enough to make contact with the metal frames of their desk would’ve regretted it.

His eyes had found her immediately and narrowed in confusion. She was affecting the charge in the room, yes, but the thought threads flowing from her weren’t the caustic kind he’d grown accustomed to. They were… excited.

He’d reached his desk, slumping slowly into his seat, still focused on her. She had been looking at an iPad (he’d never noticed she owned one; certainly had never seen her use it before), and whatever she was seeing… she was excited about it. Peeta had sat fascinated by the oddity for a moment, then the bell had rung and he’d snapped out of it.

Katniss had quickly tucked the pad back into her bag and pulled out her notebook. The charge had not dissipated.

Peeta had waited until the teacher had begun his dissertation in earnest, hoping Katniss’s diverted focus would weaken her sway enough that it’d stop.

But it hadn’t stopped. He’d felt it. Her mind had been somewhere else, on some plane where emotion subconsciously triggered the electrical spectrum. He had been forced to make her stop. Electrons could only be accelerated so far before the voltage became dangerous.

With a deep breath, he unfurled the outermost layers of his mental fortifications, reading the thought threads wafting off her in braided rainbows of neural activity.

He’d just reached the surface of her wayward trails, when her head snapped up sharply, mercurial eyes blazing into his.

What the hell did you do?
He'd reeled with a gasp. She hadn’t spoken, but her voice slashed through his mind with the force of a thunderclap. The charge in the room surged impossibly higher. Other students had started rubbing absentely at extremities now, an instinctual response to the itch of electrical charge on their skin.

His mouth had opened and closed a few times in the couple seconds they sat there, her glaring and pulsing rage into the atmosphere, him staring dumbly, trying to figure out how she’d so easily projected that thought into his mind, hijacked the connection he’d subtly established.

Jesus, what was it about her that gave her the power to do that?

Before he’d fully gathered his thoughts, she’d pulled her mother’s phone out and was typing fiercely. It took moments for his phone to vibrate in his jeans pocket.

*What part of 'I can feel you' did you not understand? I feel everyone, but you especially. I can feel when you’re near. I felt you staring at me during lunch. Yeah. O_O O_O O_O O_O O_O O_O O_O O_O There. You like feeling eyes on you? And I definitely felt whatever that was you just did. It’s because you messed with my head for so long, isn’t it? You’ve screwed something up! Stay the hell out of my head, Peeta!!!*

When he’d looked up from reading her message, her nostrils had been flaring, eyes murderous. Maybe that should have intimidated him, maybe should have made him feel attrition. Inexplicably, he’d felt just swell of indignation. Well, indignation and the overwhelming desire to prove a point. He’d typed back with matching vehemence,

*Run your hand over the leg of your desk. Don’t touch the metal. Just skim your palm close to it.*

He had stared straight on as she had hesitantly averted her eyes to glance at her phone, then snapped them back, nose wrinkling in confusion, but anger still gleaming in her stare. He had just gestured a shoulder in a ‘go-ahead’ motion.

She’d flexed the fingers of her hand warily, before reaching down to do as he’d commanded, eyes not leaving his until they flinched down toward her splayed palm.

Peeta had not had access to what it had felt like for her, seeing as he’d erected his defenses the moment she’d forced her thoughts into his mind. But, it was written clear as day across her face as she watched the blue rivulets of electricity dance across her skin, painting the flesh transparent where they passed. It had been clear in her eyes when she’d snapped them back to lock with his, as she’d snatched her hand up, cradling it protectively against her chest. The fear, the confusion, the desperation.

*Please! Please help me*, the smoky gray of her eyes seemed to have shouted. *How do I stop it?*

That plead in her stare had broken him and he’d wanted nothing more in that moment than to take it away, make it better, make it right. But he couldn’t make this better. He couldn’t make it right. There was right or wrong to this. *This* was who she was. And he had no idea where to start helping her cope with that. But he’d be damned if he was not going to try.

He’d typed furiously, heedless of how conspicuous he’d been to the teacher and other students.

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**Calm down. Take some deep breaths. Try to think of something calming. A place you feel safe.**

After Katniss glanced briefly at the text, she’d nodded her head shakily at him, closing her eyes and taking a handful of shuttering breaths. It had appeared to work for a few seconds. Peeta had felt the voltage in the air diminishing, but then he’d felt the shift. It had swarmed around her like a dark cloud: the sadness, the anger, the helplessness. He’d known instantly what that meant. She’d
inadvertently triggered thoughts of her father.

The charge in the room had skyrocketed, the overhead fluorescent lights had begun dimming and brightening sporadically, causing the teacher and all the students to gawk up, shocked.

Katniss’s eyes had flown open, manic, terrified… focused on Peeta. Then they’d twitched down to the phone on her table and her fingers had been flying across its face.

*It’s not working! I need your help. I give you permission. Do what you have to do. Stop it! Help me stop it! PLEASE!*

It hadn’t even been a fraction of a second after he’d finished reading the message before he’d bridged their minds, intercepting neural streams, triggering others, redirecting the electrical impulses of her cerebral chemistry just...so.

The physical effect had been instantaneous, Katniss had visibly melted into her chair, eyes heavy-lidded and slightly unfocused. The accelerated electrons in the air had slowed, the charge had ebbed. The lights had stopped flickering and, after looking around at each other in confusion, the teacher had marshalled the class’s attention back on the board to finish his lesson.

No one had been the wiser.

But Peeta hadn’t been able to lose the guilt as he’d stared at Katniss the rest of the class. She’d kept her elbow on the desk, bracing her head as if it would roll off without the support. He’d known she’d been incapable of concentrating the rest of the period. It’d been a miracle she’d stayed awake, at all. He’d been a little overzealous with slowing her neural transmission frequencies.

For him, the line between inducing relaxation and lunging someone into a coma was thread thin. Control. This was why control and discipline were paramount.

Finally, the bell had rung and Peeta had busied himself with putting the notebook with the day’s useless notes and his text book away. He could do the homework without the notes. He’d already read through that entire text book when Rye had taken the class last year. He’d committed the curriculum to memory. But, when he’d first started school, his parents had made it clear that doing classwork like all the other kids was important. Doing as was expected of all others would help him relate to his peers better, help forge normal social routines. If he emulated the social dynamic of others, assimilating to varying environments and situations would become second nature. His parents made sure he and his brothers took this to heart.

Peeta had developed mixed feelings about that doctrine as he’d aged. Yes, he'd been inclined to keep to his brothers' company as a toddler and young child. At that age, he didn't understand why, but he'd found comfort in simply knowing the three of them were alike. Before the fever, he'd been awkward with other children, but he'd managed well enough. After the epidemic, his father had made a point of taking them to as many places in both the U.S. and other nations as he could manage. He'd made sure they were in constant contact with all kinds of people. Peeta had been forced to adjust. As a result, over the years, it’d become rote to fit in with the masses. In high school, that meant classes, homework, sports, building superficial friendships and dating.

He’d been distracted with pulling his duffle from under his seat, the one with his wrestling uniform and shoes for practice that afternoon, so he hadn’t noticed Katniss approach until he’d straightened. He'd shrugged both his duffle and messenger bag on his shoulder, flinching reflexively at finding her there.

Katniss had cringed slightly at his reaction.
“So…” she’d started hesitantly, a hand coming to rub the back of her neck. “That was… different.”

Understatement of the century.

“Um, yeah—”

“Is it addictive?” she’d blurted suddenly.

“What?”

Katniss had frowned, shifting her weight on the balls of her booted feet. “Like… will I get hooked on it... on what you do, I mean? Am I already hooked on it? Will it tweak my brain like heroine or something?”

Peeta couldn’t help a smile, just a little one, at her curiosity. “Heroine and just about every other narcotic is a synthetic catalyst, meant to alter normal brain chemistry. That’s why they’re addictive. Everything I do, your own brain does on its own under specific triggers. I just manipulate neural impulses to simulate those triggers. You can’t get hooked on it.”

Her shoulders had loosened noticeably when he’d explained, only to tense again when he’d added, “But, that doesn’t mean you can’t become dependent on it. You can come to use it as a crutch, an excuse not to learn control on your own.”

She’d seemed to consider this, then nodded with resolve. “Okay. We need to set some ground rules. I don’t want you in my head unless I explicitly ask for your help, or I’m so out of my mind that taking me out is your only option. And remember I can feel you, so I'll know if you get in there.” She had paused, tilting her head pensively at him. "Why is that, anyway? Why can I feel you now if I couldn't before?"

Peeta had shrugged, all he'd had to offer. He had still been working to figure out how, out of hundreds of people whose minds he’d grazed, she was the first to be actively aware of the contact. And he’d also been struggling with why her awareness of him escalated so acutely after her own ability manifested.

“Also, Madge asked me to tell you—” she'd continued, breaking the awkward pause. She had avoided her eyes to the wall behind him. “This is so stupid,”—she’d huffed— “You know she’s likely already told Flax. You’re going to talk about it anyway. There’s no point… But, anyway, she asked, so… I’m staying with Madge this weekend.” Her eyes had flickered to him, then back to the wall, a deep inhalation. “I haven’t been to a sleepover since… well, you know. She has nice clothes and stuff, says she can’t wait to get her hands on my hair again.”

She’d rolled her eyes, but he could see she'd been fighting back a smirk. “So, yeah. I’m not spending good money that can go towards a car on a stupid dress for one day, so she’s lending me something and you’re supposed to pick us up and drop us off at her place tomorrow.”

Her eyes had finally settled back on his face and she’d frowned at Peeta’s sideways grin. She’d sighed dramatically, angling her body toward the door. "So, yeah. I guess I’ll see you soon…”

With a contemplative tip of his head, Peeta had responded, “See you soon, Katniss.” Then he’d watched her walk away toward the door.

Three feet from breaching the threshold, she had turned back to face him, conflict drawing a line between her brows. “One more thing I need to know—”
A brow had quirked high on his face, curiosity piqued.

She’d locked eyes with him with forced bravado. “If I focus hard enough, concentrate really hard… can I force my thoughts into your mind? Can I make you hear me?”

Peeta’s next breath had hitched at the unexpected and, honestly, intrusive question. He had no idea why Katniss could breach his mental barriers with the ease she could. And letting her know how vulnerable he was to her was just about the last thing he wanted to do. But, he’d spent years lying to her, if not directly than through omission. She deserved a truth from him, even if it was not the full truth. She hadn’t asked how easily she could do it, after all. Only if the thing itself was possible.

“Yes”, he’d answer on a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Then, as an afterthought, he’d pried, “Why would you ask that?”

Her eyes had dulled, withdrawn inwardly for an instant before brightening with a fierce intensity. “I need to know.”

“Need to know what?”

“That when I’m screaming, and screaming, and screaming into the void in my head… there’s actually a chance someone will notice.”

~*~

“If she’s so aware of you and that makes her uncomfortable… just redouble your efforts. Don’t look at her, don’t talk to her unless she seeks you out first. Don’t give her any further reason to resent you for your abilities.”

Peeta’s palm had run ruggedly across his face in frustration at Flax’s words as he’d sat alone in one of the middle seats of their father’s SUV enroute to pick up the girls. “She’s going to be inches away, in this car, for hours, man,” he’d huffed, frustrated. “I can’t make heads or tails of this… whatever this connection is we have, but proximity is not helpful. How am I supposed to pull this off?”

Petta had angrily punched the back of the passenger seat headrest. “This is your fault, stupid. I wouldn’t be in this mess if you hadn’t schemed this whole set-up!”

Rye hadn’t bothered looking up from his phone, where he’d been distracted, texting back and forth with Madge to make sure the girls would be ready by the time they made it to the Undersees. “Cry away, wuss. And blame me all you want for achieving in five minutes what you haven’t had the balls to work out in a decade. No one put a gun to your head. You didn’t want to come today? Your ass could’ve stayed home. Find another scapegoat for your social shortcomings.”

A few moments later, they’d been pulling into the winding, oak lined path that served as a driveway up to the Undersee manor and Rye’d turned casually toward Flax, ignoring the backseat passenger entirely. “Madge says they’re waiting in the foyer. Just pull up and they’ll be right out.”

Then, they’d been there, vehicle stalled on the rotunda driveway of the impressive home. Madge had been the first to emerge, stunning as ever, rushing to the side of the car as Flax lowered his window.

After a quick peck on the lips hello, she’d offered a little breathless, “All right, she’s a little nervous and a little insecure about what she’s wearing. Soooo—” Madge had elongated the single vowel for effect “—everyone has to be extra nice, okay?”
“I’m speaking to you, Ryeland,” she’d muttered with a pointed look at the Mellark middle child.

Rye had made a show of looking offended and smiling innocently, which came off as depraved, as he hadn’t bothered masking the glint of debauchery in his eyes.

Madge had clucked her tongue and turned back to Flax, though it was obvious she’d been addressing all three. “I sent her off to the bathroom so she could settle down a bit… and pee. It is a long drive, after all. And port-a-potties are gross. We’re going to try to limit visiting those to once today, if possible. We’ll be out in a second. Behave—” She’d pointed a stern, delicate finger in Rye’s direction as she’d backed away into the home.

“What does she think I’m going to do?”

“Be you, douchebag.”

Rye’s tongue had slid across his upper teeth as if considering. “Fair enough,” he’d assented, with a shrug.

Then, next thing Peeta’d known, Rye had been on his feet, leaning half out the passenger side window, wolf-calling at the girls emerging from the home.

Katniss had crossed her arms high on her chest as she’d veritably stomped over to the idling car, frowning and glaring at Rye, who had continued waxing poetic about her unmatched beauty. She’d forced an angered facade, but the flush and slight upward curl to her lips betrayed her.

“You’re so stupid,” she’d grumbled, passing him and moving toward where Peeta held the door open for her. She’d avoided eye contact with a whispered “hey” and “thank you” as she’d settled into the back seat, next to Madge, whom Flax had assisted through the opposite door. Peeta had nodded dumbly in reply to her greeting, wordless, keeping his eyes low and away from her face as well. That had proven inane, as it’d only left her lower body for his gaze to settle on.

And settled they had.

The flared fringes of her skirt skimmed an enticing couple of inches above her knees, exposing the long stretch of her trim, cinnamon hued legs. He’d stared entranced as she’d gathered the flowing material to her front, stepping onto the elevated vehicle, then releasing it to cascade around her thighs once seated. Peeta’s stare had lingered far longer than socially appropriate on the smooth patch of lower thigh the hitched material inadvertently exposed for a few seconds, before shaking his head gruffly and jumping in. He’d moved past the second row, to the solitary last row of seats in the vehicle.

He’d chanted every expletive he knew inwardly as the vehicle had lurched into motion, anxiety churning his stomach. He’d wanted to laugh and cry and hit something. Maybe Rye.

Jesus, it was going to be the longest drive of his life.

And that was just the start of the nightmare.
There's no excuse for taking this long to update. This story has become very difficult. I want to thank anyone who is still reading. You are troopers!

End Notes

Thank you to my wonderful beta Opacity for the feedback and editing.

This will be the slowest story I have ever written. I usually post a whole fic within a month. The updates to this will come much slower because the story is coming to me in bits and pieces, and not in linear timelines. But I can promise the story will develop in a very interesting way.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!