Summary

Katniss Everdeen was special. Born with powers that fed off her emotions, Katniss’s birth prophesized an uprising and a revolution with her at the helm. However, with the president determined to kill her and hunters bribed into doing his bidding, Katniss’s emotions and budding abilities were stunted for years — until Peeta Mellark became part of her life.
On the day Katniss Everdeen was born, the nation of Panem turned white. Born to a struggling Seam family in District 12 -- Panem's smallest district -- the Everdeens had never seen a world so vibrant and alive, for it had been bathed in dusky shadows since The Dark Days several decades prior.

Within days of Katniss’s birth, the grass grew tall and green. For the first time, trees began to bud and flowers bloomed in places where seeds had never been sown, enriching the land and adding shades of greens, yellows, reds, and even pinks and oranges to the district that many citizens had only ever seen in school books.

But even with the added colors, the new light in the world brought forth the most upsetting imagery. Citizens could finally see that many houses in the Seam were being held up by woods so rotted that there was panic in the district over whether or not they could fall at any moment and crush the families inside. Dirt and ash covered everything in sight, swirling through the air with every breeze and landing haphazardly on every surface it could reach. However, somehow it could no longer blanket the trees, bury the flowers, or dull the bright white the district was suddenly immersed in.

Many across the nation knew there was something special happening. Older citizens started talk of Panem being blessed again with what they called, *The Upriser*. A rare breed born just once every one hundred years, Uprisers were expected to be a symbol for both the nation and for a revolution that was prophesized by their birth. And within a week of Katniss Everdeen's birth, Peacekeepers across the nation gathered the names of all children born on the day the darkness ceased and visits were made to each family until only one baby remained a viable possibility. Within hours, Katniss Everdeen’s whereabouts had been reported to President Snow by his assistant, Plutarch Heavensbee.

"It can't be," President Snow responded to the news. He narrowed his eyes at his subordinate. "It’s only been fifty eight years since the last Upriser was defeated."

"She's early," Plutarch replied insistently . "You've seen the signs. The nation doesn't change color like this unless an Upriser has been born."

"Then we must get rid of her," President Snow said a little too easily.

"It's too late for that," Plutarch insisted. "The districts already know she's here. She's a healthy, thriving infant. It would be too suspicious if she were to die right now and take her light with her."

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**Prologue**
"Then what do you suggest we do, Mr. Heavensbee?" For the first time, President Snow’s words came with an edge of anger.

"Why don’t we pay her family a little visit?" Plutarch suggested, a self-satisfied sneer playing on his lips at the end of his sentence. "We can give the Everdeen family a little reminder that Uprisers are a taboo. As long as they never speak of her powers, they can keep their daughter."

President Snow nodded, catching on to Plutarch’s plan before adding a twist of his own. "And if they ever reveal to her what she is, they will be executed. The whole family."

President Snow and Plutarch’s visit to the Everdeen house was a quick one. President Snow skipped the pleasantries and dove straight into threats to the family. But as Snow tore the tiny infant from her mother’s arms and made it clear that Katniss Everdeen was to remain unaware of her power or face execution, Plutarch pulled Mr. Everdeen off to a quiet corner of the small, run-down house to explain what he was to do to keep his family, and Panem, safe.

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For the first year of Katniss’s life, Panem remained glazed in white. However, it wasn’t long before a new color swallowed the nation. The first time the world went red was when Katniss was learning to walk. A determined anger filled her that her small frame could not contain, and Panem was swathed in a blood red veneer until she calmed and white returned.

As the years passed and Katniss grew from toddler to child, new colors began to present themselves regularly. A yellow hue filled the skies when she was happy and a bright blue took over when she felt at peace or felt safe in her father’s arms. But most often, Panem was cloaked in green, Katniss’s favorite color. The color of the woods she so often retreated to with her father when food was low and money was tight. The color of spring, her favorite time of the year.

The district was yellow for weeks after Katniss’s sister Primrose was born. But with Katniss’s happiness came the Everdeens’ fears that one day Katniss would reveal a new power. One that would immediately expose her position as the Upriser to the entire district and threaten the lives of their two young daughters. However, with each birthday Katniss celebrated, not a single new power presented itself.

In school, there was often talk. Though none of them knew what it meant, children retold stories that their parents had shared of a District 12 that was dark until one day in early May when there was suddenly a light so bright, many citizens had to walk the streets with their hands shielding their eyes for weeks before they got used to it. Katniss never suspected that any of the stories she overheard in the cafeteria and on the playground had anything to do with her, but shortly after her eleventh birthday, she asked her parents about the things she’d heard.

It pained them to lie to their daughter. To tell her that they didn’t know what caused the light. But the thought of their two young daughters’ lives being taken pained them far worse than any lie they could tell their curious child.

A few days after asking her parents about the day the district turned white, Katniss walked through the woods with her father as they always did. Something felt different that day, though. Her father spoke less and they walked further than they usually did. At first, Katniss thought they were headed to the secret cabin that her father had discovered deep in the woods when he was a boy. It was so covered in overgrowth and so deep in the woods that nobody dared ventured near it. It was perfectly hidden in a place that a person would only know about if they were told.
They didn’t go to the cabin that day. They didn’t go anywhere Katniss recognized. Before she could ask where they were, her father settled down on an old, fallen tree, patting the rough bark next to him for Katniss to sit down. His smile was hesitant, almost somber as he looked down at his daughter’s small legs dangling over the large tree trunk underneath her.

"You like green a lot, don't you?" He asked. With his daughter's nod, he looked around at the way the green hue of the district made the green of the leaves pop perfectly on the trees that surrounded them. "I thought so. You turn the district green a lot."

Katniss laughed at her father. He always told silly jokes that never made sense to her and Prim. "I don't make it green, daddy."

Katniss’s father leaned closer to his daughter, dropping his voice to just a whisper. "Want to know a secret?" he asked, nudging her shoulder with his arm playfully. "You do. You’re special, Katniss. All of those different colors the districts changes to is because of you."

“But how..”

“Shhh,” her father warned, placing a finger to his lips. “You have to keep this a secret, ok? You can’t tell anybody.”

“Not even Prim?”

"Especially not Prim,” her father laughed. “She’s the worst at keeping secrets.”

“How do you know that I’m special?” Katniss asked dubiously.

He’d been waiting for that question. With a deep breath, he scooted in closer to his daughter and hoped that his explanation would be enough for the eleven-year-old to understand.

“When you were very small, just a week old, the president came to visit us,” he explained.

"President Snow was in our house?" Katniss asked, her jaw going slack in surprise.

“Yes. And he brought a man with him -- Plutarch Heavensbee,” he continued. “While President Snow was talking to your mother, Mr. Heavensbee gave me a few instructions.”

Katniss raised her eyebrows. “What were they?”

“That when I felt you were ready to learn about how special you are, I had to tell you in private and make you swore that you’d never tell anyone until the time came,” her father said. “Do you think you can do that for me?”

“I can keep a secret,” Katniss said with a nod.

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“I just received the most interesting phone call,” President Snow said, mindlessly tapping his pen on his desk.

“About what?” Plutarch asked.

“Katniss Everdeen,” Snow answered, shooting an angered look Plutarch’s way. “It appears that one of my Peacekeepers followed Miss Everdeen and her father into the woods a few weeks ago and overheard him tell her about her... abilities.”

Plutarch nodded, taking in the information. “Did you really expect the Everdeens to keep quiet for
the duration of the girl’s life?”

President Snow ignored Plutarch’s question. “And not only has he told her, he’s trying to teach her to gain control of her powers.”

Plutarch looked out the window, observing the green blanketing the mountains in the distance. “She doesn’t appear to be having much success,” he noted. “It’s been green for weeks.”

“I’m more concerned with her father right now,” Snow replied.

“Then take it out on him,” Plutarch suggested. “Remove him from the situation and scare the girl and mother into never speaking about what she is again.”

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After her father’s revelation, the two returned to the woods almost daily. In the beginning, they went just to talk. Though her father knew she wasn’t quite ready to learn her full destiny in life, in the weeks following, Katniss learned the basics of just how special she was.

“Focus, Katniss. Focus,” her father said encouragingly.

“I can’t,” Katniss whined, dragging her feet across the blanket of old leaves underneath her.

When Katniss seemed uninterested in asking questions about what she’d learned about herself, her father decided it was time to start trying to focus on teaching Katniss how to control the only power that had presented itself with hopes that it would bring others to the surface. But weeks went by and Katniss couldn’t seem to manage any of it. Her mother had insisted Katniss was still too young, but her father was convinced she was ready. She was bright, strong, and determined. He knew she could do it.

“We’ll try one more time and then we can go home for dinner,” her father urged. “Turn around, close your eyes, and turn the district blue.”

Following her father’s instructions, Katniss turned around and tried as hard as she could to turn the district blue. He had told her that the colors changed with her mood, but she didn’t know what led to blue. She didn’t know what led to on any of the colors she’d seen the district covered in. There were so many different times she’d seen the colors change and so many different emotions and feelings that could be attributed to them that she had no idea which ones to call upon for any of them.

She tried to think of anything that would make her feel different than she already did. The fresh smell of the air when spring arrived, the cool feeling of the moist moss on the rocks in the woods, the Mockingjays repeating the songs she and her father sang as they walked home after hunting, but the world remained green.

The sound of the birds scattering from the trees broke her focus. She turned around quickly only to be faced with a horrifying sight. Her father, barely standing and face ashen, an arrow plunged deep into his chest and a body with a faceless mask to her left holding the bow that delivered the fatal shot -- her father’s bow.

“Daddy!” Katniss screamed, running toward her father as his body fell the the forest floor.

“No,” her father choked out, his breathing labored. “Run… remember… our spot.”

As badly as Katniss wanted to stay, she knew she would be next if she didn’t make a run for it. Without a second thought, or as much as a glance back at her father’s now lifeless body on the
ground, Katniss took off running away from the screams and booming voices of whoever had found her and her father in the woods.

She was small and fast, and with her head start she could hear the sound of crunching leaves under the feet of her pursuers growing fainter as she broke away. She ran as fast as she could, terror and anger coursing through her so strong, she could feel every drop of blood flowing through her veins. Then suddenly, the district went red and a clap of thunder sounded from the sky louder than Katniss had ever heard in her eleven years, followed by rain drops that fell hard from the sky, breaking through the forest canopy and soaking Katniss to the bone.

For every word of ridicule the children at school threw at her for her size, she had never been more grateful for her small stature and skinny frame than the moment she found the large, hollowed out log in the darkest part of the forest. She’d just managed to squeeze herself into it when she heard the roaring voices of her assailants growing closer.

“How do you lose a child?!” One man spoke angrily. “We should’ve killed her first.”

“The father is dead,” another said, teeth chattering from the cold rain that still fell in sheets. “We can break for the evening, dry up, and resume our search in the morning. She can’t go far.”

“We’ll stop by their home in the Seam at sunrise,” the angry man growled. “Give the mother time to realize that her husband and daughter are never coming home, and if she doesn’t compromise with us we’ll take her other daughter, too.”

Katniss sucked in a breath, almost jumping out of the log to let them take her away. They couldn’t kill Prim. She wouldn’t allow it. But before she could move further, a voice rang in her head telling her to stay put, and for reasons she could never explain, she listened to it, staying in the log for hours after the angry group had left the woods.

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“You agreed to only killing the father,” Plutarch said. He struggled to keep his voice even, knowing that shooting an angry remark in the direction of the president would not end well. “They went after the girl, too.”

“I lied,” Snow answered with a shrug. “I let you talk me into letting her live when she was an infant and look at where that got us. I want her gone.”

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Katniss wasn’t sure if it had been hours or days since she sought shelter in the log. Not long after the angry mob left her in the woods, the red district turned near black and the rains came down even harder than they had before. The log provided Katniss with no protection. She was drenched, cold, hungry. If only she could get her limbs to move. She needed to see if Prim and her mother were ok.

The sound of someone walking heavily through the leaves and pair of feet stopping directly in front of the opening of the log made Katniss’s body freeze further, crippling her. She knew it was the end. They’d kill her like they killed her father and go back to the Seam to finish off the rest of her family -- if they hadn’t already.

But the angry voices of the group that had chased her that far into the woods was nowhere to be found. The soft voice that she heard in its place is unexpected, even soothing in a way. Taking a chance, she peeked out from the log and was surprised to see a young boy she recognized from school. Peeta Mellark. His blonde curls dripped with cold rain water. Finally, their eyes met and
“You have to leave,” he said quietly, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and shivering slightly. “You can’t stay in the Seam. The Upriser Hunters will kill you.” Katniss’s confused expression over the words she just heard seemed to disturb him, and he spoke again with urgency. “You and your family need to leave. Right away, Katniss. Before they come back.”

Before Katniss could ask a single question, Peeta was gone. Pushing herself out of the log and rising to her feet, it was then that she remembered her father’s words: Remember our spot.

The cabin was small. Smaller than their old home in the Seam, but it was somehow always wholly hidden. Even in the winter when the leaves had fallen from the trees and the overgrown vines and plants surrounding the cabin dwindled, there was still no sign of it from the the outside of the overgrowth.

Since Katniss was no longer in school, she spent her days hunting, foraging, and learning to craft a bow complete with arrows -- just like her father’s.

With her mother’s devastation over her husband’s death, Katniss was the only one bringing food into the cabin. She’d contemplated teaching Prim how to hunt, but at seven years old and having never set foot in the woods before the family made their escape to the cabin, Katniss knew it was no use. Prim was better suited for dipping her toes in the small lake near the cabin and griping about how cruel it was that her ugly, orange cat Buttercup was no longer allowed outside to hunt for mice.

Though it was unclear to Katniss just how much time had passed since she saw her father’s life end right before her eyes, she was sure it’d been months since that day. The cold days had grown longer, warmer, and the trees had become fuller. She was even certain she’d turned twelve in the time they’d been hidden, but none of it mattered to her. Every day she woke with the same questions: Who are the Upriser Hunters? And why did they kill my father? Why do they want to kill me?

And every day she also found herself thinking of Peeta Mellark. If it weren’t for him, she would have stayed wedged in that log until hypothermia set in and killed her. She wanted to see him, thank him for his insistence that she leave, but she had no way of finding him without exposing her whereabouts. So she took to thanking him silently in her head whenever she thought of him.

It was a particularly cool day and the leaves on the trees were just beginning to turn orange when she spotted a boy through a small space in the overgrowth. Katniss guessed he was around fourteen, and he appeared to be hunting, as well. With her bow nocked and ready, she peered out and watched the boy pull a rabbit from a snare that she presumed he’d set up.

“Who are you?” Katniss called, stepping out from the overgrowth, the tip of her arrow pointing straight at the boy’s heart.

His hands flew up as soon as he noticed the weapon, dropping his game and a knife to the forest floor. “Gale Hawthorne,” he announced.

“What are you doing here?” Katniss demanded, looking around for signs of others waiting to ambush.

“I’m only here to hunt. My family’s hungry,” Gale explained. “Who are you?”

Katniss’s cheeks reddened when she realized how harshly she’d talked to the boy. It wasn’t even
a year ago that she and her father would be in the woods for the exact same reason as Gale Hawthorne was now -- a hungry family.

“Katniss Everdeen,” she mumbled, lowering her bow.

“Catnip Evergreen?” Gale asked.

“Katniss Everdeen,” she said louder.

“Oh,” Gale said. “Sorry. Wait.. did you say Katniss Everdeen? Are you the Mockingjay?”

“The what?”

“The Mockingjay,” Gale repeated. “Most people call them The Upriser, but lately people have said that there’s a Mockingjay out there now.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Katniss said shaking her head.

“Well, it seems this Upriser is different -- early, and has survived and even thrived despite President Snow’s plans. Some people don’t believe the Mockingjay exists, but I hope it’s true.”

“Why?”

“About nine months ago, a group of men and women in a rmored suits raided the Seam,” Gale explained.

“Were their faces covered with a black mask?” Katniss asked. She wondered if it was the same group that killed her father and drove her and her family into hiding.

“Yes,” Gale confirmed. “They call themselves Upriser Hunters. Word is they were bribed and blackmailed by the Capitol to eliminate the threat. You. They swept in and questioned everyone they thought might have information about the Everdeen family. They even beat and killed a few who they thought were hiding information -- including my father. I want them dead.”

Katniss’s face fell and the air around them turned black. How could she have caused so much death and so much destruction without even knowing it?

Gale looked around at the change in the sky. "Did you just do that?"

"I think so," Katniss nodded, guilt creeping up her throatl “Why don’t you want me dead?” she asked suddenly. “It’s my fault your father was killed.”

Gale looked at her like the question she’d just asked was the most absurd thing he’d ever heard. His tone when he spoke was slow and affirming, “Because you’re the one that can save us, Katniss.”

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After Gale and Katniss’s first meeting, a silent alliance was formed between the two. Day after day, Gale would make his way to the deepest parts of the forest to hunt with Katniss. Katniss was often reluctant to leave the safety of the overgrowth, but Gale’s senses were always on high alert. He made sure to check for followers, snitches, and anyone that may be a danger to them daily, knowing that Katniss would never come out if he didn't. So some days, when Gale made it clear to Katniss that there was no one around, she was able to slip out from behind the overgrowth and help Gale with his snares.
And other times, Gale would go to her and forage at the lake while Katniss wandered the small, hidden grove with her bow, picking off squirrels and the occasional water fowl that wandered across her path. There often wasn’t much to hunt in such a small area, especially in the winter, so Gale’s added game from his snares was a blessing.

Though their conversations rarely escalated beyond dividing up the day’s haul, Katniss felt comfortable with Gale. More comfortable than she’d felt in the months since her father’s death, at least. So on days when Gale knew his family was well stocked with enough food for his mother to prepare supper, he ate with the Everdeens and told them stories of what had been going on in the district every week. The stories even made Katniss’s mother raise her eyes from where she pushed her food around in her plate absentmindedly.

But Gale always left out a lot of the darker details of the district’s affairs as to not scare Prim. It was on those nights, while Katniss walked Gale to the edge of overgrowth to see him off, that Gale would urge her to find it in herself to fight. As the months turned into years, his anecdotes of the things the Capitol had done grew more and more tragic. Unnecessary deaths, destruction, and the complete loss of privacy. The situation was growing more and more dire every year and was so reprehensible to Gale that it soon became all he talked about when he had a moment alone with Katniss.

“I don’t know how to help them, Gale,” Katniss said, throwing her arms up. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“I’ll help you,” Gale offered desperately, grabbing Katniss by the shoulders. “I don’t know any more than you do, but maybe if we tried, together, we could figure it out. All I know is that every year that goes by without you doing anything is another year lost to this tyranny. It's bad enough that I have to start mandatory work in the mines next week. We’ve already lost four years, I refuse to lose another.”

All Katniss could think about in the days following were Gale’s words. Four years lost to tyranny because of her inaction. At sixteen years old, she’d hoped to know more about herself than she truly did. But the truth was, she still felt like the scared eleven year old hiding in that damp log.

With Gale down in the mines six days a week, Katniss had been growing increasingly out of touch with what was happening in the district. His words still echoed in her mind daily, and she decided to take a chance while hunting alone one day. She slipped out from hiding -- something she normally didn’t do without the all clear from Gale -- and began to quietly walk further and further away from where she knew it was safe. Even though she didn’t quite know what she was hoping putting herself in danger would do, she continued to walk.

The echo of leaves crunching under someone’s feet stopped her in her tracks. She knew it wasn’t Gale. He never made a sound in the woods and he should’ve still be in the mines at that time. Katniss quietly chastised herself for leaving the grove alone. She needed to get back, but she knew she’d never make it before being discovered. Instead, she slipped behind the largest tree she could find and waited, her bow lowered but nocked.

Whoever was in the woods wasn’t doing much to keep their presence a secret. Leaves continued to crunch, twigs snapped every few seconds, and it almost sounded as though the person was dragging their feet.

Katniss was taken aback when she saw the boy. He was hardly a boy anymore, though. He was taller than the last time she saw him and his shoulders were far wider, but the rest was unmistakable. The blonde waves that covered his forehead and eyes that somehow still shone blue despite the haunted look behind them now. Peeta Mellark was in the woods. The forest was suddenly bathed in yellow as Katniss’s feet moved and her mouth opened before she could even
think about the possible consequences.

“Peeta!” She whispered, moving from behind the tree to show herself.

He turned around fast, clutching a knife in his hands so tight that his knuckles were turning white. His eyes widened when they locked on Katniss. They were virtually strangers, but there was something about seeing Peeta again after several years that made Katniss happy -- hopeful, even.

“I knew you were still here,” Peeta said with a relieved sigh, walking closer to Katniss and smiling. But his smile was not returned and Katniss gripped his arm almost painfully once they’d reached each other.

“Has anyone followed you?” she asked quietly.

“No,” Peeta insisted, shaking his head wildly. “I’m sure of it.”

After a quick look around, Katniss began to pull Peeta along with her through the woods, beyond the overgrowth and into the grove where it was safe.

“They used to follow me,” Peeta resumed.

“Who followed you?”

“Mockingjay Hunters,” Peeta confirmed. “That’s what they call themselves now. It was so dark for so long, I thought for sure you were dead. But one day, things were green again and I guess I wasn’t thinking. I ran into the woods to try to find you and they followed me until I realized what I’d done. I ended up staying in one spot the entire day, acting like I just needed a quiet place to think. After that I came to the woods every day and worked on drawings for hours.” He patted to a leather satchel slung over his shoulder.

“How long did they follow you?” Katniss asked.

“Years,” Peeta said. “But little by little I would go further and further into the woods before stopping to draw for hours on end, day after day. They finally gave up on me one day when they realized they’d been wasting their time -- I wasn’t going to lead them to anything. At least that’s what they were lead to believe.”

“Why would you do that?” Katniss questioned, narrowing her eyes at Peeta in suspicion.

“I started trying to find you after that,” Peeta said, ignoring Katniss’s question. “I watched the sky every day just to make sure it didn’t go dark for too long. If it didn’t stay dark, I knew you were still alive.”

A smile rose to Katniss’s lips at Peeta’s confession. The thought of him looking up into the sky for signs of her roused her in a way nothing had before, and the smile Peeta returned only deepened that feeling.

“I’m glad I found you,” Peeta said, making to leave. “It’s good to be sure you’re still here.”

“Wait,” Katniss called, stopping Peeta from leaving. “Will you come back?”

A grin lit up Peeta’s face with her question and he nodded once before slipping half of his body through the overgrowth.

“Always.”
"Do you see anything you'd like to draw?" Katniss asked, keeping her stride even with Peeta's.

Peeta had kept his promise. In the beginning, he returned to the woods a few days a week, staying for short periods that grew longer and longer with each visit and bringing the freshest breads and desserts he could sneak out of his family's bakery with him. Prim got first pick always. She'd grab her treats and retreat to the cabin to share them with Buttercup while Katniss and Peeta spent time walking the perimeter of the grove together.

They stayed hidden behind the overgrowth most days. Walking around the tree lined edges of the hidden quarter of the woods, dipping their toes into the lake, and on the warmest days of the year, seeking shade and a nap under the trees furthest from the cabin.

"Nothing new," Peeta said just as another twig cracked under his heavy footstep. "I've been trying to color in the drawings I've done of what the lake looks like from those trees back there." He pointed to the cluster of shaded trees they often retreated to and fell asleep under.

"You like to draw the lake," Katniss observed, leading Peeta to their resting spot.

"It's not that I particularly like to draw it," Peeta said. "I just can't seem to do it perfectly."

Once they'd sat down under the trees, Peeta pulled his drawing book from his satchel and handed it to Katniss. She flipped through drawing after drawing of the lake shaded in various different shades of yellow -- the color the district normally was during Peeta's visits.

"These look pretty perfect, to me," Katniss said, switching back and forth from drawing to drawing trying to find the problem.

"It's the yellow," Peeta said, pulling a drawing from Katniss's hand and holding it up. "It looks so dull compared to the real thing. How do you do it?"

Katniss sighed. "I wish I knew."

They settled back against the large tree together. Katniss dropped her head to Peeta's shoulder before closing her eyes and letting sleep wash over her and when she woke, the woods were bathed in blue. Peeta was already awake, his drawing book propped up against his knees, his hand making small, minute strokes across the paper.

"Sorry," Katniss mumbled, removing her head from Peeta's shoulder.

"I don't mind." Peeta assured her, keeping his eyes on his drawing. "You can stay there if you want."

Katniss hesitated, but after a minute or so, she slowly dropped her head back down to rest on a Peeta's shoulder. "You're drawing the lake again," she laughed.

"Things went blue when you fell asleep," Peeta began. "I couldn't pass up the opportunity to draw the lake this way. The blue of the water seems so much brighter when it's like this."

"Like your eyes." Katniss froze, mortified over what she'd just said. She didn't mean to say it out loud, but Peeta didn't seem to be put off by her comment. He didn't even call attention to it, and Katniss was grateful.

"Do you change the colors when you sleep, often?" He asked.
"I don't think so," Katniss said. "Things are usually the same color when I wake up as they were when I went to sleep. But if they change while I sleep, I'll never know."

"Do you know what the colors mean?" Peeta asked.

"They change with my moods," Katniss said, removing her head from Peeta's shoulder and meeting his eyes. "That's all I know."

"Well, blue could mean a lot of things, good and bad." Peeta said, putting his artwork down.

"Tell me the good things," Katniss urged.

"Calm, tranquility and unity.." He trailed off, dropping his hand to Katniss's arm. With gentle, mindful movements, his hand reached hers. Their fingers laced together easily. "Trust."

“And yellow?” Katniss asked, watching Peeta’s thumb move from side to side across the back of her hand, smudging the blue residue on Peeta’s thumb from the chalk he was drawing with across her skin.

“The good things?” Peeta asked, waiting for Katniss’s nod. “Sunshine, friendship, happiness.”

“Friendship,” Katniss repeated. “Maybe that’s why it’s always yellow when you’re here. Does it mean anything else?”

“Yes,” Peeta smiled, tightening his hold on Katniss’s hand. “Hope.”

Katniss tried to tell Gale about what she’d learned from Peeta. But despite Gale’s previous fervor for her to embrace her abilities, he hardly seemed interested in learning what Peeta had to say. She only saw Gale once a week since he’d started working in the mines, and every week she’d try to talk to Gale about it, but every time she started, he’d excuse himself to check his snares.

“But wasn’t he the one that urged you to learn this stuff?” Peeta asked, handing a stack of his drawings over to Katniss. “You’d think he’d want to know this stuff so he could help you. He wants to help you, right?”

“That’s what he said,” Katniss replied with a shrug. Without another word about Gale, she started sifting through all of the drawings Peeta brought for her to look at. She liked looking through his drawings. He was able to capture the district almost picture perfect, but with an added twist that somehow made the works of art come to life.

Her hand stopped and her blood ran cold at the sight of one drawing in the pile. She tried to quickly move past it and forget what she saw, but as she flipped through the next three she realized they were a series of drawings from around the district. They were not the usual scenes that Peeta brought with him to show her. They were far more gruesome. Far more horrific. Mountains of burning rubble, families with small children living in the streets, the bodies of citizens who defied the Capitol piles in the back of carriages.

“Peeta…”

“I’m sorry, Katniss,” Peeta said, fumbling with the mass of drawings in Katniss’s lap. “I thought I left those at home. You didn’t need to see that.”

“No, it’s ok,” Katniss said, stopping Peeta from taking the drawings away. “Is this really what it’s like out there?”
She’d heard the stories from Gale about the raids. She knew it was bad, but seeing it somehow made it clear just how bad it was.

“'Yes,' Peeta confirmed. ‘I see it everyday.’

She looked through the drawings again and for the first time she understood Gale’s need for her to fight. “I need to do something,” she muttered, running her fingers over the the fires and letting the bright orange and reds of the chalk stain her fingers.

“I know.”

“Is the nation really out there waiting for me?” Katniss asked nervously.

“The Capitol’s trying to hide it, but yes,” Peeta confirmed. “People are ready to support you. They already do.” Peeta took her hand in his.

“I just don’t even know where to begin.”

“Why don’t you try thinking of something that makes you warm?” Peeta suggested, moving his hands to Katniss’s shoulders and rubbing up and down her arm. “Turn the world orange.”

"Is that what orange means?" Katniss asked. "Warmth?"

Peeta nodded. "That's one of the meanings."

Katniss closed her eyes, bringing thoughts of warmth to the front of her mind. Long summer days, the fire in the cabin, the wool socks of her father’s that she wore on the coldest winter nights -- but nothing worked. When she opened her eyes, the sky was still blue just as it had remained green when her father tried to get her to change the colors ears earlier.

“I can’t do it,” she sighed.

Peeta brought his hand to Katniss’s chin, tilting her head up to meet his gaze. “You can,” he whispered. “I know you can.”

In a flash of motion, Katniss’s lips met Peeta’s with great haste and little thought, catching Peeta off guard. It took a few extra seconds for him to respond, but he soon returned her kiss with zeal. Now that it’d happened she was able to admit to herself that she’d been wondering what it might be like to kiss Peeta from the moment their fingers first wove together under those shaded trees and she felt the first spark of heat flicker in her throat and down to the pit of her stomach. And then, as their kisses transformed from a chaste peck to something far more carnal, that heat inside Katniss grew and traveled even lower and gathered between her legs. And then the world around them turned red.

Peeta’s eyes opened and he pulled away, the corners of his mouth turning upward as Katniss noticed the change in color. His hands moved to either side of her head and he pulled her closer, resting his forehead against hers.

"Well, it's not orange, but it'll do," he observed.

“What’s red?” Katniss murmured, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply. “The good ones.”

“Desire,” Peeta whispered, covering her mouth with his own and resuming their kisses.

Neither of them noticed the mix of gray and black clouds that began to gather in the sky and swirl
above them. Hands began to roam. Katniss’s palms smoothed down Peeta’s chest before she fisted the fabric of his shirt in her hands and pushed it up so she could touch the bare skin of his chest and reach the button that held his pants securely around his waist.

It was Peeta’s hand snaking down the front of Katniss’s pants and between her legs that caused the first clap of thunder from the dark clouds. They looked up at the open space in the canopy above them and finally saw the clouds that had gathered while they were reveling in one another. As Katniss stared up at the sky, Peeta brushed the soft pad of his thumb across her sensitive clit, producing a second clap of thunder.

He kissed her hungrily. “That’s you,” he whispered against Katniss’s mouth. “You did that.”

The moment Peeta was inside of her, lightning followed the thunder. It brightened up the red sky, casting harsh shadows down on their naked bodies as they moved in tandem together. But not a single raindrop fell until the moment Katniss fell apart in Peeta’s arms, and once the final tremor had pulsed through her body, the world went blue again.

"I think you're starting to get the hang of it," Peeta said. Walking hand in hand with Katniss toward the exit of the grove "You changed the colors three times on command just today."

"Changing the colors won't defeat Snow, and that's all I can do," Katniss sighed. "Maybe everyone was wrong about me. Maybe I'm not the Upriser."

"The Mockingjay," Peeta corrected. "And that's not true. What about those storms we've been having lately? You create them yourself, Katniss."

"Only when we're..." Katniss trailed off and looked down, her cheeks heating up.

Peeta was right, she created the storms the district had been experiencing for weeks. Dark and powerful storms that whipped the fallen leaves into a frenzy around the woods and soaked the grounds with a warm, summer rain, replenishing every plant and tree in sight. Washing away the ash and soot that settled in even the tiniest crevices.

But the storms only began to build when Peeta touched her. A crack of thunder when his fingers found her center, a bolt of lightning when he'd finally sheathed himself inside of her. And the rains only came when she did. When the violent pulses of her climax shook her body, the skies opened up above them, emptying the clouds and saturating the land. She had no idea how to create a storm without Peeta's touch.

They exited the hidden grove, stopping at a tree just a few feet away.

"You'll figure this out, Katniss," Peeta whispered, pressing her against the tree with his body. A reflexive moan escaped her lips and echoed through the trees in response to the pressure of Peeta's body against hers. A pressure she missed feeling when he was away.

"I wish I had as much faith in me as you do," Katniss said, closing her eyes when Peeta's hands cupped her jaw before he silenced her with a kiss.

He pulled away reluctantly and rested his forehead against hers. "Can you do something for me?" He asked, closing his eyes. "I want to see green tonight. I like that reminder of you when I'm not here."

As Peeta began to walk away, he turned back and locked eyes with Katniss. With a doting smile, Katniss closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, and when she opened her eyes again, the world
was green. She watched Peeta until his form was so far away that she could no longer see him walking.

She didn't want to go back to the grove right away. Instead, she walked around quietly, dragging her hand across the coarse bark of the trees that surrounded her. The feeling of a rough hand wrapping around hers tightly caused her to squirm and try desperately to remove her hand from the vice-like grip.

"Stop fighting me!" A voice whispered harshly next to her. She immediately recognized it as Gale's. He pulled Katniss along with him through the overgrowth and into the grove before letting go of her hand.

"What are you doing hiding in the woods and scaring me like that?!" Katniss yelled, pushing Gale roughly.

"Would you rather me interrupt you and Peeta?" Gale shot back.

Katniss balked. "You were watching us?" She hissed.

"You didn't exactly try to hide," Gale said. "Kissing him out here like that? Katniss, what are you doing?"

"Whatever I damn well please!" She pushed Gale again, storming passed him in a huff and ignoring his calls for her to come back.

"Katniss!" Gale yelled. The front door of the cabin opened and Prim stepped out, a confused look on her face.

"Go back inside, Prim," Katniss called. "Everything is fine, Gale was just leaving."

"Katniss..." Gale called again.

"He's leaving!" She bellowed.

Prim retreated back in the house quickly, leaving Katniss and Gale alone again. Katniss refused to turn around and look at Gale again.

"Please just leave," Katniss pleaded. "I can't look at you right now."

"Don't you know, Katniss?" Gale asked.

Against her better judgement, she turned around. "Know what?"

Gale inhaled deeply and walked toward her, his face overcome with a pained expression even though his eyes were still fiery with anger.

"Peeta's family," he started, clenching his jaw to ward off the bubbling fury. "They're Mockingjay hunters, Katniss."

"You're a liar," Katniss spat.

"How would you know that?!" Gale blew up. "You haven't set foot in the district in almost five years."

"I'm not listening to this," Katniss said exasperatedly, turning back and trudging toward the cabin.

"You've given the son of people who want you dead the location of where you're hiding!" Gale
yelled after her, throwing his arms up in frustration.

Katniss ignored his shouts and the world went dark as she walked into the cabin. She slammed the door shut behind her, leaving Gale seething with rage at the entrance of the grove.

It was several hours before Katniss decided to leave the cabin. She wasn't sure what was worse. The crippling loneliness the grove provided or the air of desperate sadness inside the cabin. Everything was still bathed in darkness, and no matter how hard she tried to change it, it stayed just as dark as it had been the day her father died.

The lake looked like a muddy swamp, the overgrowth more like a wily snakes waiting to strike. Katniss walked in careful circles, avoiding the shaded batch of trees where she and Peeta spent most of their time.

And then, she heard it. The scream of a voice she knew well -- Peeta's voice.

"Katniss!" He howled, bursting through the overgrowth and running through the grove to find her.

He almost knocked her down when he found her standing near the center of the grove, looking up at the open space in the canopy.

"Katniss, what's wrong?" Peeta asked breathlessly. He pulled her into an embrace and Katniss couldn't help but return it. The warmth that flooded her body for the first time since he left earlier in the day was welcome, needed. But just as the world started to flood with orange it was stamped out again by darkness and Katniss pushed Peeta away from her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" She pleaded desperately. "Why didn't you tell me that your family wants me dead?"

Peeta dropped his gaze and focused on the ground in front of him. "You and I have nothing to do with them," he muttered.

"How can I be sure of that now?!" Katniss shouted. "How do I know that you haven't been leading them to me this whole time and they're just waiting for their moment to strike?"

"I would never do that to you, Katniss," Peeta stammered. "I'm not part of the hunters. That's them, not me."

Katniss shook her head. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Would you have really been happier if I'd done that?" Peeta asked.

"I'll never know, now," Katniss said sadly. "I want you to leave. And don't come back."

Peeta stood silent, staring back at Katniss in disbelief and as though if he stood there long enough she'd change her mind, but she never spoke again. The rain that began to fall spoke for her. It was cold and stung his skin as it blew in sideways from winds that picked up out of nowhere. And as Peeta exited through the overgrowth, he knew it was from Katniss, and she knew it too. She was ready to fight, and she was willing to do anything to learn how, with or without Peeta by her side.


Black, Katniss thought to herself. Summoning darkness on her own was easiest. All she had to do was bring back the feelings that had been burnt into her being the day her father died. Or if that was too much, she thought about her mother. Alone and despondent in that cabin, never coming
out unless forced.

Yellow and blue was a little tougher. All she could connect to the colors was Peeta. She tried for weeks until she found that she could easily submerge the district in the two colors when she thought about memories with Prim, too. Teaching her how to sing the Valley Song was her favorite memory to conjure yellow, and evenings where the two of them would curl up and create a story together was how she summoned blue most of the time.

But the only way she was able to produce red, pink, and orange was when she thought of Peeta. No other memories were strong enough to do it, and even the memories that made her angriest could not produce red.

She refused initially. It may have been the only way she could call those colors to the sky, but it also made it harder on her later when those memories were still occupying her mind. She told herself that if she gave it enough time, she’d make new memories to invoke the colors she desired, but after weeks of easily altering between black, green, blue, and yellow, she knew she had to force herself to master the rest even if it meant bringing up memories of Peeta.

Thoughts of his embrace brought orange to the sky first and pink followed soon when she remembered what it felt like every time she saw Peeta slip through the overgrowth, the same memory she wanted to use for yellow. Red took the longest. Memories of hugs and kisses she'd shared with him couldn't summon anything but pink. And she found that the only memories that could call red were memories of the way Peeta held her when there wasn't a stitch of clothing between them and the soft groans and gasps that flooded her ears when he moved inside of her. Then, as the sky flooded with red the way a deep wound pours blood, the clouds began to churn above her.

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It was in the company of red that Katniss learned just how powerful she could be. Allowing herself to feel the things her memories with Peeta provided, she was then able to tap into the anger that she'd been suppressing since her father’s death and where she thought the only time she ever produced rain was when she was with Peeta, she remembered that day she was wedged in that log and the rain felt colder than ice. She realized all at once that she produced that storm, too. And it wasn’t just rain storms she could produce.

Soon, she had control of storms right down to where each bolt of lightning would hit. She willed it to hit the ground, trees, and even the center of the lake. Fires could be started from the strikes and earthquakes, floods, and tornadoes came next. She washed out small areas and flattened others -- the severity of each act all controlled by Katniss.

This is why the Capitol wanted her dead. This is why Uprisers were taboo. They could alter the world as they knew it and show no mercy if that was their choice. They could send a flood to the Capitol, a tornado that'd flatten buildings for miles, or a ground swallowing earthquake right under President Snow’s mansion.

She worked for weeks to gain control of her powers, readying herself for the day she would have to leave the safety of the hidden grove and face her destiny. But nothing could have prepared her for the warm afternoon when the screams of Mockingjay Hunters boomed through the forest. Their knives and swords slashed through the overgrowth, tearing down every twig, vine, and leaf that protected the grove from harm.

Katniss ran toward the cabin, screaming for Prim and her mother to stay inside, but it was too late. They’d already come running out and were hugging Katniss with unyielding strength and forcing her to turn around and face the mob.

As she turned and saw the same dark, faceless masks closing in on them, she summoned a
powerful gust of wind that knocked many of them off their feet and stopped the rest in their tracks, dividing the two groups on each side.

“I have a message from the president,” a familiar, guttural voice yelled. The same voice she heard all those years ago as she hid in the log. “Your days of hiding are over! The war has begun.”

Another laughed. “That’s quite an army you have!”

As the rest joined in laughing and began to move in closer, a bolt of lightning struck behind them, splitting a nearby tree in half and stopping them again.

“You can come with us willingly or we can take you by force!” Another called.

“If the war has just begun, why would I come with you?” Katniss shouted back. The ground began to shake underneath the hunters, knocking a few off balance once again. And just as the ground began to settle, Gale and Peeta ran into the grove, stopping right between the two groups facing one another.

Gale joined Katniss, Prim, and their mother immediately. He had a bow in his hands and a quiver of arrows slung over his back -- he was ready to fight.

Peeta remained standing between the two groups, his back turned to the hunters and his eyes focused on Katniss. Anger flared inside her chest and without thinking, she sent another forceful gust of wind toward Peeta, knocking him down.

He jumped to his feet quickly, smiling from ear to ear. “That’s you,” he said to her proudly. “You did that.”

As soon as the words were out of Peeta’s mouth, Katniss remembered the first time he said it to her. She remembered everything. Their walks, their naps, teaching him to fish in the lake. Memories flooded her mind. Their first kiss, the first time she felt his fingers slip between her legs, the first time he was inside of her. As she stared at Peeta, suddenly noticing a large bruise under his eye and across his cheek, the strangest thing happened -- she seemed to be seeing straight into Peeta’s own memories.

Things flashed by quickly. She could even hear people speaking. A woman, who Katniss could only assume was Peeta’s mother, screamed at him over his refusal to support his family’s agreement born from bribery to hunt and kill the Mockingjay. The pictures rushed forward and the same woman was slapping Peeta, beating him into a corner and telling him that he was getting what he deserved. And then Katniss is shown another flash of pictures. Peeta leaving his room in a hurry, leaving all of his drawings out on his bed. Beautiful and near exact replicas of the very space in the forest where they now all stood. Drawings of Katniss peeking out of the overgrowth.

The final pictures darted through her mind. Peeta running through the district, running through the Seam and telling Gale that she’d been found. The two of them tearing off together toward the woods.

And suddenly, as Katniss’s vision focused back to the scene in front of her, the world turned blue. Peeta was telling the truth. He refused anything that had to do with hunting her. He took beatings for it, just to protect her.

With a simple nod of her head, she conveyed to Peeta that it was ok, allowing him to step out of the middle of the face off and over to the side he’d chosen from the beginning. He joined the small line with Katniss, Prim, their mother, and Gale.

She sucked in a deep breath, pulled up every ounce of anger she could muster and on the exhale,
the ground beneath them began to shake again. Weakly on their side, but so violently on the other that the ground below the hunters began to crack, opening up a deep, wide crevice that swallowed the entire group before they could find the speed in their legs to flee.

They all stood in line, staring at the deep rift in the ground that Katniss created. She knew their fight was just beginning, and it would not be easy, but she felt at ease as Peeta slipped his hand into Katniss’s, lacing their fingers together. And somehow, despite what had just happened, Katniss managed to find it in herself to turn the world yellow again.

With a deep, shaky breath, she stood tall, her eyes trained forward and forcing a strong tone as she spoke.

“The war has begun.”
“The war has begun.”

Katniss let go of Peeta’s hand and tried to venture closer to the rift in the center of the woods when all at once, her body went cold and her legs couldn’t hold her any longer. She hit the ground before her words were barely a memory on her lips, her sharp gasps for air reminded her of the sounds that game made in their final moments before death.

The forest seemed to be rippling in front of her. Trees with thick trunks wobbled just as easily as new branches wavered under a strong breeze, and the leaves she clutched in her hands appeared ready to jump right out of her grasp. Nothing made sense. Nothing was recognizable. Everything around her turned gray.

She tried to scream when she felt the cold hand pressed against her back, but any noises she tried to make died in her throat and left her flailing in the dirt soundlessly in her attempts to escape harm.

“Catnip!”

The voice was far away, yet familiar. Katniss tried to listen, tried to place who was calling for her but nothing would register in her brain beyond the garbled tones that seemed to be repeatedly saying the same word. The voice was then joined by a second that came from a figure that knelt down before her and added even more sounds to the confusion that swirled through her mind.

“Don’t touch her!” The new voice wailed. “Can’t you see it’s bothering her?”

The hand that’d been pressed against her back disappeared suddenly, and soon a second, blurred figure joined the first.

“Catnip?”

Katniss didn’t know how much time had passed, but it was gradually becoming clearer to her that neither one of the figures that stood in front of her were trying to hurt her. So, slowly, she began to let her body relax and her muscles uncoil, allowing the oxygen to flow through her body. Soon, the trees stopped swaying and everything around them turned green again. The leaves stilled in her hands, and her eyes focused on the two figures in front of her, still blurry but now recognizable -- Gale and Peeta.

The two boys stared down at her, their faces twisted in expressions of terror and concern. Katniss felt her cheeks flush under their gazes, suddenly embarrassed over her antics.

“I’m okay,” she lied, trying to push herself up. It was her arms shaking as soon as she put weight on them that told both boys right away that she was lying. However, neither of them said it out loud, choosing instead to each offer her a hand so they could help her pull herself up.

As they pulled Katniss to her feet, the sensation finally started to return to her limbs and the warmth of her blood flooding back into her veins flowed in tandem with the orange tones that were quickly saturating the sky. She steadied herself on her feet and took a deep breath, exhaling in relief when her legs didn’t betray her and she remained standing as the boys loosened their grips.
“No,” Katniss whispered, tightening her hold on Peeta’s hand when he started to move away. She pulled him closer as they began to walk toward Prim and her mother. “Don’t let go.”

“I’m gonna go check out that crater,” Gale mumbled, dropping Katniss’s hand and hastily walking ahead. He remained three strides ahead of Peeta on their way to Prim and Mrs. Everdeen, quietly swiping the bow he’d arrived with from the ground and turning back toward the hole in the forest.

“Be careful,” Katniss warned.

Gale didn’t turn around to acknowledge Katniss’s warning, but she knew he heard her when his hand reached around to the quiver on his back and nocked an arrow while he walked further away from the group, and before Katniss could ready herself, Prim’s powerful hug tore all of her attention away from Gale’s safety and onto the scared and shaking twelve year old whose arms wrapped around her torso with surprising strength.

“You scared me,” Prim whimpered, burying her face into Katniss’s shirt. “I thought you were dying.”

“I’m fine now,” Katniss said, smoothing her hand down Prim’s blonde braid.

“You promise?”

“I promise.” Katniss nodded and forced a smile for her sister’s sake. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” Prim confirmed, her eyes puffy and welling with tears again. “I promise.”

As the little girl continued to weep, she hid her face in her sister’s clothes, muffling the sobs. Katniss looked at her mother’s emotionless face. Her eyes were downcast and vacant, paying no mind to her frightened young daughter.

“Don’t you think a mother should be the one comforting her children?” Katniss whispered to Peeta, her hand still clutching his.

“I’m probably not the best one to give opinions on mothers,” Peeta whispered back. His voice sounded troubled, and the expression on his face when Katniss turned to look at him was no better.

“Peeta?” Katniss asked, turning to him. “What’s wrong?”

The panicked tone of Katniss’s voice caught Prim’s ear. She moved away from Katniss and took in the two teenagers’ equally tense faces.

“Maybe we should.. move back to the grove. Gale!” Peeta yelled, trying to get the older boy’s attention, but it went ignored. Peeta shook his head. “He won’t listen to me.”

“Prim, get mom and go to the grove,” Katniss instructed carefully.

Prim didn’t ask questions. She moved to her mother quickly and helped her up from the ground before guiding her to the grove that was now wide open, the collection of overgrowth cut away by the Mockingjay Hunters.

“Gale!” Katniss yelled. “Gale, we need you to come back!”

Even Katniss’s calls were futile. The older boy continued his trek forward, slowly stepping across
the uneven turf under his feet. His curiosity had gotten the better of him, and the continued calls from Katniss and Peeta would not deter him.

When the ground began to rumble underneath them, Gale’s feet were the first to feel it before they slipped out from underneath him in his haste to move away from the fissured dirt in front of him. The bow that was in his hands was quickly swallowed up by the hole as he struggled to grab onto a piece of Earth that didn’t come loose when he captured it.

Prim’s screams sent Katniss and Peeta into a full sprint in Gale’s direction, but their journey was hardly simple. Forced to fight against the ground that continued to shake underneath them, they hopped over the patches of dirt and leaves that separated them from Gale and threatened to take both of them down with the older boy whose legs were already halfway in the gap.

The tremors suddenly stopped just as fast as they’d started, but Katniss and Peeta’s movements remained careful and calculated when they reached Gale. The fear of the gap widening was too strong to become sloppy, so they linked their arms together and set themselves down on the ground on their stomachs and reached out to Gale with their free hands. They grabbed onto him and pulling as hard as they could while Gale tried desperately to get his feet to find purchase with any part of the ground he could use for extra leverage.

It took Katniss and Peeta pulling Gale up a few inches before the tips of his toes could even reach solid, stable ground. He pushed with his feet and rolled away from the crevice, jumping up and running to the grove with Katniss and Peeta, reaching it mere moments before a second round of ground shaking began.

“What the hell was that?!” Gale yelled breathlessly, turning on Katniss. “Why would you do that?!”

Katniss looked at Gale incredulously. Was he really blaming her for his near fatal mistake?

“She didn’t do it,” Peeta interrupted. “I don’t know how to explain it, but I knew this was going to happen.”

Gale narrowed his eyes at Peeta. “Did you…”

“Did I cause this?” Peeta asked sorely. “No. But something told me it was coming.”

Gale continued to stare at Peeta suspiciously, unconvinced.

“I called for you, Gale,” Katniss added. “I told you to come back to the grove. We both did.”

With a huff, Gale threw his hands up and stormed away in the direction of the lake. Katniss knew he was stubborn, but he couldn’t possibly believe that she and Peeta didn’t have his best interest at heart with their warnings -- could he? But there something else was nagging at her too, and if she didn’t ask it would never stop.

“Peeta?” She asked, turning around to face him. “How did you know this was going to happen?”

He noticed the look on her face at once. It was the same suspicious glare that Gale had given him moments before.

“I already said I don’t know,” Peeta sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I just had this… feeling that something bad was going to happen and we shouldn’t be anywhere near that hole in the ground.” He paused to collect himself. “Why’d you let me come back?”

Katniss was expecting the question. Eventually Peeta would want to know what it was that
convinced Katniss that he was being truthful about his refusal to help the Mockingjay Hunters, she just didn’t expect the question at that moment. Her explanation would’ve sounded senseless to anyone else, but somehow she knew that Peeta would understand.

“I saw things,” Katniss said. “Your mother. I heard the things she said to you. She was hitting you, Peeta.”

Peeta dropped his gaze. “She does that sometimes,” he said, eager to change the subject. “But how did you see all of that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand any of this,” Katniss said, slumping down into the grass and bringing her knees up to her chest. Peeta joined her. “How am I supposed to be this symbol for the nation when I have no idea what I’m doing or what any of this means?”

“I wish I had an answer for you,” Peeta said, taking Katniss’s hand. “Let’s just take this one step at a time, though. First step is deciding where we go from here.”

Katniss dropped her head into her knees. She didn’t have an answer for that, either. She was lost and burdened with a responsibility that she never asked for, a sister that depended completely on her, and a mother who may as well be dead. If it weren’t for Peeta and Gale, she would’ve been completely alone in the fight. But even they could only help her so much.

“We can’t stay in the grove,” Katniss said finally. “We’re too exposed now that the overgrowth has been cut down.”

“Well, we can’t go into the district, either,” Peeta said, shaking his head. “There are more Mockingjay Hunters out there. What we saw was only a handful of them.”

Katniss hated what Peeta knew. She hated that he had no other choice but to know, and she hated what his witch of a mother did to him when he refused to join in hunting her. But for as much as she hated it all, she also knew that his knowledge could be useful as they tried to figure out a plan.

“How many more?” She asked.

“I can’t say for sure,” Peeta replied. “The Capitol’s attempts to recruit district citizens had been getting worse and more desperate over the last few weeks. It’s impossible to know exactly who they managed to convince to help them. We have to do something soon, though. It’s only been about an hour, but soon the district and the other Mockingjay Hunters are going to realize that the group sent to the grove aren’t coming back and they’re going to come looking for not just you, but all of us.”

Peeta was right. They had to move and they had to move soon. They were no safer in the grove than they were standing face to face with a dozen Mockingjay Hunters just an hour ago. But it wasn’t just the two of them they had to worry about.

“We have to convince Gale,” Katniss said. “And I don’t think it’s going to be easy.”

“He’s never going to listen to anything I have to say,” Peeta warned. “It has to come from you.”

The sun would be setting soon. Before long, the other Mockingjay Hunters in the district would know the group that was sent into the woods to capture and kill Katniss would never be returning. They had to be gone before then.

With a nod and a heavy sigh, Katniss stood and looked reluctantly to the lake where Gale was still settled, picking at blades of grass and tossing them into the water. He didn’t seem to be paying any
attention to Katniss and Peeta, though Katniss suspected that her proposition to leave wouldn’t surprise him. He had to know it was coming. But with all of his suspicions, would he agree to go with them?

“I think it’s best if I stay here,” Peeta said. “Unless you want me to.”

Katniss wanted Peeta to come with her. She wanted him to sit Gale down and tell him everything he knew and convince him that they had to start moving away from the grove, but it’d never work. It was Katniss or nothing.

“Stay,” Katniss agreed, taking backwards steps away from where Peeta still sat in the grass.

“Signal if you need me,” Peeta offered, his eyes flitting back and forth between Katniss and Gale.

With a deep breath, Katniss dug her feet unto the grass and spun around, rehearsing what she planned to say to Gale in her head as she trudged toward him. She wouldn’t let him speak until she’d said everything she needed to. She knew that if she let him get a word in before she’d finished explaining what Peeta had told her, she’d never recover enough to continue.

She stopped a few paces from Gale and cleared her throat to get his attention.

“We need to leave the grove,” she said, wasting no time. “There’s no protection here anymore and when the other Mockingjay Hunters realize the group that came out here isn’t coming back, they’re going to come looking for them -- for us.”

“There are more hunters?” Gale asked, rising to his feet.

“A lot more,” Katniss confirmed. “I want to be on the move by sunset.”

“How do you know there are more?” Gale stared at Katniss, waiting for an answer but was met with silence. “Peeta told you that, didn’t he? There’s no other way you’d know.”

Katniss looked toward the trees, observing the way the sun had already begun to slink lower and lower in the sky. The deep orange tincture spread across the grass, enhancing the already orange hue of the sky and serving as a harsh reminder that they were running out of time.

“Why does that matter?” Katniss argued, stepping closer to Gale. “He’s trying to help, no matter what you might believe about him. We have to leave before they get here. There’s no other choice.”

There was nothing more for her to say. So, to make her point clear, she turned on her heel and began tromping away from Gale before he could argue any further.

“I’m not going,” Gale called after her, stopping Katniss in her tracks. “My family is still out there, Katniss.”

Gale’s family. How could she forget about Gale’s family?

“Gale…”

“I’m not leaving without them.” He shook his head. “I can gather them up and be back here in two hours.”

Katniss’s face fell. Two hours was too long to wait, and judging by the hopeless look on Gale’s face, he knew it too.
“Go without me,” Gale conceded, his voice not matching the resolved look on his face. “I’ve got my knife. I’ll catch up.”

“No,” Katniss retorted, shaking her head. She looked back to where Peeta sat. Prim had joined him and they talked animatedly together as Peeta pointed to the trees, his gaze trailing over to Katniss when Prim wasn’t looking. “Maybe we can wait, let me just tell Peeta…”

“No, Katniss!” Gale bellowed. “Just go, all of you. I’ll catch up later, I promise.” He nodded his head, hoping that the fake smile he tried to give would convince Katniss that he really would find them, but Katniss stood her ground, crossing her arms over her chest and staring him right in the eye.

They’d reached an impasse, neither willing to budge. The unnatural silence that filled the grove went unnoticed by both of them until the sound of birds scattering from the trees broke through the quiet. The memory stirred in Katniss’s mind with vivid detail. The birds scattering, the arrow in her father’s chest, the horrible gasps that rose from his throat as he tried to warn her to get away. The birds were their warning, and the confirmation that they’d run out of time.

“Prim,” Katniss murmured, taking off in the direction of where her sister and Peeta were now standing together, Peeta’s arms wrapped protectively over the little girl. She didn’t hear Gale bounding right behind her until he spoke.

“Don’t move, I’ll go get your mother,” he panted.

Gale was halfway to where Mrs. Everdeen sat alone in the grass when the forest was immersed in chaos. A loud and deafening roar emanated from the sky and the trees swayed violently under the strength of the downdraft from the hovercraft that had appeared and was inching toward them quickly.

“Run!” Katniss yelled, letting go of Prim to allow her to clear out. She watched as Prim took off toward the thickest part of the forest, waiting until she saw her mother begin to run in the same direction before she joined them, Peeta and Gale trailing right behind her.

They were putting a good distance between them and the hovercraft until the thick root of a large tree hooked onto Prim’s foot before she could even see it. Katniss saw the small girl fall face first into the ground, crying out in pain and stopping everyone. And her sobs only continued, a mixture of pain and terror shook in her voice.

“Prim!” Katniss cried out, trying to pull her sister from the ground. “We have to keep running!” Her pleas were desperate, but Prim still remained in the dirt, curling her body up in attempts to protect herself from danger.

Gale reacted quickly, pushing Katniss to the side and scooping Prim’s shaking body into his arms before taking off in a full sprint away from the hovercraft that was starting to close in on them. Mrs. Everdeen took off next, running in silence behind Gale as Prim reached a hand out to her mother. Only Katniss and Peeta remained still, but not for long. They joined hands and moved to follow the others, holding onto each other for dear life.

Suddenly, the hovercraft seemed to speed up, casting a dark shadow over the group as they pushed themselves to the limit in attempts to outrun the object that was now traveling faster than any of them could ever hope to run.

A sharp hiss began to sound from the hovercraft and soon, a murky, gray smoke filled the forest from above, skewing their vision and filling their lungs. The sounds of their gasps and coughs resonated through Katniss’s ears as a heavy feeling of drowsiness fell over her body. She heard
Peeta calling for her, and she could just make out the silhouette of Gale and Prim falling to the ground as she let go of Peeta’s hand and fell to the ground herself.

She tried to crawl to Gale and Prim. She needed to make sure her sister was okay, but each time she set her hands down and tried to push her body forward, she collapsed again, finally giving up when her mother’s limp form hit the ground and blocked her path.

Peeta was the last to fall, and tears pricked Katniss’s eyes when the realization washed over her that none of them would be able to escape. They were all going to die in the forest, all because of her. It was too late to ask them to spare the others and just take her. They’d show no mercy to anyone caught with her. Peeta’s mouth was moving, but Katniss could no longer hear the sounds that came out of it.

Her arm felt as though it’d been filled with concrete when she struggled to move it toward Peeta, but she managed to move it just enough to weakly grasp a few of Peeta’s fingers in her hand, and as she stared into his terrified eyes, her own began to close until everything went black and numbness took over.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Tumblr: mellarksloaves
Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone that has read this story and given their feedback and thank you to ichooseupeetachu for all of her support. I forgot to mention this last week, but this story will be updated every Wednesday. I hope you enjoy!

It was a gentle humming noise that began to rouse Katniss from unconsciousness. For just a moment, she allowed herself to linger between lucidity and confusion. She imagined she was still in the grove, curled up under the large maple tree while Peeta’s arms wrapped around her like a protective shield, keeping her close -- keeping her safe.

Katniss tried as long as she could to keep herself teetering between her imagined utopia and her reality. The clear images of low hanging branches ripe with green leaves waving under a summer breeze, the smell of the Earth after an afternoon rain shower, and her and Peeta tangled together in bliss easily blotted out the truth. But slowly, the reality of her situation crept in.

She wasn’t in the grove anymore. She wasn’t nestled safely under the maple tree with Peeta, and the humming didn’t come from the breeze whipping through the forest but rather the hovercraft she was on. And Peeta’s arms weren’t wrapped around her at all. Nothing but tight restraints were there. Thick, heavy bands encircled her chest, wrists, and ankles, keeping her upright against the cold steel of what felt like a chair. And then she remembered -- she’d been captured by The Capitol.

She wondered if Snow would have her killed instantly or if he’d take his time and have her tortured mercilessly. Would the others meet the same fate? Tortured into madness until the only thing they could wish for was the relief that death would bring?

She tried to open her eyes, but the stinging when her lids opened forced her to screw them shut again until the urge to rub away the pain had subsided. Her second attempt was slower, one eye at a time. The burning still persisted, still caused tears to well up and blur her vision, but she refused to shut her eyes again.

It took several minutes for the blur of tears to subside, and when Katniss’s eyes adjusted they landed on a large man she’d never seen before. His back was turned to her and he appeared fixated on a bright screen affixed to the wall in front of him. His finger traced over a flashing red dot, but he remained silent and focused.

Without even seen his face, Katniss could tell he was from The Capitol. His clothing was pristine and elegant, made of threads that would never make it as far as District 12, and the gold chain leading into the pocket of his pants was an accessory the people from home could only dream about.

It was then that Katniss noticed the others seated around her. Gale sat across from her, his eyes wide open but vacant. There was an unusual calm and silence radiating from him. Her mother was to her left, stirring slowly and Peeta to her right breathing heavily and clenching his fists. Prim, still unconscious, sat next to Gale, her head hung low enough for her chin to touch her chest and wobbled from side to side haphazardly.
Katniss’s legs were kicking out in front of her before she even realized it. The rest of her body followed soon after, thrashing around in her seat as much as the restraints allowed her to. The angered howl that broke free from her throat didn’t even sound like her own, and the commotion not only caught the attention of the man from the Capitol, but also Peeta. He lurched forward, screaming at the pressure of the restraints digging into his chest and wrists in his attempts to loosen them enough to free himself, but it was no use. His body stilled and deflated as the man walked toward them, one arm extended in front of him as if he was asking them, without words, to calm down, the other hand held a large syringe.

“I don’t want to have to sedate you like I did him,” the man said, nodding toward Gale. “He wouldn’t let me talk without trying to kick me.”

The man’s voice was loud and commanding, but not angry. As Peeta and Katniss calmed and their breathing returned to a steady rhythm, the man slowly lowered the syringe, slipping it behind his back and out of sight.

Katniss understood why Gale kept trying to fight. The urge to extend her leg out in front of her and slam her boot covered foot into the man’s shin was strong. It was only the fact that he said he wanted to talk to them that kept her from doing it. Maybe she could barter with the man and convince him to spare the others.

“Don’t let them hurt Prim,” Katniss blurted out, suddenly aware all over again that her sister would also soon be suffering because of her. “None of this is her fault.”

The man cocked his head to the side and knit his eyebrows together. “I’m not going to be hurting anybody,” he stated. “You’re safe here. And I’m sorry we had to rescue you the way that we did, but there was no other way to get to you.”

The words moved through Katniss’s muddled mind slowly. Safe? Rescued? She looked over at Peeta. He didn’t look any less confused than she did. She observed the way his legs bounced around wildly in front of him, as though he was fighting his own urges to kick the man in front of them. Instead, his suspicious voice pierced the air.

“Who are you?” He asked.

The man smirked, which made Katniss want to kick him even more. His eyes lingered on Peeta and he nodded like he was pleased about something.

“My name is Plutarch Heavensbee,” the man finally revealed.

Katniss froze. She’d heard that name before. And the memory was quick to jump to the front of her mind.

“When you were very small, just a week old, the president came to visit us,” Katniss’s father explained.

“President Snow was in our house?” Katniss asked, her jaw going slack in surprise.

“Yes. And he brought a man with him -- Plutarch Heavensbee,” her father continued. “While President Snow was talking to your mother, Mr. Heavensbee gave me a few instructions.”

Katniss raised her eyebrows. “What were they?”

“That when I felt you were ready to learn about how special you are, I had to tell you in private and make you swore that you’d never tell anyone until the time came,” her father said. “Do you think you can do that for me?”
Plutarch Heavensbee. The man who had instructed Katniss’s father to tell her about what she was. Plutarch Heavensbee, the reason her father was dead. She wanted to scream at him, dig her fingernails into his face and make him pay for every day that she lived without her father’s protection and guidance, but somehow Plutarch seemed to know that this might happen. The syringe was back and held up for Katniss to see, almost daring her to try to fight him.

“I’ll take those restraints off if you promise to sit and listen,” Plutarch bargained, hiding the syringe for a second time. “There’s a lot I need to tell you before we reach District 13.”

For the second time in minutes, the words Plutarch said didn’t make sense to Katniss. Everyone in Panem knew that District 13 was destroyed during The Dark Days. What kind of game was Plutarch playing?

Katniss and Peeta’s agreement to listen came with terse nods. As Plutarch began to remove the restraints, Katniss took a second look around the hovercraft. Gale was starting to look a little less vacant. He was able to move around, blink his eyes, but he still appeared to be limited. Mrs. Everdeen was fully awake and staring nervously at Prim next to her who was still not awake. Resentment bubbled in Katniss’s stomach seeing her mother trying to act worried in front of Plutarch, but genuine concern for her sister prevented her from commenting on it.

“She’ll be fine,” Plutarch said nonchalantly. “She’s just smaller than the rest of you, so it’s going to take longer for her to come out of it.”

Katniss wasn’t sure if she liked Plutarch. Even when she forced herself not to think about how it was his advice that got her father killed, there was something crass and off putting about the man. One minute he sounded sincere with his apologies and the next, he didn’t seem phased to threaten them and barter with them.

“Katniss, President Snow and I have been keeping an eye on you since the day you were born,” Plutarch began, holding his hand up to silence Katniss. “With that said, our interest in you was for immensely different reasons. President Snow only has two things in mind for you, containment or elimination.”

“And you?” Katniss asked, her voice devoid of any emotion.

“I want to see you change the world, Katniss,” Plutarch stated. His eye darted to Peeta for the briefest moment as he took a deep breath, an air of giddiness coming over him. “I’ve been putting together a team of rebels that will help you, and we’ve been waiting for the day you’d be ready to embrace your destiny.”

“You think I’m ready now?”

“No,” Plutarch said, shaking his head. “But we had to get you out of those woods. It was no longer safe for you to be there or anywhere else without significant protection. The President has eyes and ears everywhere.”

“Is that what got my father killed?” Katniss asked. She narrowed her eyes at Plutarch. “President Snow’s eyes and ears?”

“Your father’s death was an unfortunate repercussion of the budding revolution. He knew the risks,” Plutarch explained, sounding as though he’d been rehearsing the sentence for years. “If things had gone President Snow’s way you both would’ve been killed that day. Luckily, you managed to escape.”

“Luckily?” Katniss scoffed. “I fail to see how any of this was lucky.”
“Nobody said this would be easy, Katniss,” Plutarch stated.

At that moment one thing became clear to Katniss. It was all business to Plutarch. The revolution, war with the Capitol, forcing her to embrace her destiny. She wanted to hate him, refuse to compromise with anything he proposed, but the truth of the matter was that he’d saved her -- all of them, and she was in debt to him.

“I’ve been working closely with President Snow for almost seventeen years now,” Plutarch continued. “In that time I made sure he couldn’t get to you, but now is the time to rise, Katniss.” His eyes once again strayed to Peeta as if he was making sure Peeta was listening too, and Peeta noticed it, seizing the opportunity to speak.

“Where are we going? he asked, an edge of distrust in his voice.


“Everybody knows District 13 doesn’t exist anymore,” Peeta challenged. “Tell us where we’re really going.”

“The annihilation of District 13 was a myth created by the Capitol to scare the other districts,” Plutarch explained with a sigh. It seemed that he didn’t expect the resistance he was getting. “What better way to deter districts from rebelling if they thought another district was completely destroyed for trying before? Damage was done, of course. The Capitol made sure of that, but the district still exists underground and has agreed to a cease fire with The Capitol. We should be there in less than ten minutes. Their President and military is prepared to work with you, and your protection is their top concern.”

It was all too much for Katniss to wrap her head around. Working with the military of a secret district? A president she’d never heard of before? Plutarch said she wasn’t ready to embrace her destiny, but if he thought any of this would help her get there sooner, he was wrong.

Another look at Gale sent pangs of guilt through Katniss that she hadn’t felt since they were still in the grove. They’d been arguing about going back to get Gale’s family when the hovercraft moved in.

“Your family,” Katniss murmured, catching Plutarch’s attention. “I’m sorry.” There was nothing she could do to keep from blaming herself.

She would’ve understood if Gale blamed her, too. What would happen to them with Gale gone? And what would happen to District 12 once President Snow realized she had escaped?

“His family is already in 13,” Plutarch said airily, turning back to the bright red dot blipping on the screen.

“How?” Gale asked, rising from his seat.

“Sit down,” Plutarch demanded, waiting until Gale had taken his seat again before speaking. “We’ve had a rescue plan in place for years now, we’ve just been waiting for the moment to execute it. We knew who would be targets once President Snow caught wind of Katniss’s escape and can’t afford any loose ends. Trust me when I tell you they’re safe and waiting for you in District 13.”

Gale’s body collapsed in relief against his chair, a smile spreading across his face that he tried to hide by running a shaking hand over his face and through his hair. Mrs. Everdeen even seemed relieved by the news. She leaned over in her chair and squeezed Gale’s arm, whispering to him
about how nice it’ll be nice to see Hazelle Hawthorne again after years of being away from the Seam.

Katniss didn’t want to look over at Peeta, but she forced her gaze to the boy sitting next to her and her body stilled at the look on his face. His gaze was trained on the floor of the hovercraft as he chewed on the inside of his cheek. His breathing seemed uneven and labored, but he said nothing.

There was never any plan in place to rescue Peeta’s family and they both knew it. Being the son of Mockingjay Hunters couldn’t possibly allow it, no matter what the circumstances for them taking on the task to kill her were.

The only thing to pull Katniss’s eyes from Peeta at that moment was the sudden realization that there was someone else on the hovercraft she hadn’t noticed before. He’d been so quiet that she hadn’t even seen that he was sitting in a chair furthest from all of them the entire time. She didn’t call attention to her discovery, but managed to catch Peeta’s eye and direct him to where the man sat.

“Haymitch Abernathy?” Peeta said, eliciting a guffaw from the man.

Haymitch Abernathy was best known as the Seam’s drunkest resident. Even Katniss knew of his penchant for liquor. He hadn’t been off the stuff in well over twenty years. He didn’t look much different than the last time Katniss saw him. A bit paunchier, a little more weathered, but it was definitely Haymitch.

“I see you’ve finally noticed Haymitch,” Plutarch said. There was a certain amusement in his tone that bothered Katniss. She didn’t find any of it particularly funny.

“Why is he here?” Katniss snapped. She’d had it with being cooperative. If their confusion was so comical, there was no point in even trying to be cordial anymore.

“Haymitch has been helping me out for awhile now,” Plutarch explained. The smile was gone from his face and his tone back to serious as he spoke. “Making sure you were safe and keeping tabs on you, on Gale, and on Peeta since the day you went into hiding.”

Things were becoming more and more absurd by the minute. The town drunk was summoned to keep tabs on a group of kids the president wanted dead? That was the budding rebellion? Katniss had never seen Haymitch sober, how could he be trusted to keep tabs on her and make sure she was safe? Now it was her turn to laugh.

“What’s so funny, Sweetheart?” Haymitch asked, getting up to move around the hovercraft. “Do you think we’re lying to you?”

“I never saw you in the woods.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Haymitch said. “That’s what hiding means. I figured you’d know that since it’s what you’ve been doing the last five years.”

“You aren’t alone as you may have thought, Katniss,” Plutarch added. “We’ve been with you every step of the way.”

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With the hovercraft landed and safely taken underground, the group was finally free to file out. Gale stepped off first, a still groggy Prim holding onto his arm as she took the steps one by one. As the two waited at the bottom of the hovercraft steps for the others, there was a high pitched
shriek before a small girl that looked to be about four or five years old came bounding toward Gale, her dark hair bouncing wildly as she leapt into his arms. Katniss realized that the little girl must have been Gale sister, Posy. She’d never met Posy, but Gale had mentioned her and his brothers Rory and Vick briefly a few times. So briefly that she wasn’t even sure how old any of them were.

Mrs. Everdeen was even smiling when a woman that had to be Gale’s mother came up to her and swallowed her up in a hug. She nodded and talked easily with the woman, and Katniss felt a certain level of relief. They were finally safe. Though it’d never bring her father back, perhaps she, Prim, and their mother could begin to rebuild their lives in District 13 and be a family again.

The relief was extinguished almost as quickly as it had bloomed in her stomach when she noticed Plutarch talking quietly with Peeta away from the others. Peeta’s expression was blank, but his eyes told a different story. With a hard slap to Peeta’s shoulder, Plutarch broke away and found Haymitch who was stopped mid-pull from a silver flask. He swallowed the liquor quickly and capped the flask, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before walking off with Plutarch.

Peeta made his way back to Katniss in four large steps, flashing a half smile at her when he stopped. With everyone else caught up in talking, it was just the two of them together taking in their surroundings.

To say that District 13 looked bleak would be an understatement. Every wall was the same pale gray right down to the solid, windowless doors that dotted the facade every few meters.

“Well, it’s not the lush green grove,” Peeta joked. “But you’re safe.”

“Yeah,” Katniss said, distantly. She’d hoped Peeta would tell her what Plutarch said to him, but instead he commented on the look of District 13. She didn’t want to ask him, but she did look at him pleadingly, as though to ask him anyway.

Peeta sighed, knowing exactly what Katniss was trying to do. Scrubbing a hand down his face, he spoke softly, “Plutarch did have a hovercraft go for my family.”

“Even though they..” She couldn’t finish the sentence, but Peeta’s nod told her he understood.

“They went to the bakery with intentions of getting them out of there and bringing them here,” he explained. “As prisoners, though, for your safety. But when they got to the bakery, it was gone. Burned to the ground, no sign of anyone. That’s all Plutarch knew.”

The look Peeta gave her confirmed everything she had suspected. It was likely that Snow ordered the bakery burned down, forcing Peeta’s family into the woods to find her and kill her before Snow killed them for their failures. Only it wasn’t Snow that killed them, it was her. Neither one of them wanted to acknowledge it out loud, but they didn’t have to.

“There’s nothing you could’ve done, Katniss,” Peeta whispered, moving in closer. “They wouldn’t have shown you any mercy.”

Katniss nodded, trying to convince Peeta that she believed him. That there really was nothing else she could’ve done, but she didn’t even believe it herself. Worst of all, she wasn’t sure if Peeta believed it either.

“She?” Plutarch’s voice interrupted them, forcing them to try and forget what they’d just learned for the time being. “The three of us need to talk, follow me.”

They followed Plutarch in silence through a sliding gray door that revealed a second hallway that looked no different than the drop off point they’d just came from. A quick walk brought them to a
second door that slid open and revealed a poorly lit office with a bare desk that looked like it hadn’t been used in years. Dust covered the surface of the desk and the chairs in front of it were tattered and worn, the arms looking like something had been chewing on them. Plutarch didn’t seem perturbed by their surroundings one bit. He sat down in the chair behind the desk, rolling it back to grab a cobweb covered broom in the corner to dust off the top of the desk.

“I just wanted to give the two of you a rundown of things before they begin,” he said. “The first thing that’s going to happen here is a meeting with President Coin. She’s agreed to provide you with military training and protection in exchange for your help in the rebellion.” Once again, he put his hand up to silence Katniss. “That’s all I know. Any questions you have about that should be directed at her.”

“When am I meeting her?” Katniss asked.

“You’ll both be meeting her when she’s ready for you,” Plutarch said. “The next thing I want to address is what happened earlier today in the woods. That was an impressive display of power, Katniss but do know that most of it was luck. It will never be that easy for you again. There’s still too much you don’t know and too much you have to learn.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Katniss said, repeating words she’d said dozens of times before. Maybe if she said it enough, someone around could help her understand.

“Which is why we’ve arranged for the both of you to meet with the only expert on Uprisers that we know of in existence. It was difficult to secure her and she’s going to need some time before she’s ready, but as soon as she is I’ll take the two of you to meet her. Until then, I’ll try to answer your questions to the best of my knowledge, but know that it’s very limited.”

There was a silence that hung in the air far longer than necessary. Plutarch’s eyes flitted back and forth between Katniss and Peeta, and the same look he had on his face on the hovercraft was present once again, filling Katniss with anger all over again.

Plutarch had been hiding something from them, that much was clear. But how could he manage to work behind President Snow’s back on an entire rebellion when he could barely keep a straight face over what he knew in front of her and Peeta? Katniss didn’t understand the man at all but remained still and silent, waiting for Plutarch to speak again.

“There’s a reason I wanted you here too, Peeta,” Plutarch finally began. “You see, this isn’t just Katniss’s destiny. She is The Upriser, or as many are calling her, The Mockingjay. She’s being looked upon to usher in a new way of life, but there’s something that almost everyone has been missing.” Plutarch took a deep breath, ringing his hands together nervously. “What nobody has told you, and what very few know, is that while Katniss is The Upriser, you Peeta, are The Incendiary.”
The entire room seemed to still.

Every bit of buzzing, nervous energy that had filled the small space moments before had disappeared and was replaced with an almost comedic silence that was only enhanced by the perplexed expression on Plutarch’s face.

It was as if he expected his news to garner a bigger, more grandiose reaction from Katniss and Peeta. In fact, he looked disappointed with the blank expressions that were etched on the two teenagers’ faces since his big reveal.

Finally, Peeta cleared his throat and asked the question that was on both of their minds. “What does that mean?”

For the first time, it looked like Plutarch finally realized just how uninformed Katniss and Peeta really were. For the first time, he understood just how much they still had to learn about who they were and how much work it would take before they were ready to rise.

“I’m going to back up a little,” Plutarch started, settling into his chair. He exhaled loudly and continued. “As we know from history, a new Upriser is born every one hundred years--”

“No, we don’t know that,” Peeta said, shaking his head.

“We hardly know anything at all,” Katniss added. “I’ve had five years to learn about this and I still know next to nothing.”

“You say you’ve been keeping an eye on us but you haven’t been doing a very good job of keeping us informed,” Peeta quipped. “How long have you known this about me?”

Plutarch looked taken aback by the sudden backlash to his revelation, but he pressed forward.

“We knew for sure a year ago,” he admitted. “And you wait until now, until Katniss was discovered and almost killed before you did anything?” Peeta spat. The tops of his ears had turned red with anger, and his jaw clenched tightly between words. “You want us to learn now? Why not a year ago?”

“There are as many doubters as there are supporters,” Plutarch sighed. He never wanted to reveal this much to them, but he had no other choice. “As I said, Uprisers are born only once every one hundred years. There is never more than one in the world at once, and since Katniss was born a mere fifty-eight years after the death of the last Upriser, it has caused people to.. question things. Some don’t believe you’re The Upriser, Katniss.” He paused, waiting for his words to sink in. “But there are others that believe that this is a sign that things are different this time.”

“Different how?” Katniss asked.

“You’ve found your Incendiary, Katniss,” Plutarch announced, another giddy smile breaking out across his face. “Uprisers are born to change the world, but they haven’t always changed it for the better. In fact, not many have. The last Upriser was greedy, arrogant, and thought he alone held the key to changing the world all on his own. He rejected the wisdom of his elders and refused the
help of allies, and when the time came to fulfill his destiny, he failed and took the light with him.”

“That’s how they knew it was you,” Peeta said, turning to Katniss. “Because when you were born, the light came back.”

Plutarch nodded. “The last Upriser not only failed, but he allowed The Capitol to rise to such a high power that they vowed to never let another Upriser fulfill their destiny ever again. Research was done and execution tactics were put in place that still exist today. They are ready to fight to ensure you do not rise, Katniss.”

“But that still doesn’t explain what an Incendiary is,” Peeta protested, an air of impatience in his voice.

“I was just getting to that part,” Plutarch said, wagging his finger. “Were you listening when I gave the reason as to why the last Upriser failed?”

“He wanted to work alone?” Peeta answered.

“Right,” Plutarch said. “He also refused to listen to anyone and therefore failed to learn how to control his powers. But most of all, he failed to find his spark. He never even knew about his Incendiary.”

“Spark?” Peeta questioned.

“The Incendiary is the person who stirs the Upriser into action and complements their powers with an arsenal of their own,” Plutarch explained. “They’re two parts of a whole and their powers are never greater than when they’re together.”

“Does every Upriser have an Incendiary?” Katniss added.

“Yes,” Plutarch nodded heartily. They were finally starting to get it.

“Can anybody be an Incendiary?”

“No,” Plutarch said. “Just like Uprisers, there’s only one in existence at a time and only one born every one hundred years. Well, with the exception of you two. Some Uprisers have searched their whole lives for their Incendiary and never find them. Some didn’t live long enough to even learn about theirs. Others never even bothered to look.”

“What happened to the last Incendiary?” Peeta asked.

“Nobody knows.” Plutarch shrugged. “There is no record of him or her. All we know is that since you’re here, Peeta. They’re dead.”

“And how can you be sure that it’s me?” Peeta continued. “If I’m supposed to have an arsenal of powers of my own, where are they? What are they?”

“I wish I had an answer for you, but I told you my information is limited,” Plutarch said, setting his elbows on the desk in front of him. “I’m relaying what information I was able to get from the expert you’ll be meeting with, but she wasn’t in the best of health when I met her. I didn’t get much. Can you do me a favor, Peeta?”

“Sure,” Peeta uttered reluctantly.

“Touch Katniss’s face,” Plutarch said. “Gently, and keep it there.”
The request was off-putting at best. The look of aggravation that crossed Peeta’s face in response was almost enough to make Katniss laugh at the entire situation. Things had gone from confusing to impossible in a matter of minutes and Plutarch’s newest demand didn’t help.

Even still, Peeta raised a shaking hand to Katniss’s face and cupped her cheek, instinctively rubbing the pad of his thumb along her jaw. Instantly, as though a switch had been flipped, warmth began to build in Katniss’s stomach. At first she thought it was embarrassment over sharing such an intimate gesture while Plutarch sat captivated at his desk watching, but soon the heat continued to grow until it felt like her blood was made of fire.

And then the light directly above Plutarch’s head gave a few flickers and produced an audible buzz that wasn’t there before until all at once the bulb shattered, sending glass raining down onto the desk in front of Plutarch’s hands.

“That’s how we’re sure you’re The Incendiary, Peeta,” Plutarch said smugly.

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“I’m bringing you to the main hall,” Plutarch announced, walking a few steps in front of Katniss and Peeta. “That’s where you’ll get your compartment assignments and uniforms.”

The rest of the walk was silent. Peeta took wide steps, staying just a pace or two behind Plutarch while Katniss walked slower, replaying parts of their conversation over again. She couldn’t make sense of it. How much time had she spent with Peeta over the last year? Why hadn’t anything clued either of them into the fact that he may have powers of his own? But as she thought more about it all she wondered if maybe there had been clues. Moments in their time together that made it easy to notice for those who knew what to look for. Moments they’d missed because they never knew what Peeta was.

It was something that only the Upriser expert that Plutarch told them about would have answers to. After all, it was probably her that confirmed Peeta’s Incendiary powers in the first place. Plutarch didn’t know any more than what he was told. Without thinking, Katniss began to make a mental list of things about Peeta that might be some kind of clue. How she felt when he touched her was an obvious one, but then she wondering, did Peeta feel his blood run hot and electricity stir in his body when she touched him, too? If he had, he’d never told her. Was the strange inkling about the second Earthquake in the woods a sign, too? The thoughts made her head hurt.

Finally, Plutarch dropped them off at the doorway of the main hall, shuffling off quickly with claims of having another meeting and promises that he would see the both of them again soon. The main hall was more of the same gray walls and floors that they’d seen all day, brightened by the rows of artificial lighting that hung above their heads. Several groups of people were lined up in front of large tables while a pair of older women, who appeared to be searching for something on small electronic devices, gave directions to the next table that handed out a set of shirts, pants, and boots in the same drab gray as the walls.

“What’s going to be our uniforms?” Peeta asked, speaking for the first time since they left their meeting with Plutarch. “Aren’t they afraid we’ll blend into the walls and get lost?”

Katniss couldn’t stop the laugh that burst from her mouth. It was nice to hear Peeta making a joke again. It felt like she hadn’t seen him smile in weeks, and after letting herself think about it for a moment she realized she hadn’t. The last time she’d seen Peeta before the Mockingjay Hunters invaded the woods was the day she told him to leave the grove and never come back. There had hardly been time for sleeping let alone for jokes and laughter since he returned to the chaos laden woods. Had that only been a day ago?
“Keep that thought in mind,” Katniss said, following the flow of the line a few steps closer to the first table. “You never know when we might want a minute to hide.”

“I hope our compartments aren’t too far from each other,” Peeta added. His next words came as a suggestive whisper. “I’d like to be able to visit you.”

The spot where Peeta’s hand came to rest on the small of Katniss’s back tingled with warmth and she allowed herself to bask in the sensation. Even though the room was bustling with people, none of them paid any attention to Katniss and Peeta and in a strange way, she felt protected by the commotion.

However, the feeling was short lived. They were forced apart when the lights in the main hall began to flicker just as the light had during their meeting with Plutarch.

“Am I not going to be able to touch you while we’re here?” Peeta asked, his voice a mixture of confusion and frustration.

Katniss didn’t have an answer for him. Being indoors together seemed to change things, and until they could figure out why their touches produced the odd incidents that they did, they’d have to be more careful.

“Next.” The bored voice of the white haired woman behind the table caught Katniss’s attention. “Name?”

“Katniss Everdeen.”

The woman pressed her finger to the letter “E” on the screen of the device in front of her and quickly found Katniss’s name.

“Are you Peeta Mellark?” The woman asked, looking back down at the screen, her finger hovering over a notation next to Katniss’s name. “You’re both in compartment 101. Once you’ve gotten your uniforms, Ayers over there will bring you down to your compartment, just give him your name.” She pointed to a tall, dark haired man who stood stiffly next to the uniform table. He seemed unperturbed by the people weaving all around him. “Once you report to your room, you’re both to stay there until further notice.”

“Would you be able to tell me the compartment number my sister and mother are in?” Katniss asked, as a pair of strong hands gripped her shoulders and attempted to shuffle her toward the next table. “Primrose Everdeen?”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, swiping her hand over her screen to hide the page. “That information is private and I can only give compartment numbers to those who will be staying in them.”

“But she’s my sister,” Katniss said, fighting the guard that continued to try and direct her to the next table. “You can’t tell me where my sister is?”

“No.” The woman shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Come on, Katniss,” Peeta whispered. “We’ll find her soon.”

Katniss didn’t want to move to the next table. She wanted to stand at the first and demand to be told where her sister was. Something didn’t feel right in District 13, and she needed to make sure that Prim was alright, but people were beginning to stare. Forcing the guard’s hands off of her, she conceded and continued to walk with Peeta to the table where their uniforms were waiting for them.
Ayers was a man of few words, snapping into action immediately when the teenagers gave him their names. The only words he spoke on the way to compartment 101 were directions.

“One in your compartment, change into your uniforms,” Ayers explained. “Put your old clothes in the white crate next to the door. You won’t be needing them again. Fresh uniforms will be delivered in front of your door every morning, and night clothes are in the closet.”

They passed through a door and descended four flights of stairs down. The endless expanse of gray was already becoming too much, though Katniss couldn’t quite put her finger on why.

“How can they tell which way is which around here?” Peeta whispered. “I swear we were just in this hallway.”

“Each floor is marked with a number on the main wall,” Ayers deadpanned.

“Oh,” Peeta said. “I guess it must’ve blended in with the rest of the gray around here.”

Ayers came to a sudden stop in front of a large, steel door. For a moment, Katniss worried that Ayers didn’t take too kindly to Peeta’s mockery, until she noticed the numbers “101” etched into the door. They’d reached their compartment.

“Each of you need to put a hand on the front of the door,” Ayers instructed, pulling a small device from his pocket. It looked identical to the one the woman had just used to find their compartment, except for the size. “To program the lock.”

Once Katniss and Peeta each placed a hand against the door, palm side down, Ayers began to input codes into the device in his hands and the door seemed to come alive under their touch. It grew warm, vibrated and soon slid open easily, allowing Peeta and Katniss to enter. Their words of thanks to Ayers went unacknowledged as the door promptly slid closed in front of them.

Katniss took in their surroundings. The compartment was small, perfectly square, and as gray as ever. She hadn’t seen a single window since arriving, and their compartment was no different, but being underground probably didn’t provide the best views anyway. There was no bathroom, and the closet Ayers spoke of could hardly be called a closet. It was just big enough to hold a few gray t-shirts and lounge pants. A small, sealed cubby hole near the floor next to the beds caught Peeta’s eye, but when he inspected it, he couldn’t find any way to open it. Katniss was beginning to feel trapped, worn out and she wondered if Peeta was feeling the same.

A foreign and uncomfortable silence filled the room as Peeta dropped his uniform on one of the two single beds that were pushed up against the back wall of the compartment. Their white and sterile sheets looked just as uncomfortable as the material of Katniss’s own uniform in her hands. She followed Peeta’s lead and dropped the garments down onto the second bed and pulled her shirt over her head, remembering Ayers’ orders to change when they’d gotten into their compartment. By the time she’d slipped her pants down and removed them, Peeta had his back turned to her, an action that confused Katniss. He’d seen her in far less many times before, and his sudden unease concerned her. Not because she couldn’t understand it, but because she was worried that their meeting with Plutarch earlier in the day had injected the same fears in Peeta as they did in her.

She tried not to think about it as she shrugged into the uniform’s gray button down shirt. It was far too big and the threads were coarse, firm, and scratched at her skin, causing her to feel even more uncomfortable than she already was.

Peeta’s uniform looked even more uncomfortable as it fit him much better. His shoulders filled out the top of the shirt and the pants hugged his thighs in a way that, despite uncomfortable it probably
was, actually made it look good on him. He sat down on the bed, his back still to Katniss as she slipped her pants on and adjusted the belt to the tightest notch to keep them up.

“Are you wondering it too?” Peeta asked suddenly.

Katniss walking over to the other side of the bed to face him. “Wondering what?”

His question added another layer of unease to Katniss’s mind. She wasn’t sure what he was asking her, but with how somber his voice sounded, it couldn’t have been good.

“Wondering if what we feel for each other is simply because of what we are?”

Katniss didn’t want to say it, but she had been wondering it. From the moment Plutarch revealed what Peeta was she’d been wondering.

“I hate myself for thinking it,” Peeta continued. “The one thing I have always been sure about was my feelings for you. I keep trying to talk myself out of even thinking it, but I just can’t. I’m starting to question everything and I don’t know how to stop.”

“There’s still a lot we don’t know, yet,” Katniss offered. It was a weak response and she knew it.

“There’s no freedom here.”

“No color,” Katniss added.

When Peeta put his arms out, Katniss went to him readily and happily. His arms wrapped around her torso, his head coming to rest on her stomach. For the moment, she didn’t care to wonder about the reasons for her feelings for him. She just wanted to feel his arms around her and his hands running up and down her back the way that she’d grown used to during their time in the grove.

Pressing a kiss to the top of Peeta’s head, Katniss broke away, a smile springing to her lips at the wounded look on Peeta’s face as she walked away from him. She had only one reason to leave Peeta at that moment, and she was quick to find it. The light switch on the wall next to the door. She punched it, pulling the room into darkness that was so thick, she had to ask Peeta to speak in order to find her way back to him on the bed, grabbing hold of his outstretched hand after she’d walked into it.

As soon as Katniss reached him, she lowered herself down onto the bed next to him and pulled on his arm. “Lay with me?” She whispered.

The tiny bed wasn’t the most comfortable spot for two people, but with Katniss’s body nestled back against Peeta’s chest, they managed to make it work. The silence that filled the room this time was comfortable, welcoming even as the pair tried to drive out all of the new questions and concerns that the day had brought.

Katniss sighed and settled in against Peeta even closer as he peppered kisses across the back of her neck.

“Hey,” Peeta whispered. “Maybe this isn’t so bad, afterall. If I close my eyes and tune out everything but you, it almost feels like we’re still in the grove.”

Katniss knew he was lying, trying to sound positive to make both of them feel better, but she didn’t let it stop her from trying anyway. She closed her eyes and focused on the length of Peeta’s body against her and the way his arms held her tightly and protectively to him. And before she knew it, she’d fallen asleep.
Their contentment and rest was interrupted by a loud beeping noise. They sat up quickly, both disoriented and sleep addled as the beeping came again, more insistent.

“It’s the door,” Peeta said. “See the speaker next to it?”

Katniss couldn’t see much of anything in the darkness, especially not a speaker next to the door. She felt the weight of the bed shift when Peeta stood up, and she heard him shuffling away before the compartment was assaulted with a bright light as the door slid open. Katniss shielded her eyes from the brightness, and once they adjusted she noticed Plutarch standing in the doorway.

“Katniss? Peeta?” Plutarch spoke, not bothering to say hello. “Come with me. President Coin would like to speak to you in the command room.”

Once again they were led through halls and corridors that looked identical save for the numbers indicating the floor they were on, sleep still fresh on their bodies and any shred of relaxation gone.

“Plutarch?” Katniss asked, her steps quick and long in her attempts to keep up with the man. “Do you know where my sister is?”

Plutarch seemed to start walking even quicker. “I don’t have that information, Katniss,” he said briskly.

Katniss slowed her pace, falling into step with Peeta. “Why won’t they tell me where Prim is?” She whispered.

“Ask Coin,” Peeta suggested. “Demand to see her.”

“Make demands to the president?” Katniss scoffed.

“Sure,” Peeta shrugged. “What could they do besides tell you no?”

Katniss couldn’t finish her thought. In almost no time, they were standing in front of the door that separated them from President Coin. Katniss’s stomach fluttered with nervousness as the door slid open.

They followed Plutarch as he shuffled into the room which was surprisingly full of people. Perhaps it was foolish to assume that only President Coin would be there, but the faces staring back at them were entirely unfamiliar and only made Katniss’s nervousness stronger. As she looked from stranger to stranger, her gaze stopped on the one person at the table that she did recognize, and she almost had to do a double take when she realized who it was.

“Hey, Catnip,” Gale said with a wave.
Many thanks to ichooseupeetachu for her support and encouragement as I write this story!
The First Meeting

Chapter Notes

This chapter begins to show readers a little more of who Peeta is outside of his relationship with Katniss. And from here on out, you'll find out more and more.

Thanks to the always amazing ichooseupeetachu for the encouragement and support. It's never not appreciated!

Come say hello on Tumblr! I am mellarksloaves.

For some reason, the sight of Gale sitting in that room felt wrong. They hadn’t seen him since they’d first arrived in District 13 and he was reunited with his family. The haste in which Katniss and Peeta were shuffled away from the others didn’t allow either of them the time to exist in their new surroundings, but they hadn’t have been in District 13 for more than a day. What went on in that time that brought Gale there in that room with the president?

A quick glance to Peeta told Katniss that she wasn’t alone with her thoughts. A puzzled look marred Peeta’s features, and his search for an answer in Katniss’s eyes only returned equal confusion. Neither of them wanted to be there, that much was clear. To make matters worse, all eyes were on them like they were caged animals put on display for the amusement of everyone else and Katniss wanted it to stop. But even her best scowl didn’t deter the uncomfortable stares.

“Sorry I’m late,” Haymitch interrupted, his voice breaking the focus of everyone in the room. “A few clocks around this place wouldn’t kill anyone, you know.”

Of all people to ease the tension, it had to be Haymitch. Katniss had to admit, his sudden appearance did make her feel better, somehow. Even though he went straight to Plutarch upon entering the command room, Katniss had never been more relieved to see anyone in her life. She may have even felt a tiny fragment of gratitude for Haymitch and his impeccable timing.

“Sit down, everyone.”

The voice came from a small, shrewd looking woman seated nearest to the center of the round table. Her straight, silver hair almost matched the shade of gray that painted the walls they were surrounded by.

As Katniss and Peeta lowered into their seats, their view became clearer and even more disturbing. The silver-haired woman, who Katniss could only assume was President Coin, sat comfortably in the center seat while the others sat fanned out to her left and right, covering only one half of the round table. On the other half of the table were only two seats, the two that Katniss and Peeta had just settled into. They were definitely being scrutinized, sized up, and they didn’t like it one bit.

President Coin’s long, bony fingers clutched a device identical to the one the older woman in the main hall had used the day before to look up their compartment number. The device reminded Katniss that she still didn’t know where Prim was, and she wondered if the information would be on President Coin’s device, too. Peeta told her to demand to see her sister. If anyone should know how to find out where Prim was, it would’ve been President Coin.
“Welcome to District 13,” President Coin began, setting the device down on the table. “We’ve been waiting a long time for the two of you to arrive. I am President Alma Coin, and I’ll be--”

“Where’s my sister?” Katniss interrupted.

President Coin cleared her throat, shooting a warning glance in Katniss’s direction and continued her sentence right where she left off. “...introducing you to the others shortly. I hope Plutarch has been helpful since you’ve arrived.”

“Where’s my sister?” Katniss insisted, her voice rising.

The second glare President Coin flashed from across the table should have been enough to silence even the most persistent negotiators, but Katniss simply returned her glare with equal enmity.

“There are more pressing issues to discuss at the moment,” President Coin said through gritted teeth. “Discussing the location of your sister is not on our agenda this morning.”

Katniss knew what she wanted to do long before she even did it. The anger rose up and she allowed it to consume her. It heated every inch of her skin and made the blood move faster through her veins. Her heart pounded in her ears and her breaths were shallow and heavy. She was a dam about to break, and it’s exactly what she needed.

When she couldn’t stand the strain any longer, she released it all in one strong burst of wind in President Coin’s direction. The gust was enough to take the president’s breath away and sent the cup of water in front of her toppling over, spilling the liquid across the table.

Plutarch’s quick reaction saved the device on the table from being doused in water, but a simple electronic seemed to be the least of President Coin’s concerns at that moment. The scowl on her face did nothing but make Katniss angrier, and she contemplated a second burst of wind for a moment, until her head began to feel too light for her shoulders. Just as her vision began to blur, the sensation of Peeta’s hand clutching hers under the table reeled her back in moments before she collapsed. She was grateful for Peeta’s steadying grip on her hand. The last thing she needed was another display like the one in the woods back in District 12. There was no time to wonder what the dizzy spells meant, she couldn’t let President Coin see a hole in her facade.

“She just wants to know where her sister is,” Peeta said harshly, leaning forward. “Wouldn’t you begin to grow upset if people seemed to be purposely withholding information from you?”

Plutarch made quick work of looking for the information Katniss was seeking. He tapped on the screen of the device a few times and, as Katniss and President Coin continued to glare at each other, found the compartment number.

“Katniss,” Plutarch said carefully, turning the device so she could see the screen. “You sister and your mother have both been assigned to compartment 307.”

The words on the screen confirmed the information, and Katniss felt the last shreds of agitation begin to melt away for the moment. As long as she didn’t look in Gale’s direction, she was confident she would be able to get through the rest of the meeting without another incident.

“Thank you, Plutarch,” President Coin recovered, breaking her eye contact with Katniss and allowing a team of two assistants to move in and towel up the mess of water in front of her.

“Let’s continue, shall we?” President Coin said once the water had been cleared away. There was nothing cordial in her tone. Each word came out more like a warning to both Katniss and Peeta. She didn’t have to say it, but her message was clear -- they were not to interrupt again.

"End of note."
For the first time since they’d stepped into the command room, Katniss was happy to oblige. She repeated the compartment number Prim and her mother were staying in to herself, and Peeta’s steadying grip remained on her hand and kept her placid and focused. She was as prepared as she could be to hear what President Coin had to say next.

“I want the two of you to be aware of who you’ll be working with while here in District 13,” President Coin said, turning to a large soldier to her left. “This is Boggs, he’ll be part of your military training along with a few others who you’ll meet later.”

Boggs gave them a quick nod in greeting, which Peeta returned after a slight hesitation. Before President Coin moved on to introduce who she referred to as the Victors. Rebels who have gone above and beyond for the rebellion.

First was Finnick Odair, the extremely handsome and somewhat arrogant rebel from District 4. With bronze hair that appeared impossible to muss and sea-green eyes that seemed to hold a world of secrets, he was described by the president as extremely proficient with spears and tridents, and a master of close quarters combat.

The flippant Johanna Mason was next. Her upbringing in District 7 provided her with expert handling of axes. Her short, brown hair was fixed into spikes at the top of her head and though she didn’t say a single word to Katniss or Peeta, the way she glared dubiously at Katniss made her feel like she may have trouble with Johanna.

Last was Beetee, a bespeckled technological genius from District 3. His demeanor was far more subdued and his strengths came less from physical skill and more from the ways in which he was able to use his mind in the creation of weapons and traps, a skill that Gale also possessed. Katniss wasn’t exactly surprised when President Coin announced that Gale and Beetee were going to begin working together in weapons creation in the coming days.

While President Coin’s announcement helped Katniss understand why Gale was in the command room with the other rebels, it wasn’t enough to wash away the general feelings of restlessness over Gale’s quick allegiance to President Coin.

“We have a second rebel from District 3,” President Coin added, turning back to the two teenagers before her. “Wiress, the Upriser expert. The two of you will begin meeting with her as soon as she’s well enough for visitors. With that, I think we’re ready to move on to what we’re really here to talk about.”

“When do you think we’ll be able to see Wiress?” Peeta asked curiously. “Katniss and I have a lot of questions that we’d like answers to.” Leaning forward in his chair, Peeta looked President Coin straight in the eye. “Unless you have some answers for us?”

“Well, Mr. Mellark,” President Coin said stiffly. “That’s what I was just going to get to. As for Wiress... in her current state she would be of no help to you right now. I ask that you please be patient while she recovers.”

“Oh course,” Peeta said sympathetically. “Though I’m sure you can imagine how frustrating this is for us.”

There was a coldness in Peeta’s voice that Katniss had never heard before. If it wasn’t clear that Peeta wasn’t fond of President Coin before, it certainly was clear then. Peeta’s questions evoked a different rise out of Coin than Katniss’s did. Instead of becoming noticeably angry, she seemed nonplussed and thrown off by Peeta’s unexpected interruption and fluency.

“All the more reason for us to continue with what needs to be discussed,” President Coin advised
with a bitter tone that matched Peeta’s word for word. “The two of you sit before us as The Upriser and The Incendiary, the two most integral keys to this revolution. We have military, we have weapons, and we have bombs, but you two are the leaders. This revolution will not be a success without both of you.”

As President Coin continued to speak, it became clear that the words she was saying were being read off of the device in front of her. Adding it to the growing list of things about District 13 that made Katniss uneasy, she and Peeta listened with uncertainty while the others gawked at them, poring over them with each word President Coin uttered.

“The rarity of your position is unprecedented. There is not a single person alive today that has witnessed an Upriser and Incendiary together -- until now.”

To their surprise, President Coin set down her device and looked up, as though she not only expected questions, but for the first time welcomed them. A shared look between Katniss and Peeta was all the two needed. President Coin didn’t appear to be any more fond of either one of them than they were of her, but it was Peeta that seemed to be able to get answers from her without incident. Katniss decided it would be best if she said nothing for the rest of the meeting and allow Peeta to do all of the talking.

“I hate to bring this back around to what we’d already talked about,” Peeta started, his voice calm and even. “Plutarch already told us about the rarity of Uprisers and Incendiaries finding each other, and now you’ve just told us again. But what we aren’t being told is why this is so important. I don’t know about you, but wouldn’t you think something like that to be important? How can we lead a revolution when we’re not even sure what we’re doing, or what we can do?”

President Coin inhaled deeply through her nose and let it the air out slowly. Her frustration was evident. Peeta’s strategy of asking the president how she would feel in their position seemed to be the trick to getting answers from her. “The information we’ve received from Wiress has been limited. She’s come to us under extreme duress.”

“So what you’re saying is that you don’t know much more than we do?” Peeta pointed out. “Wouldn’t Wiress’s presence at a meeting like this be more beneficial to this revolution?”

There was something in the smile that rose to Finnick’s mouth in response to Peeta’s words that was a small comfort to Katniss. He tried to hide it by lowering and turning his head away from President Coin, but Katniss caught it. While she still had her reserves about him, she hoped that it was a sign that she and Peeta weren’t the only ones that didn’t trust President Coin.

“We don’t have the time to waste,” President Coin replied. “By now, the Capitol has probably already learned that Katniss has left District 12, and President Snow is going to want answers. They’re going to be planning, preparing, and before long, attacking.”

“We were told it was safe here,” Peeta argued, his voice beginning to rise. “We were told District 13 and the Capitol have agreed to a cease fire.”

President Coin laughed. “Boy, don’t you know what a cease fire is?” she said. “They’re temporary. Eventually something is going to come along to break it. You and Katniss will be kept safe from any attacks the Capitol sends our way. We are prepared for them and now it’s time for the two of you to prepare for them. You see, we have something that Snow doesn’t know about. A secret weapon -- a key to a rebel victory.”

“What is it?” Peeta asked.

“You,” President Coin answered, an impish grin covering her face. “In all of the preparation that
Snow’s regime did for a new Upriser, they were never clued into the legend of the Incendiary since so few Uprisers ever found theirs. They can prepare all they want, but they’re missing one very important piece to the puzzle and we intend for them to never find out. And that’s why we’re here today.”

President Coin once again paused in expectation of more questions, but nothing came. Both Katniss and Peeta were ready to hear why they’d been called to the command room. They were tired of being in the dark.

“Katniss, you’re the face of the entire revolution. You’re the nation’s Mockingjay, and Peeta, you’re our sure advantage,” President Coin began. “And by agreeing to take on the Capitol and embrace these roles as the Upriser and the Incendiary, you can change the world. But your compliance in this is integral.”

“Our compliance..” Peeta said, trailing off.

“We need it in writing,” President Coin confirmed. “That you agree to taking on the task of being The Upriser and The Incendiary.”

President Coin then turned the device she’d been reading from around, showing Katniss and Peeta a screen with two lines on the bottom where they were expected to sign. From the top of the device, she pulled out a small pen and extended it toward Peeta.

Katniss leaned over to Peeta and kept her voice as low as she could. “What exactly are we agreeing to?” She asked, keeping her hand over her mouth but moving her head away from Peeta’s ear and to the side so he could whisper his reply.

“I don’t know,” Peeta mumbled, shaking his head. “I don’t think we should, though. At least not yet.”

“Would they agree to more time?” Katniss murmured.

“They don’t have a choice,” Peeta said. “Forcing us to choose now, with all of these people in the room and hardly any clarification doesn’t feel right.”

Katniss and Peeta both moved their gazes back across the table to President Coin, and it seemed that she could tell right away that the two teenagers were having their doubts. Quickly, President Coin turned her head to Gale and nodded, and just as quickly, the older boy leaned forward and focused on Katniss.

“You know you can do this, Katniss,” Gale said, his voice taking on an unnatural saccharine tone. “I’ve seen you do incredible things. Think of your father. You know he’d want you to do this. Do it for your father, Katniss. Do it for our fathers.”

If President Coin’s plan was to use Gale as some kind of bribery, it wasn’t going to work. The pit in Katniss’s stomach that had been present since she walked into the command room and noticed Gale sitting in for the meeting blossomed into full on dread over his behavior. She knew that Gale was an advocate for the rebellion, and his need to fight had only been growing stronger and stronger in the years since she’d met him, but it was his sudden dedication to President Coin’s rebellion that she couldn’t find solace with. Her rejection of the agreement was there, nestled somewhere between her throat and lips, but the words were stubborn and refused to move up and out. Instead, it was Peeta’s voice that broke the silence.

“We’d like more time,” he began, testing the waters. “I’d like to discuss things with Katniss privately, without an audience and pen being forced at us. We’d also request that a list of
stipulations to this agreement be drawn up that we can look over before we agree to anything.”

President Coin looked just as blindsided as Katniss felt. She expected Peeta to ask for more time, but stipulations? Drawing up agreements? Peeta had it figured out long before Katniss did. President Coin chewed on the inside of her cheek as Peeta continued to speak.

“We also request that we be allowed to draw up a list of our own stipulations to the agreement,” he said, crossing his hands on the table in front of him.

“You want to bargain with me?” President Coin asked, failing to keep the anger out of her voice.

“If that’s what you want to call it, yes,” Peeta nodded. “Katniss and I just feel it’s fair that we both agree to the exact terms of this agreement since we’ll be expected to do all of the work for the cause.”

After another round of dead silence, President Coin’s voice came out in a mutter.

“Very well,” she said, clearing her throat. “We’ll meet here after breakfast tomorrow for your decision and your.. stipulations.”

“Thank you, President Coin,” Peeta said, settling back into his chair.

“Everyone is to report to this room tomorrow morning, straight after breakfast,” President Coin announced. “You’re all free to leave.”

Everyone but President Coin rose from their seats and began to file out of the room. Katniss and Peeta stayed behind, waiting as Plutarch spoke softly to President Coin. As soon as he headed toward the door, the two followed him to make their exit.

“Katniss?” President Coin called. “Could you wait a moment?” Peeta stopped with Katniss, taking a few steps back into the command room. “Peeta, you can leave.”

There was reluctance in Peeta’s steps back toward the door, but with one last look back to President Coin, he knew he was not welcome any longer. He turned the corner sharply, quickly disappearing from the doorway.

Once it was just President Coin and Katniss in the room, Coin’s words came quick but threatening.

“Your little friend Peeta is quite a mouthpiece,” she hissed. “But I would be careful what you two try to get away with here in District 13. I may have let you know where your family would be staying, but I never promised that either one of them would be there when you went to visit.”
The chill in President Coin’s voice matched the sensation of numbing cold that was running through Katniss’s body. As she stared back at the apathetic president, she kept her expression equally cold. She refused to let President Coin see that her threat had any kind of impact on her, and she maintained a fluid and leisurely stride in her steps when she exited the command room.

It wasn’t until she’d rounded the corner and walked a safe distance from the command room that she darted up the hallway to catch up to Peeta and Plutarch, mentally thanking the district for supplying her the boots she was wearing. If it wasn’t for the thickness of them keeping the bottoms of her pants from falling, she surely would’ve tripped on them in her haste to catch up.

Peeta stopped first, his eyebrows furrowing in concern over the distressed look on Katniss’s face.

“Katniss, what’s wrong?” he asked, running to meet her. The sound of Peeta’s voice caused Plutarch to finally stop and turn around.

“I need to get to compartment 307,” Katniss gasped. Peeta would be no help there, so her only choice was to turn to Plutarch who was carefully walking closer to the teenagers. “Can you tell me how to get there, Plutarch?”

If he noticed the alarm in Katniss’s voice or the worry in her posture, he didn’t make note of it. His instructions were quick, his tone natural and unperturbed.

“Take the stairwell at the end of the hall up two flights, odd numbered compartments are on the left,” he said, pointing to a single steel door at the end of the hall they were on.

The door became the only thing Katniss could focus on. Her feet were moving toward it and beyond before she could even mutter a thank you to Plutarch, though she doubted he even noticed. It was Peeta’s voice that almost stopped her. He could be heard in the stairwell calling after her, telling her to wait for him, but she couldn’t stop her legs from taking the stairs two at a time. She needed to tell Peeta what happened, but there was no time to stop and wait. He’d catch up eventually and by then she’d know if President Coin was bluffing and Prim was safe in her compartment where she should be or if there was truth behind the threat.

By the time Katniss reached the third floor, a pain ate at her side and her breaths came out in hoarse gasps, but she continued forward, her focus trained on the left side of the new, but equally gray, hallway. The numbers blurred as she ran passed the first three doors, stopping when the numbers “307” caught her eye.

“Prim!” Katniss yelled, banging her fists into the hard steel of the compartment door. “Mom! Open the door!”

There was no answer.

Katniss started to yell for Prim and her mother even louder, battering the door as hard as she could and ignoring the bursts of pain that traveled up her arms when her balled fists hit the cold steel of the door.

“Katniss!” Peeta called, running up the hall to her. “What happened?”
“President Coin,” Katniss panted, opening another round of wallops to the door. “She threatened to have something done to Prim and my mother if we continued to undermine her. Prim!”

Thankfully, Peeta didn’t bother to supply Katniss with a generic response that did nothing to soothe her. He said nothing, but the look on his face told Katniss that he was thinking, planning something that he couldn’t quite explain at that moment.

“Doorbell,” Peeta finally muttered, leaning over and pressing the small button situated right next to the door. “The doors thick. They’re probably soundproof.”

Of course, the doorbell! In Katniss’s panic, she had completely failed to notice or even consider that there was a doorbell to the compartment, despite being woken up by the one in their compartment that very morning.

Within seconds, the thick door was sliding open to reveal Mrs. Everdeen and Prim behind her, sitting on one of the beds. Prim stood up when she noticed Katniss and was immediately devoured in a protective hug.

“Has anyone been here to see you two?” Katniss asked, smoothing Prim’s hair and checking her face for any signs of distress. “Any visitors?”

“Not until the two of you got here,” Mrs. Everdeen said. There was something about the way she looked at Katniss, the way her eyes were wide and searching, that told Katniss she knew something was wrong. Not wanting to scare Prim, Katniss gave her mother a curt nod.

“Well you haven’t missed much,” Peeta quipped, taking in the compartment. “Our compartment looks just like this, and I’m still not sure where the bathroom is.”

Katniss knew what he was doing. There was no way either of them were going to tell her mother the danger she and Prim were in with Prim in the room, and what better way to take their minds off of the disquiet than to talk about the minor calamities they’ve encountered since arriving in District 13?

“It’s a communal bathroom,” Mrs. Everdeen said, pointing at the door. “Ours is a little ways up the hall.”

“That’s the one thing they forgot to tell us,” Peeta said nodding and smiling at Prim. “How do you like the uniform, Prim?”

Peeta’s goal of diffusing the tension worked as the compartment filled with easy laughter, all eyes on Prim. Katniss thought her uniform was big on her, but it was nothing compared to how terribly Prim’s fit.

With the air a bit clearer, the rest of the visit went smoothly. Prim told Katniss and Peeta about the other kids she’d met during breakfast that morning. A breakfast they’d missed because they were in the command room with President Coin. They kids were assigned to her table and suggested she take some medical classes with them during her stay.

Prim took after her mother. Gentle, soothing, and a natural healer. Though it’d been years since Katniss had seen that side of her mother, she saw it every single day in Prim.

“I want to be a doctor,” Prim stated proudly, curling her legs up under her on her bed. “The kids said District 13 could help me with that.”

Katniss thought it was a good idea. Maybe the classes would help Prim blend in a little bit and keep her busy enough to remain unaware of the dangers that lurked just on the surface. She
wanted her sister to be as normal a kid as she could be in District 13. After spending most of her life hidden in the woods, Prim deserved that.

With Katniss’s words of encouragement fresh in the air, she and Peeta made to leave. They had a lot of work ahead of them if they wanted their list of terms for President Coin to be ready by morning.

“What do I do?” Mrs. Everdeen whispered, following Katniss and Peeta to the door.

Katniss pushed away the anger that flared in her stomach, choosing instead to focus on the fact that her mother was even asking how she could help in the first place.

“Watch her,” Katniss instructed. “Make sure you know where she is at all times. You both need to be careful.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Peeta added. “But until then, stay cautious. We’re afraid things aren’t much safer here than they were in District 12.”

Katniss shook her head when her mother’s wide eyes seemed to ask for details. Not there, not with Prim in the room.

“Just do what I said,” Katniss pleaded. “We’ll see you at dinner later.”

Every single noise that echoed in the hallway seemed far louder than it really was. The sounds of Katniss and Peeta’s boots meeting the floor rang out like gunshots, and even the energy that hummed between the two felt audible. They were dying to speak, but both knew it was better to wait until they were inside their compartment before uttering a word. Plutarch once said that President Snow had eyes and ear everywhere, and it was likely that President Coin had the same.

Peeta didn’t waste time. As soon as their compartment door had slid closed behind them, he began to pace the small area.

“President Coin didn’t only threaten your family so that we’d stop undermining her,” Peeta said. “She’s trying to scare you into agreeing to be their Mockingjay. Why else would everyone act like telling you where Prim and your mother were when you asked was top secret information? She’s trying to use them against you Katniss, so you’ll agree to something before you’ve had time to think about what you’re agreeing to. Because you’re the one that’s hasty enough to do that.”

“I am not hasty!” Katniss objected, quickly noticing the anger in her voice. “Okay.. maybe I am a little hasty, but they need us both to agree.”

“President Coin wouldn’t threaten both of us,” Peeta explained, dropping down on his bed. “First of all, what would she threaten me with? The only thing she has on me is you, and she wouldn’t do anything to you, you’re what she needs for her revolution.”

“She needs you, too,” Katniss reminded him, sitting down across from him on her own bed.

“Which gives her all the more reason to threaten you,” Peeta said with a nod. “That way you can decide you want to sign that agreement right away and convince me that I need to do the same. She’s already figured out our weaknesses, Katniss. She’s probably known them all along.”

Peeta was right. President Coin already knew exactly what it would take to get the two of them to agree to things. If it weren’t for Peeta, Katniss probably would have signed the agreement as soon as Prim’s safety was threatened.

“She’s playing a game with us,” Katniss muttered, realization washing over her.
“She wants us to agree to something that will most likely backfire on us later and benefit herself,” Peeta said. “So the first thing we have to make clear tomorrow is that threats as a method of control will not be tolerated.”

“How do we say that to the president of the district?” Katniss sighed.

“We make it a stipulation,” Peeta smiled. “Your family is off limits. They have no part in this revolution and there is no reason to make them, part of it. A twelve year old especially.”

Peeta made it sound so simple. He was quick and sensible, and the more time Katniss spent with him outside of the grove the more she was able to see a side of Peeta she was never privy to before. The boy that let her sleep on his shoulder and smudge his drawings was still there, as patient and comforting as ever, but there was more that she was starting to see. A cunning and astute side that made Katniss’s pull to him and ache of his absence in the weeks leading to their rescue that much stronger.

The rest of the day was spent discussing their terms to the agreement. They left no stone unturned, and when the voice came through the speaker next to the door that it was time to go to the dining hall for dinner, they complied, if only to scour around to find paper and two pencils to write down their thoughts.

Almost every inch of every piece of paper they manage to find was covered in writing. Only a single sheet remained clean, and they vowed not to write on it until they’d both felt as though they’d covered every detail and were ready to write up their final draft of their terms.

“We both need to be active when we present this to President Coin,” Peeta said, using the wall the scribble down a few more notes. “She isn’t going to agree to anything without details of each term, so if I took that part would you be able to read the terms?”

Katniss thought about Peeta’s suggestion and it seemed like the best approach. All of the head-butting and negotiating would be on Peeta’s shoulders, while Katniss simply had to present their list and agree to any negotiations Peeta and President Coin put on the table.

“I think that would be best,” Katniss agreed. “Since you think I’m too hasty.”

“Hey,” Peeta said, walking over to where Katniss sat on her bed. “I never said hasty was a bad thing, it just may not be the best way to keep President Coin from breathing down our necks right now.”

Peeta knelt down, and for the first time in weeks, their lips met in a slow and lingering kiss that enlivened Katniss’s body and made her realize just how starved she’d been for Peeta’s affection in the weeks they’d spent apart.

They didn’t want to stop, and for the briefest moment it seemed like nothing was keeping them from stopping, until the lights above them began to hiss and threaten to shatter, forcing Katniss and Peeta apart.

“That wasn’t how I pictured this going,” Peeta sighed, dropping his head. “But we probably should finish this up, I’m sure it’s getting late.”

If it weren’t for the papers, and the fact that they had to present their list first thing in the morning, Katniss would have told Peeta to forget about finishing them before bed. The lights could’ve been turned off and they could’ve resumed where they’d left off, but without those terms finished, they’d be walking into a warzone completely unarmed.
With a sigh and a nod, Katniss picked up her pencil and circled her first term, “My family is off limits.”

It was another three hours before Katniss and Peeta were finally content with the list of stipulations. But, they felt that the folded up final draft that was safely tucked away under Katniss’s pillow was their key to contentment.

Peeta pulled two pairs of both pants and shirts from the small closet in the compartment and handed a set to Katniss. They undressed together in silence, and this time neither teenager turned away from the other.

“Weren’t we supposed to get fresh uniforms?” Katniss asked, pulling her pants down and stepping out of them.

“I thought that’s what Ayers said,” Peeta replied, pulling off his shirt. His voice faltered slightly as their eyes took in each other. “I guess we could just fold up the ones we have and wear them again tomorrow.”

Katniss had never felt true temptation before. There were days in the past when she’d thought about Peeta in the grove. What his lips would feel like against hers, or what his hands might do if she asked him to slip them underneath her shirt. But nothing was quite as strong as how drawn she felt to Peeta in that small, stifling compartment.

It was no longer a case of her wondering what his lips might feel like or what his hands would do if given permission. It was a craving for those things that she both had to have and knew she couldn’t, at least not at that moment. They both knew that once they moved in on each other, sleep would be an afterthought. There was too much to do the next morning for them to go without sleep, no matter how strongly they both desired it.

Peeta turned off the lights, and rather than squeezing into one bed together they both pulled the covers back on their respective beds and slipped underneath them. The sheets were just as rough and uncomfortable as everything else in District 13, and the lack of room to truly settle in to sleep was frustrating for Katniss.

But it was the darkness that was the worst. Denser than the thickest autumn fog and filling Katniss with a heaviness she couldn’t even begin to try and explain. Instead, she tried to cut through it with her voice.

“I don’t like it here, Peeta.”

“I don’t, either,” Peeta agreed. “But is there any other place for us right now?”

“No place that’s safe,” Katniss said. “But our safety here is questionable, too.”

“I don’t trust any of this,” Peeta admitted, though it was hardly a secret. “What if this room is bugged? Or that speaker they called us to dinner through operates two ways and they can hear us talking right now? I keep wondering if there’s anywhere that really is private here.”

“Do you think Plutarch would know?” Katniss asked.

“Do you think Plutarch would tell us if he did?”

Katniss had nothing else to say. If Plutarch wouldn’t even tell her which compartment her mother and sister were in, there was no way he’d ever tell her about the security measures of District 13. It was hard to believe it was only their second night there. Things had changed so quickly, and there’d hardly been any time to adjust.
“Peeta?” Katniss asked suddenly. “Are you okay?”


“Well, your family,” Katniss explained hurriedly. “With everything that’s happened there’s hardly been any time for you to talk about it. And I..”

“I already told you it was okay,” Peeta said. His voice felt like it was a million miles away in the dark compartment, and he sounded anything but okay.

Katniss climbed out of her bed, pressing the front of her legs against the heavy, steel bedframe before pushing all of her weight against it. The bed began to move, emitting a deafening scrape as it traveled across the concrete floor, and she only stopped when she’d gotten her bed as close to Peeta’s as she could, the frames of both beds crashing into each other.

As Katniss got back into bed, she scooted over closer to Peeta, placing her head down on his chest as his arms wrapped around her. It felt so much better than being in her small bed with so much space separating her from Peeta. With their beds pushed together, they could both sleep comfortably together, and even though it couldn’t get rid of the disquiet the darkness brought upon them, somehow even just listening to the rhythm of the other’s breathing seemed to help a little.

Neither of them spoke as they settled in together, but even that felt soothing when their bodies were woven together and their fingers roamed delicately over the planes of each other’s bodies. The only thing that either of them had that was still familiar was each other. A new district full of new people was bound to make anyone feel lost and alone. Prim was moving forward and making a life for herself, and even Katniss’s mother seemed to be turning over a new leaf. But as long as Katniss and Peeta stayed by one another’s side, they felt okay.

“I’ve always thought that the word family had two different meanings,” Peeta said, breaking the silence. Katniss hadn’t been expecting him to say anything else, so she laid still, waiting to hear what else he had to say. “There’s the family you’re born into, of course. My mother was that only in the sense that she gave birth to three sons, but she cared more about a bakery that she married my father to get than she cared about actually being a mother. And then sometimes there’s the family that you choose. People who act and feel more like family to you even though you don’t share blood. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

Katniss thought about her own mother. There was the woman that only existed in memories. The gentle and patient one that was able to take the pain of a cut away with a single kiss and laughed earnestly at Katniss and her father dancing around their small home in the Seam. And then there was the one she knew now. The emotionless, dejected woman who seemed to forget she ever had children.

“It makes sense to me,” Katniss murmured.

“My brothers were so bloodthirsty,” Peeta continued, his voice small. “They were twins, so they always had each other. All of my memories of them involve them killing something, I think. It started small. Setting spiders they found in the bakery on fire, plucking the legs off of grasshoppers, but then they got bored with that. Pretty soon they were catching and killing chipmunks, and after that rabbits that wandered into the district from the woods. And it had nothing to do with feeding the family. My mother was so vengeful, though, I don’t know that it bothered her in the slightest. I think it bothered my father more, but he never spoke of it.”

Katniss stayed silent, happy to let him talk, even if what he was saying was a glimpse into Peeta’s life that she could have gone without learning.
“So when the Peacekeepers showed up and started threatening the family, my brothers didn’t hesitate to volunteer to hunt you down. They were laughed at initially, because they were only fourteen at the time, but they proved themselves worthy by gutting our pigs while the Peacekeepers watched. As sick as it’s going to sound, I think my mother was proud of my brothers for the first time in her life that day, because not long after that she was standing next to them, waiting to hear how they could get rid of you. I don’t know what they said to my father to get him to agree, I ran out of the bakery before they got to him. But I do know that the Capitol was dead set on painting you as the tyrant. The Peacekeepers convinced so many people that if you weren’t stopped, they would be in danger, and promises of riches beyond measure once you finally were killed were made.”

“What happened to the families that wouldn’t agree to become hunters?” Katniss asked.

“They were killed, usually,” Peeta said. “Some of them were forced to live on the streets while their homes or businesses were destroyed. They’d end up dying of starvation after a while. I knew my family was dead either way as soon as they agreed to become Mockingjay Hunters. Snow never intended to make good on those promises, but my mother seemed to think our family was the exception. That they’d be spared for their dedication, and she always told me it’d be my fault if the family were killed, because I refused to hunt you.”

“You didn’t believe that, did you?”

“No,” Peeta scoffed. “I still spent all of my time trying to find you. I wished for so long that I could’ve told you more that day I found you in that log, and when I finally got the chance I couldn’t do it, and that haunts me. I convinced myself that not telling you would protect you somehow, but it only made you not trust me.”

“I trust you,” Katniss said.

“But you didn’t,” Peeta retorted. “It took a catastrophe for the truth to come out. What if it hadn’t?”

“Does it matter now?” Katniss sighed. “I know the truth. It shouldn’t matter how I learned it.”

“It matters to me,” Peeta said. “All I ever wanted to do was protect you. My family’s death orders were signed with or without my participation. They wrote me off a long time ago, but it still didn’t save them. I couldn’t save them. We can’t let this agreement with President Coin be made without as much written proof of all of our terms or she’ll do the same thing to us. I’ve seen this before. Plutarch may think she’s for The Mockingjay, but so far she hasn’t shown us that. I may not have done the right thing to protect you before, but I plan on doing it now.”

Nothing more was said that night. After a bit of stressful tossing and turning, the two finally managed to fall asleep, both anxious but ready to present their terms to President Coin in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks to ichooseupeetachu for her support as I write this story!
The Stipulations

Chapter Summary

To everyone that has stuck with this story, thank you so much. I know it has been a little slow, but the shorter chapters make it possible for me to update every week instead of once every three months. And as always, thank you to ichooseupeetachu for all of her support!

Nobody in the dining hall the next morning looked nearly as anxious as Katniss felt. How could they all be so casual? Of course, almost none of them even knew of the impending meeting between her, Peeta, President Coin, and the rebels. What was there for them to be anxious about? They’d go to their district approved activities and be back to the dining hall when they were called to dinner. The inner workings of a possible war were not their concern. If only Katniss could feel even a fragment of their incognizance, she’d be content.

Katniss smiled when she spotted Prim seated at her table. She talked happily with a group of kids that appeared to be around her age, and her mother sat a few feet away, talking to Hazelle Hawthorne. After the meeting with President Coin, the two of them would be safe from anything involving Katniss and free to start a new life in District 13. She waved at them, not wanting to rile up any of the guards, and continued toward the table she and Peeta had been assigned to the day before.

If she hadn’t been so pre-occupied with finding a pencil and paper during dinner the previous night, she probably would’ve put up more of a fight when the cafeteria guard forced her away from Prim’s table when she stopped to say hello. Katniss couldn’t understand what the harm was in saying hello to her family, but the guard simply told her she had to be seated at her assigned table, and she was to stay there until she was dismissed. It would’ve been nice to talk to her family before the meeting with President Coin. She wanted to tell her mother that she was taking care of everything and that their safety would be secured soon, but all she could do was walk by them, her anger growing as she thought of just how illogical some of District 13’s rules seemed to be.

Peeta was already seated at their table, poking his fork into the unidentifiable mass of food on his tray while Finnick and Johanna talked earnestly to one another. Beetee sat alone, methodically spooning his food into his mouth while reading some sort of pamphlet. They were told that Gale was also assigned to their table, but he was nowhere to be found at dinner the night before, and there wasn’t a trace of him there at breakfast, either.

Katniss couldn’t decide whether she was more angry or concerned over his absence. He could be doing work in the weapons department like Coin had said, but Beetee was in charge of both the technology and the weapons departments in District 13, and he still made it to meals. What was keeping Gale from the cafeteria? What did President Coin have him doing that Beetee was not?

“Hey,” Peeta said with a smile, scooting over to allow Katniss to sit next to him. “I didn’t think you’d ever make it out of that food line.”

The attention in District 13 was strange to say the least. While nobody quite acknowledged who Katniss was, that didn’t stop everyone from staring too long and stopping to ask her too many questions she had no interest in answering. By the time she made it through the food line and
gotten her allotted tray of mush, half of the cafeteria had already finished eating.

“I was prepared to start eating before I even got to the table if that woman asked me one more question about District 12,” Katniss complained, shoving a fork full of food into her mouth.

“They haven’t been out of this underground blockhouse in years,” Peeta laughed. “Some probably never have been outside. They’re just curious.”

“Well they should try being curious when I’m not trying to eat,” Katniss said. “Not that any of whatever this might be is settling well with how nervous I am.”

“Are you alright to read those terms?” Peeta whispered, leaning in close. “Did you want to go over them over more time?”

“No,” Katniss shook her head. “I’m ready, just nervous. But what about what we talked about last night?”

The teenagers’ eyes moved across the table to Beetee who still seemed fixated on the pamphlet he was reading, paying no attention to anyone else at the table. It was going to take a little more than staring at him to get his attention. Squaring his shoulders, Peeta cleared his throat and began to speak.

“It’s Beetee, right?” he asked, leaning forward. At the sound of his name, Beetee looked up from his pamphlet and nodded, dropping it when Peeta extended his hand toward the man. “I was just wondering something, Beetee.” He dropped his voice before speaking his next words. “How well do you know President Coin?”

Katniss tensed at the question. She and Peeta had discussed the conversation they wanted to have with Beetee in full before they left their compartment for breakfast, but hearing Peeta say the words to Beetee, and how quickly he said them, felt risky in a way it hadn’t when it was just the two of them together.

“No very well,” Beetee said. He didn’t appear to be put off by Peeta’s question at all, even going as far as pushing the pamphlet he had been so enthralled with away from him. “I only got to 13 a couple of days before you and Katniss did.”

“You specialize in technology, is that correct?” Peeta asked. “Katniss and I have a question to ask you…” Finnick and Johanna had caught wind of the conversation and both were staring at the trio whispering near them. “Privately,” Peeta stressed.

“Of course,” Beetee nodded. “We can move to the end of the table if you’d like?”

After quick nods from Katniss and Peeta, the three moved down to the empty half of the long table to resume their conversation without prying ears. Peeta and Katniss wanted to keep things between as few people as they could, and having just met Finnick and Johanna twenty four hours prior, they still weren’t certain they could be trusted just yet. They still weren’t sure they could even trust Beetee, but they were willing to take the chance.

“We were wondering,” Peeta said, his voice low. “If it’s possible to record audio of video of our meeting with President Coin today? And if so, how we could go about doing that?”

Beetee looked at the pair thoughtfully and nodded slowly, a small grin appearing on his face.

“Of course it’s possible,” Beetee said. “Microphones and cameras can be very small. Sometimes as small as a button. In fact, I created a camera that can be attached to just that, a button.”
“And is that something we could use?” Katniss asked. “Do you have it?”

“I have it,” Beetee nodded. “And once we’re dismissed here, I’ll take care of it. It’s very simple, and completely undetectable unless you’re looking for it.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Peeta asked uncertainly. “We were prepared to attach the camera to ourselves.”

“I can handle it,” Beetee assured them. “Are you hoping to keep the recording as evidence of President Coin’s agreement?”

“Can’t be too careful,” Peeta confirmed.

“Well, I’m impressed,” Beetee smiled. “And you’re right. You can’t be too careful.”

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Everything following their dismissal from breakfast seemed to mirror the morning before. Katniss and Peeta following Plutarch to the command room, entering to see Gale already sitting at the table with President Coin and, as time passed, the others sitting across from them, staring expectedly.

As Beetee shuffled into the room, he caught Katniss and Peeta’s attention and gave them a pithy nod to let them know everything was set with their plan to record the meeting. And just as Beetee sat down, Haymitch jogged in, not as late as the morning before, but still last.

“Glad you could join us, Mr. Abernathy,” President Coin breathed, not bothering to look at him.

“Clocks,” Haymitch retorted, taking his seat.

“As you all know, we’re here this morning to discuss the agreement District 13 has presented to Miss Everdeen and Mr. Mellark,” President Coin began. “Just in case anyone’s forgotten, Miss Everdeen and Mr. Mellark were uncomfortable agreeing to the proposal yesterday and requested they be given time to discuss the matter privately and be given a chance to present a list of their own terms to this proposal.” She let out an exasperated breath and dropped her hands to the table, folding them gently. “Now that we’ve recapped what happened yesterday, we can begin. Miss Everdeen, Mr. Mellark? Let’s hear your stipulations.”

The command room grew uncomfortably silent. Finnick shifted restlessly in his chair while Johanna cleared her throat. And though Katniss couldn’t be sure, she thought she heard Haymitch chuckle from his spot next to Plutarch.

Katniss clutched the paper in her hands and looked down at the list. It was simple, just read what they had written on the paper and let Peeta elaborate on what they meant. That’s all she had to do, but her mouth felt dry, her throat constricted. She opened her mouth a few times to try to speak, but all she did was gasp like a fish out of water.

“Katniss?” Peeta whispered. She swallowed hard and took a deep breath, trying to keep her heart from pounding. “Do you think we could get a glass of water, please?”

The silence lingered as a District 13 assistant poured a cup of water and handed it over to Peeta.

“Relax,” Peeta whispered gently. “Take a sip and swallow it slowly, then try again.”

Katniss did just that. The water was cold on her tongue, and she swirled it around for a moment, making sure her mouth was sufficiently coated before letting the liquid slide down her throat.
After a second, identical sip, she looked back down to their list and read the first stipulation with the strongest voice she could muster.

“My family is off limits,” Katniss said, looking straight up to President Coin after the words had been read.

“This revolution does not include Mrs. Everdeen, a widowed mother of two and Primrose, a twelve year old child,” Peeta started. “If you’re hoping for Katniss to be the Mockingjay, your symbol in the revolution, then we ask that you recognize that attempting to use Katniss’s family as some sort of leverage against her is arbitrary and will never benefit you in gaining our trust and getting our cooperation.”

President Coin’s face went from blithe to confounded as Peeta spoke, and as he finished his explanation, she said nothing in return. She couldn’t. Any rebuttal would confirm to the entire room that she’d threatened Katniss, and so with a simple wave of her hand, she instructed Katniss to continue with the next stipulation.

“Everything Peeta and I agree to must be in writing from this point forward,” Katniss read, much more confidently. “Nothing electronic.”

As though the room expected it, all eyes turned to Peeta for his explanation.

“We are requesting hard copies of everything agreed upon today and anything drawn up in the future,” he said. “Katniss and I do not feel comfortable signing anything electronically as we are unaware of the technology in District 13 and don’t know what can and cannot be altered once our signatures are given. In addition to that, we’d each like a copy of anything drawn up, just to be sure that additional copies of this agreement and others are out there.”

“Mr. Abernathy, I’m allocating this one to you,” President Coin said. “You’ll be in charge of having this agreement drawn up and ready for signing.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Haymitch replied, leaning back in his chair.

“Your next stipulation, Miss Everdeen?” President Coin urged.

“Peeta and I request permission to go outside.”

“No,” President Coin countered, shaking her head. “Too much exposure to the toxins on the surface of the district is not safe for anyone. Only authorized personnel is permitted outside.”

“How much exposure is considered too much?” Peeta asked. “We understand the district is unsafe for prolonged exposure on the surface, but is there some sort of time limit we could try to agree on?”

There was no way President Coin was going to agree without Peeta explaining why. And Katniss wasn’t sure Peeta could even explain the feelings of suffocation that they’d been experiencing since they were moved underground to District 13. The air may not be the freshest, and the scenery not nearly as vast as District 12, but it had to be better than the dull gray surroundings and stale air where they’d been, if even for a little while.

“I don’t think that risking toxic poisoning is worth the negotiations, Mr. Mellark,” President Coin stated flatly.

“We know the risks,” Peeta argued. “And we aren’t asking for much time, and I don’t expect you to believe us, but we need this. We feel just as poisoned down here.”
“Why’s that?” President Coin questioned, a wry smile playing at her lips.

“I.. can’t explain it,” Peeta signed. “But there’s something about being so far underground in this place that has no color that feels very…”

“Suffocating,” Katniss finished. “Like we’re being smothered here.”

“And we’re only asking this in hopes that by being outside, even in small intervals, it’ll help reduce that feeling and keep us better prepared to learn and train later,” Peeta added.

President Coin grew silent, her eyes downcast and thoughtful. Was she actually considering agreeing? Out of all of their terms, going outside was the one Katniss was sure would never be agreed on.

“Once a week,” President Coin said, looking back to the pair. “For twenty minutes, and you must go separately.”

Peeta looked to Katniss, and they both nodded at each other, knowing that asking for anything more than what President Coin had just given them would be entirely too much.

“That sounds fine with us,” Peeta said as Katniss prepared to read the next term.

“We have a slight issue with the electricity around here,” Katniss began, sounding almost embarrassed. “We were also wondering if there was any way for us to see outside since we can’t be out there or even see out of any windows.”

“Before coming to District 13, the only time Katniss and I spent together was spent outside so until now we were unaware that our… connection had any impact on electricity, but it does as Plutarch showed us,” Peeta explained, leaving out that they’d experienced the phenomenon while alone together as well. “This isn’t a stipulation so much as it’s a request for help on figuring out how to stop the electrical shorts when Katniss and I are too close to each other.”

“Beetee,” President Coin said. “This seems more your territory. Is there anything that can be done?”

“Small spaces, like compartments or individual rooms can be equipped with surge protectors that should prevent small electricity shorts,” Beetee explained. “They aren’t always effective, though. It’s all dependent on the strength of the surge, but one can be installed in their compartment very easily anyway to see how that works.”

“Thank you, Beetee,” President Coin said, turning back to Katniss and Peeta. “Since District 13’s facility is not equipped with windows, we could put a TV into your compartment with a feed into our surveillance system so the two of you can see outside if that’s what you’d like. Though there isn’t much to see.”

“That’s fine,” Katniss piped up. “We’ll take anything.”

“Very well,” President Coin nodded. “We’ll take care of that and the surge protection after the agreement is signed. Anything else?”

“One more,” Katniss confirmed. “Peeta and I would like full knowledge of all plans that involve us before they’re made or presented to anyone else.”

“Any plan of attack or tactic against the Capitol that directly affects us should be presented to us before any plan moves forward,” Peeta said. “While we’re on the verge of agreeing to head this revolution, I think it’s still important to consider that we should have the power to agree or
disagree with the ways this war will be won. We want to help and we want to fight, but we will not kill ourselves for the cause.”

“Safety first,” President Coin agreed, an edge of parody to her voice. “We conduct many meetings while we strategize, we’ll be sure to extend invitations to these meetings to you and Miss Everdeen. Now, if that’s everything, I--”

“I have one more!” Katniss bellowed. There was nothing left on the paper for her to read, but she had to do it. “In addition to my family being off limits, I want Peeta and Gale to be off limits as well. They can choose to give what they want to this revolution, but I want their safety ensured right now, the same as my family’s.”

Katniss didn’t have to elaborate. President Coin knew exactly what she meant. Neither Peeta or Gale could be used as bait to get Katniss to do anything. President Coin had already used Gale once, already threatened Katniss with Prim’s and her mother’s safety, and Katniss feared for what President Coin was capable of doing. If she could ensure that the people she cared about would stay safe and not suffer anymore because of her, she had to do it right then and there.

“If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do this as fair as possible. Threats will not be tolerated under any circumstances,” Katniss finished, keeping her eyes focused on the President as she spotted Peeta gaping at her out of the corner of her eye.

President Coin nodded, seeming pretty unaffected by Katniss’s final stipulation.

“Before we conclude this meeting, I have a few of my own stipulations for the two of you,” she said. “First, during your weekly visits to the surface of the district, you will not go alone. Katniss, Gale will go with you and Finnick, you’ll go with Peeta.”

“We don’t need anyone with us,” Katniss argued.

“Oh, but you do, Miss Everdeen,” President Coin said. “District 13 is putting all of their stock in the two of you. We don’t need our efforts wasted because you ventured too far into the woods alone.” She flashed Katniss a look that told her it’d be best to drop the topic. “Next, both of you are to undergo a physical examination once the agreement has been signed. Katniss, in addition to your exam you’ll also receive a shot that will prevent pregnancy. The last thing we want is for our Mockingjay to become pregnant.”

The teenagers’ silence was all President Coin needed to confirm her suspicions about the depth of their relationship.

“If that’s everything we want to cover this morning, and both parties are in agreement, then we are dismissed for the day. We’ll reconvene in the morning to sign the printed documents. Are we all in agreement?” President Coin asked.

“What do you think?” Peeta whispered. “Do you think we’ve got as much control of this as we can get?”

“I don’t know,” Katniss said. “How are you feeling?”

“I think we’re in as good a position as we’re going to get here,” Peeta replied honestly. “Do you agree?”

“I agree,” Katniss nodded.

“We’re in agreement,” they both said in unison.
“Then everyone is dismissed,” President Coin declared. “Haymitch, get on drawing up those papers right away, we’ll need them by this time tomorrow.”

Gale caught the pair as soon as they exited the command room, latching onto Katniss’s upper arm.

“Hey, Catnip,” Gale said, stopping Katniss and Peeta from walking further. “Can we talk privately?”

With a quick nod, Katniss looked to Peeta. “Wait here,” she said before following Gale a few yards away.

Gale’s words came quick. “I wanted to thank you,” he whispered. “For what you did in there for me.”

“You’re welcome,” Katniss said. “So you’re the president’s right hand man in training now?”

“I’m not here to talk about that,” Gale snapped. “I just wanted to say thank you, but it’s not necessary. I can take care of myself.”

“It was just to protect you, Gale,” Katniss retorted. Her voice was louder than she expected, and Peeta’s head turned to the sound. “President Coin already threatened my sister and mother, I didn’t want the same to happen to you. I’ve put all of you in enough danger as it is. And with how close you seem to be with her I--”

“I don’t need your protection,” Gale muttered. “I can take care of myself.”

“So you said,” Katniss deadpanned.

“We’re finally doing this, Katniss.” For a minute, Gale sounded like the boy Katniss met in the woods six years prior. Eager and affected, but with a touch of innocence that still scared her. “So let’s do it. I don’t want the protection order on me.”

Gale didn’t give Katniss a chance to respond. He’d said everything he needed to and wasn’t looking to be reasoned with. He disappeared down the hallway just as quickly as he’d appeared in front of her.

“Everything alright?”

Katniss turned to see Beetee standing next to Peeta, the pair of them staring blankly at her as she walked toward them.

“It’s fine,” Katniss lied. The truth was that she wanted to run after Gale and hit him -- no, slap him across the face. Anything to get him to wake up and see that they weren’t safe in District 13.

“Were you able to get video, Beetee?” Peeta asked, steering the conversation away from the conversation that’d left Katniss rattled.

“I have video of the entire exchange,” Beetee confirmed in a whisper, showing them the button on the cuff of his uniform. At first glance, it looked just like any ordinary button, but with a closer look they could see that one of the needle holes was actually a very small lense. “I’ll do the same for the signing tomorrow, if you want.”

“Yes,” Peeta said, letting out a puff of air. “Please.”

“I’ll make sure the two of you are equipped with a private storage chamber here,” Beetee
continued in a whisper. “They can only be accessed by fingerprint and I’m the keeper of that information. Anyone trying to tamper with another’s storage will have to answer to me, even the president. Storage chambers are the one thing in the district that she cannot tamper with.”

“Thank you so much, Beetee,” Katniss said.

“You’re welcome. Let’s just get those fingerprints so I can put this camera in storage until morning,” Beetee said, pulling out a small device from his pocket similar to the one Ayers used the day Katniss and Peeta were assigned to their compartments. “Just press your fingers to the screen. I’m connecting both fingerprints to storage chamber 73. You’ll need both fingerprints to open it. Anything you want kept inaccessible from District 13 is to go in there. Like I said, I’m in charge of them and I’ll make sure anything in there remains untouched.”

“We really appreciate this, Beetee,” Peeta said, pulling his finger off the device. “We owe you one.”

With everyone going their separate ways, Katniss and Peeta decided to head back to their compartment, both pleased with how things went during their meeting. Katniss felt even more pleased knowing that not only would Prim and her mother safe from being used against her, but Peeta would be, as well, but a pit still sat in her stomach when she thought of Gale.

When their compartment door slid open, the last thing they expected to see was Haymitch Abernathy seated on their beds waiting for them.

“Sweetheart, Loverboy,” Haymitch greeted with a nod. “Come on in. We need to have a little talk.”
The New Beginning

Chapter Notes

This is the longest chapter of the story, so far, and what I’m considering to be the first of the "second act", so to speak. The groundwork has been laid, so now the story can really take off and it will over the next few chapters. Thanks to all who have read this and left feedback. It means the world to me. Thanks to ichoosepeetachu for her support through my writing process and especially for this chapter. I probably would have ripped my hair out if it weren’t for your words of reassurance.

“Get out!” Katniss yelled, storming into the compartment and straight to Haymitch. “Get the hell out!” Her arm was raised, her hand balled into a fist and ready to strike when Peeta’s fingers wrapped around her wrist.

“Katniss!” Peeta shouted, pulling her away from the older man who sat placidly on the edge of the beds. “What are you doing!?”

As Peeta’s question seeped into her brain, he gently coaxed her to lower her arm. What was she doing? She was about to punch Haymitch Abernathy for breaking into her and Peeta’s compartment, that’s what she was doing. She jerked her arm again, but was stopped by Peeta’s body moving to block Haymitch from her.

“Hey,” Peeta whispered, closing the space between them and tilting her head up to meet his eyes. “Are you okay?”

She wasn’t, and they both knew it. How could anybody be okay after their lives had been turned into as spectacle for District 13 and the rest of the rebels? Three days before, she was sitting with Prim at the edge of the lake, dipping her toes into the water and watching to see which ripple would touch the leaves that bobbed on the surface first. Three days before, Gale was just a boy trying to feed his family while Peeta tried to escape from his. And now none of that even felt real anymore. How could anybody be okay when everything they’d ever known was suddenly so different that they could hardly recognize any of it?

Between Haymitch’s audacity, Gale’s heightened vengeance, and the portent of disaster that seemed to follow President Coin, seeing the smug look on Haymitch’s face when their compartment door slid open was the last straw. She knew she wouldn’t have regretted hitting Haymitch. He’d probably deserved it anyway.

“Let’s just see what he wants first,” Peeta suggested, slowly letting go of Katniss’s wrist.

“He shouldn’t be in here, Peeta,” Katniss argued. Her body had calmed considerably, but the resentment that Gale’s refusal brought earlier and the sense of violation she felt from Haymitch’s trespassing still lingered.

Peeta nodded in agreement and rounded on Haymitch. “You don’t get to break into our compartment and act like it’s no big deal,” he warned. “No matter what you’re here for. It’s bad enough we have to worry who may have this place bugged, or if they’re listening to our conversations through that doorbell system. Don’t make us worry about who’s going to be trespassing while we’re not here, too.”
“Relax, kid. I’m on your side,” Haymitch said. “But you’re right to be concerned with the privacy in here, especially now that you’ve practically invited them in by requesting modifications.”

Peeta sighed as he paced the length of the compartment once before stopping in front of Haymitch again. “Do you think they’d bug this compartment?” he asked. “Do you think they already have?”

“I don’t think they would yet, but I want you to be aware that they can if you give them enough reason to want to keep more tabs on you,” Haymitch explained, flashing Katniss a look that told her he was mostly talking to her.

“Why are you here?” Katniss demanded.

“Listen, Sweetheart. I’m here to help you,” Haymitch said. “It was smart, what you two did in that command room the last two days. Requesting more time, taking that time to write down terms, the whole thing. But you two need to watch out for President Coin. She’s power hungry, anyone can see that. And Plutarch? He’s so caught up in the romanticism of war that he’s best kept at arm’s length.”

Peeta nodded. “Is Plutarch aware of President Coin’s...”

“Less than noble intentions regarding the revolution?” Haymitch finished. “He doesn’t, but I’m still warning you not to put all of your trust in him. Not because he knows, but because he doesn’t know. That’s not the kind of person you want in your inner circle.”

“And who are we supposed to want to be in our inner circle?” Katniss asked. “You?”

“Is it that much of a stretch for you, Sweetheart? I did look after you all those years you were hiding away in that grove,” Haymitch reminded her. “You can consider me a mentor. By the way, nice touch going off the papers and throwing in that blondie here and your friend aren’t to be touched.”

“Well, you can take Gale out of that agreement,” Katniss said bitterly. “He doesn’t want any part of it.”

“Really?” Peeta asked.

“That’s what he was saying to me in the hall earlier,” Katniss admitted.

“If we’re being honest here, Peeta doesn’t really need to be on it, either,” Haymitch interjected.

“I’d prefer it if he were,” Katniss said, almost pleading.

Haymitch nodded. “If it makes you feel better, he’ll stay on it, but your friend is in more danger than Peeta is right now,” he said. “President Coin would never touch a hair on Peeta’s head. You two are too valuable to the cause. It’s after everything is said and done that you should be worried about. Coin doesn’t want to help you, she wants to use you to gain power and after she does?”

“That’s what we were afraid of,” Peeta said. “We asked Beetee for help securing a video of the meeting this morning. Extra evidence of the agreement existing.”

“That’s good!” Haymitch laughed. “I’m not sure I would have even thought of doing that.” He turning to Katniss. “You’re lucky he knows what he’s doing.”

“Peeta,” Katniss muttered through gritted teeth. “Why did you say that to him?”
“Are you really still that worried about me, Sweetheart?” Haymitch asked. “Listen, I’ve been looking after you since you were eleven years old. Don’t you think if was a threat I would have made sure you were found long before it finally happened?”

“So you’re saying it was you that kept me and my family safe all those years?”

“No,” Haymitch said, shaking his head. “But I did what I could. When nothing was biting, I even threw a few rabbits into those snares your friend liked to set up. My job was to observe you and anyone you interacted with and report everything back to Plutarch.”

“Why you?” Katniss asked, more perplexed than angry. “What made Plutarch want you to look after me?”

“Let’s just say that everything that’s happening now is something I gave up a lot for trying to do before,” Haymitch explained. “But we didn’t know about an Upriser twenty five years ago. That agreement the two of you’ve made with President Coin only covers the duration of the revolution and any war that may start because of it, and I don’t see either of you having any luck changing that, so remember this… if you fail, those closest to you will be the first ones to pay. I learned that the hard way. Remember that when you’re feeling your worst. This isn’t for Coin, even if might feel that way at times. You have to keep going. You have to stick together.”

“What do we do?” Katniss asked. “How do we stop President Coin?”

“Don’t give her the power she so desperately wants,” Haymitch warned, rising to his feet. He headed to the door and as it slid open, he turned around. “You also should’ve requested a bigger bed so you didn’t have to push two together.” He laughed as he walked out the door.

The signing went quickly the next morning. Katniss and Peeta took their turns looking at each page of the agreement, reading over any fine print to look for errors, loopholes, or changes that weren’t stated at the meeting the day before. And as Katniss scanned the final page, observing that Gale’s name was noticeably missing from the list of people who were not to be put in danger on account of her, she signed her name at the bottom next to Peeta’s, looking up to Gale who was nodding freely, all emotion gone from his features.

Katniss was immediately reminded of Haymitch’s words about Plutarch and the way he was caught up in the romanticism of war and couldn’t possibly see the undignified ways in which President Coin chose to run things. Haymitch’s urges to keep Plutarch at arms length due to his naive allegiance to the president forced Katniss to wonder if that was the same thing that had happened to Gale.

Had Gale gotten so caught up in winning and making the Capitol pay for his family’s oppression and the death of his father that he refused to see what was really going on in District 13? There had to be more. Empty promises from President Coin, titles, authority? They were all things Gale would find appealing now that he was in a position to fight. But he lived in District 12 right along with Peeta while The Capitol was recruiting people to hunt her down. He had to know that President Snow used similar tactics to convince people to join him. With the stories he came to the grove with, there was no way he didn’t know. Why couldn’t he see that President Coin would never give him the opportunity to get out from under her thumb as long as he stuck by her? There was only one answer -- he didn’t care to see it.

President Coin didn’t waste a second before signing the last page of the agreement, and without a second glance to either teenager, she turned her attention to Boggs.
“Boggs, will you please escort Miss Everdeen and Mr. Mellark to the hospital wing immediately for their physicals? The staff is expecting them,” she asked, finally looking across the table. “Once you’re cleared to train, you’ll both go with Boggs to the training facility to meet the others in your squad and to start light training. Finally, per the agreement, surge protection and your television with a video feed of the surface will be available by the time you return to your compartment tonight.”

Without so much as a pause to give Katniss or Peeta a chance to speak, President Coin breezed out of the command room, leaving the others to do as they pleased while Boggs walked the perimeter of the table to reach them.

“Are you two ready for your physicals?” he asked, pressing a button on his watch.

Why even ask? It wasn’t like they had a choice.

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“How have you been feeling since arriving in District 13?” A short but intimidating woman asked, flashing a light into Katniss’s eyes. “Any headaches? Nausea? Lethargy?”

“The last one,” Katniss confirmed.

“Lethargy?”

“Yeah,” Katniss nodded. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Can you try?” The woman urged.

“Nothing feels right here,” Katniss started. She knew that wasn’t what the doctor was looking for, but in order to explain how it made her feel, she had to include everything. “I don’t know if it’s the fact that we’re underground or not, but ever since I got here my whole body feels like it’s fighting to breathe.”

“You’re having trouble breathing?” The doctor asked, pressing a stethoscope to Katniss’s back and listening.

“No, not me.” Katniss let out a frustrated breath. “My body. It just feels like it’s weighed down by something. I told you it was hard to explain.”

“It’s probably just the change in surroundings,” the doctor assured her. “You spent a lot of your time in District 12 outside, right? The change in environment is enough to throw anyone out of sync. Other than the lethargy, do you feel alright?”

“Yes,” Katniss nodded. “It’s only the one thing, and that’s enough.”

“Your reflexes are excellent, muscle structures nicely developed, but there are signs of slight vitamin deficiency, which is common in some districts,” the doctor explained. She turned toward a tray full of medical instruments. “Other than that, you seem perfectly healthy, so there isn’t much you’ll need today. Two shots and you’ll be on your way.”

“Two?” Katniss questioned. “President Coin only mentioned one.”

“The orders from the president have two listed here for you,” the doctor confirmed. “That’s good, considering you’re from District 12.”

“What’s the supposed to mean?”
Katniss didn’t have to ask the question to get the answer, but she wanted to hear the doctor try to explain it anyway. District 12 was the poorest district in Panem. A district where sick and starving was the norm, that had always been true. Dozens of children died every year from eating spoiled food that caused them to become so sick they eventually died of dehydration, because not only was food scarce in District 12, so was clean water. It existed, but not all families could get to it, especially families with sick children.

“It’s just... the conditions in District 12 are more favorable to illnesses,” the doctor stammered, plucking a syringe from the sterile cloth that covered her tray. “Let’s get you set and ready for medical clearance, okay?” Bringing the syringe to eye level, the doctor coaxed the sleeve of Katniss’s hospital gown upward. “This is your birth control shot. It’ll be administered into your upper arm and it’ll be effective for four months.”

The shot was administered before Katniss could even feel the needle pierce her skin. Without much more than wiping the area with sterile gauze and instructing Katniss to massage the injection site for sixty seconds, the doctor turned back to the tray in front of her and grabbed a second, much larger syringe.

“This one can be a little intimidating,” the doctor said in response to Katniss’s wide eyed stare. “But it should take care of that lethargy you mentioned. I’m going to need your forearm this time.”

Not only was the second shot more intimidating, but the pain and burning that flooded Katniss’s arm was at times unbearable.

“Try not to rub the area,” the doctor warned. “That one needs to work its way in naturally. You can put your uniform back on now. We’ll keep you here for an hour just to make sure you don’t have any adverse effects to your shots and then you’ll be free to go.”

That hour seemed to crawl. The throbbing pain in Katniss’s forearm all but disappeared within minutes of the doctor leaving the exam room, and she was left alone to stare at the only walls she’d seen in District 13 that weren’t gray. The sterile white facade surrounding her seemed to brighten up and come alive as she sat waiting, and for the first time in days Katniss felt a little vitality returning to her body.

“You ready to go?”

Katniss turned to the voice only to find Boggs standing in the exam room doorway with Peeta, who was peering over Boggs’s shoulder trying to see her. In the days leading up to Boggs becoming their official escort around District 13, Katniss had hardly heard him speak. He sounded a lot more personable than Ayers, but less enthusiastic than Plutarch.

With a nod, Katniss hopped down from the exam table and followed Boggs and Peeta out the door, slowing her pace to create space between her, Peeta, and Boggs at the front.

“What do you think training will be like?” Katniss asked, walking in step with Peeta.

“If they wanted us to pass a physical exam before we started, it’s probably pretty intense,” Peeta reasoned. “But I don’t think Boggs has anything to do with anything beyond military training, so that’s only half of it for us.”

President Coin had been pretty vague on the details of their training, leaving Katniss and Peeta to guess what they’d be expected to learn from Boggs. But they wouldn’t be left wondering for long. With a simple code punched into a keypad on the wall, a door slid open to reveal the training quarters.
It was darker than Katniss imagined it would be. The familiar dull gray walls were traded for a
darker slate shade, and the floors were covered in black mats that buckled slightly under the
weight of their footsteps.

There were dozens of people in the training quarters. Some were grouped together by weapon,
others were gathered in a circle practicing hand to hand combat. Katniss knew right away that was
the group they were headed toward when she spotted Finnick explaining weaponless sparring
techniques to the group that also included both Johanna and Gale.

Boggs introduced them to the three unfamiliar faces in the group. A woman Boggs referred to as
Jackson, and two men, Homes and Mitchell. They all appeared to be in their early to late forties
and definitely weren’t strangers to sparring or military service.

“Peeta!” Finnick called, smiling as the two newest military recruits approached behind Boggs.
“Why don’t you come up here and try sparring with me?”

Katniss’s head whipped around to Peeta, who was already three steps ahead of her and headed
toward Finnick.

“Go easy on me,” Peeta said jovially. “I’m not exactly dressed for sparring.”

It wasn’t until Peeta pointed it out that Katniss noticed that they were the only ones in District 13’s
standard uniform. All of the other trainees were dressed in lighter, more breathable outfits.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get training clothes soon enough,” Finnick said. “I’ll do a quick
demonstration on a live person and then the rest of you can come up and replicate what Peeta and
I did.”

After Peeta made his way through the others, Finnick explained they’d be working on takedowns.
Each would take a turn trying to take Finnick down.

“Do you think he’ll do it?”

Gale’s voice caused Katniss to jump. She hadn’t even heard him walk up next to her.

“Do what?” she asked.

“Do you think Peeta will be able to take Finnick down?” Gale reiterated.

“I don’t know,” Katniss shrugged. “Have you gone yet?”

“Not yet,” Gale said, shaking his head. He fell silent briefly before clearing his throat. “Thanks for
taking my name off of that agreement.”

“You’re welcome,” Katniss replied icily. Though she still didn’t understand what the harm was in
making sure he was protected, she refused to revive their argument.

She tore her attention away from Gale just in time to see Peeta quickly and flawlessly sweep his
body underneath Finnick’s arms before wrapping his own around the top of Finnick’s thighs to
pull him to the ground.

“This is a good thing, Katniss,” Gale whispered. “We’re finally doing something. President Coin
even promised to introduce me to some pretty important people soon enough.”

“Do you really believe that?” Katniss snapped. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Gale,
of all people, falling victim to the empty promises of a ruler who had shown herself to be no better
off than the ruler who he had been determined to take down since the day she had met Gale. “Do you honestly believe that you, a brand new citizen to this district, who the president knows absolutely nothing about, is really going to amass some sort of status around here as quickly as you seem to think you will? Because Peeta--”

“This isn’t just about you and Peeta, Katniss,” Gale hissed. “There are other people that District 13 needs for this revolution to work. The weapons Beetee and I are working on will put us ahead of the curve. Nobody’s going to get in our way when we go to war with The Capitol.”

As Gale spoke, Katniss could see the flame behind his eyes. The same flame that was born and grew for years while Katniss hid out in the grove. But this wasn’t just an idea talked about in the secluded corner of the forest anymore. It was really happening, and that changed everything.

“Gale!” Finnick’s voice rang out, stopping any words of warning to Gale that Katniss was thinking about giving him. “You’re up! Can you beat Peeta’s time of forty-five seconds? I think that’s the fastest take down I’ve ever seen.” Finnick slapped Peeta hard on the back as he made his way back to the group to observe the others spar, and he noticed the angered look on Katniss’s face immediately.

“Another argument?” Peeta asked, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead.

“He’s just not seeing what’s going on here,” Katniss said. “He’s so eager and ready to fight that he doesn’t care to see a single thing wrong with President Coin’s revolution.”

“He probably never will,” Peeta said. “You always said that this was all he ever wanted since the day you met him. You can’t expect him to want to see something that’s standing in the way of him attaining his goals. He probably thinks he can fight through it and come out on top, like my brothers.”

“I tried to tell him what you told me,” Katniss said. “About your family, but as soon as I said your name…”

“He wouldn’t even listen to me when I tried to save his life,” Peeta reminded her. “Do you really think he’d listen now that he thinks he’s in a position of power?”

Katniss had nothing else say, because Peeta was right. The wall between her and Gale now was much thicker than the wall between Gale and a war with the Capitol, and Katniss’s warnings were useless.

After everyone in the group had their turn taking down Finnick, the rest of the training session was spent getting to know the others. Boggs said if they’d be working together, they had to get to know each other. For the most part, the group stuck together. Finnick and Johanna sat with Peeta, Katniss, and Gale, but Mitchell and Jackson broke off and sat together a few yards away.

“Where’d you learn to take a person down like that, Peeta?” Finnick asked, fiddling with a rope in his hands and fashioning a knot.

“I used to wrestle in school,” Peeta revealed. “And I had two older brothers, so sparring was pretty much a daily thing at home.” He laughed lightly, but Katniss could tell it was forced.

“Well good, then you can help me with these sparring session next time,” Finnick said. “Maybe teach the others some escapes if you have some.”

“I do,” Peeta confirmed. “I’d love to help out.”

“What about you?” Johanna asked, turning to Katniss. “Anything you could teach us?”
“She can shoot a bow better than anyone I’ve ever met,” Gale answered. “Been doing it since she was a kid.”

“Is that true?” Johanna asked.

“I’m alright, I guess,” Katniss said.

“More than alright,” Peeta chimed in. “She could probably teach everyone something.”

“Good, because this isn’t a free ride,” Johanna said. “Just because you’re some symbol doesn’t mean you don’t have to pull your weight around here.”

The group retreated down to dinner together, keeping conversation light for the rest of their time together, and disbanded when their table was dismissed with promises from Finnick that Katniss and Peeta would have their training clothes before the next day’s session.

As promised, the compartment was equipped with a single television when Katniss and Peeta entered that night. It was fastened to the bare wall to their left and was already cycling through different views from the surface.

“Too bad it’s so dark,” Katniss said, plunking down on the edge of the bed. “You can’t see much.”

“You can see enough,” Peeta said, walking closer to the screen. “Don’t you see it?”

“No really,” Katniss squinted, but was still unable to see much on the screen.

“Do you think you can make it lighter out there?”

Peeta’s question made Katniss think. Why was it so black in District 13? Her father had told her long ago that all of Panem could see when the world changed color, yet District 13 remained bathed in black that had nothing to do with the time of day.

“I don’t know if I can,” Katniss finally said.

“Are you feeling okay?” Peeta asked. “Why is it so black?”

“I’m fine,” Katniss assured him, standing up to grab her night clothes from the closet. “That’s why I’m not sure if I can do anything to make it lighter. I’m not doing that.”

Peeta paced the room, something Katniss noticed he seemed to do when he was thinking. Not even the sight of Katniss stripping out of her uniform could pull him from his thoughts. It took several minutes of Katniss staring at the television screen cycling through undecipherable black shadows before Peeta lowered himself down on the other side of the two beds that were still pushed together, sliding across to meet Katniss.

“You’re not causing the darkness in the district, so you don’t know if you can change it,” Peeta said, replaying their earlier conversation back. “But did you want to try?”

“How? I’ve never worked against the world, only with it,” Katniss said. “This goes against everything my father told me.”

“Do you remember that day in the grove,” Peeta started, settling down on the bed on his side. Without question, Katniss followed, pulling Peeta’s arms around her body as she settled her backside against his front. “When you changed the colors at will all on your own for the first time?”
“Yes,” Katniss murmured, shivering as Peeta’s fingers painted a light trail up and down her arm. “To orange, and then to red. But I didn’t do that all on my own. I had you.”

“You have me now, too,” Peeta whispered, pressing a kiss in the crook of her neck.

Katniss allowed the warmth that flared in her stomach to overtake her as she thought about that day in the grove. Peeta’s hands, first grazing her chin, then traveling further than they’d ever been. She could remember exactly how his touch left a trail of heat across her skin and his words drove her body and mind into an almost intoxicated state. She yearned for that feeling again. She turned in Peeta’s arms, bringing her chest flush with his as she rested her forehead against his, closing her eyes and breathing him in.

“What was it like for you that day?” She sighed. “What’d you feel?”

“Alive,” Peeta whispered. “Like I finally understood what kept me going all those years I searched for you. I felt everything with an intensity that I’d never experienced before, and it all seemed to be feeding off of you. All of the warmth you were trying to think about, I felt it. The frustration when you couldn’t bring yourself to change the colors, I felt that too. And then you kissed me and it was like my entire body had finally detonated and I would never be the same again.”

“Me too,” Katniss whispered, pressing her lips to Peeta’s. “Me too.”

“Look at the television,” Peeta said, pulling away.

Katniss rolled onto her back, turning her head toward the television to see that the darkness had been brightened slightly by a pink hue. The camera view then switched over to a feed of what looked to be an old city circle. In the distance were trees that looked as though they’d been dead for years. Black, charred ghosts of the leaf bearing trees they once were, they brought a haunting ambiance to the screen that was only further enhanced by the silhouettes of rubble and shells of old buildings that were probably once shops, possibly even homes.

Katniss couldn’t look at it anymore. Turning back to face Peeta, she buried her face in his chest and tried to steady herself, but the anger the views of District 13 brought was too strong. An entire district gone because of the Capitol. Had this been what President Snow was trying to do to District 12 the longer she stayed in hiding? What had he done to it since their escape? She couldn’t stand to think about it.

“Do you think the Capitol did that to District 12?” Katniss asked, looking up at Peeta.

“They were doing it before we even escaped,” Peeta confirmed. And he was right. Katniss had seen his drawings of the destruction around the district. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they finish it off once President Snow realizes you’re gone.”

Katniss screwed her eyes shut in attempts to drive out the horrific images that were flashing before her. “Tell me what pink means,” she begged, clutching Peeta’s shirt.

“Funny that pink would be the color to show up tonight. It could mean calm, but your body feels anything but calm right now, so it’s not that. It could be caring, or acceptance, or...” Peeta’s voice trailed off before choking out the last word. “Love.”

“The district went pink a lot while I was working on controlling the colors,” Katniss said, being careful not to acknowledge that those weeks spent working on her powers were also the weeks she and Peeta were apart.
“I know,” Peeta said, almost proudly. “I saw it. It’s what kept me going.”

“And it always happened when I was thinking about you.” Peeta stayed quiet, waiting for her to continue with her train of thought. She didn’t like talking about her feelings, but how could she hide them from Peeta when the world around her told him exactly what she was feeling? “Would I really be able to conjure pink if I didn’t feel something real for you?”

She’d been thinking a lot about Plutarch’s revelation and the worries she and Peeta shared when it came to their feelings for one another. Nobody made her feel the way that Peeta did, and she refused to believe that it was simply because of what they were.

“No matter how hurt I was that you didn’t tell me what your family was doing, I still couldn’t stop thinking about you or how you made me feel. That has to mean something. But how can I tell the feelings apart? Which ones are because of who we are, and which ones are because...” she couldn’t finish her sentence, but Peeta seemed to understand what she was trying to say.

“What does it feel like,” Peeta said, slipping his fingers under Katniss’s shirt and over her back. “When I do this?”

“Like fire,” Katniss answered. “But the burning doesn’t hurt. It just makes me feel warm all over. And it makes me feel like I can do anything. Does it ever feel like that for you?”

“It feels like that all the time,” Peeta said. “Even when you’re not touching me. It’s the way you look at me sometimes that makes me feel different.”

“What does it feel like?”

“Have you ever felt like your heart was beating so hard that it’d come out of your chest?” Peeta asked. “But you weren’t scared, and you weren’t angry, and the pounding didn’t hurt at all? It just made you feel happy?”

Katniss thought about it. The moments where Peeta’s eyes settled on her face and he looked at her like there was nobody else in the world. Moments when his lips would graze her earlobe, or kiss a trail down her neck, and those silent moments after they’d both come undone and Katniss sat perched naked and sated in Peeta’s lap. She’d felt it then, for sure.

“Yes,” she murmured.

“I’ve been thinking that maybe that is what the real feelings are,” Peeta said. “I can’t touch your heart with my fingers and get a response, and you can’t do that for me. Yet, they still respond. And when I feel that, I know that I want you, Katniss, no matter who we are or what we are.”

“I want you too,” Katniss murmured as Peeta’s lips came crashing down against hers.

If the lights in their compartment failing to flicker or buzz was any indication, the surge protection Beetee had installed was working. For the first time since arriving in District 13, the two were able to get lost in one another, only moving away from each other’s lips when they pulled their shirts over their heads.

Peeta moved first, rolling on top of Katniss and drawing a gasp from deep within her throat as her legs fell open and Peeta settled in between them. It was new, it was different, but no less electrifying than what they were accustomed to in the small concealed spot under the maple tree in the grove. Katniss would always climb into Peeta’s lap and they’d rock their hips together until their climaxes found them, but now she was feeling Peeta in a way she never had before.

He was hard and pressing against her thigh while he kissed an erratic line down her throat,
stopping when he reached the cleft between her breasts. He lingered there, dotting kisses across her skin and working closer to her nipple until finally, his tongue was circling the peak and his lips came down, sucking gingerly on the node as his hands continued to drift across her body, leaving a path of heat in their wake.

There was a determination in Peeta that was causing Katniss’s body to respond with zeal. The warmth of his lips sucking on her nipple had her arching her back to him, begging him to continue while her hips bucked against his arousal, which Peeta returned earnestly. The teasing was new, and though it made Katniss feel frenzied on a level that she never realized possible, she didn’t want it to stop. And as Peeta pulled his mouth from her nipple and began to travel further down she realized that while she could have laid there all night with Peeta’s lips painting her skin, she also needed to feel more of him at the same time.

Soon, Katniss’s hands began their descent from Peeta’s hair, down his back until she reached the waistband of his pants, and she wasn’t shy in making it clear that she wanted them off.

But Peeta wasn’t as quick to respond to her advances. He sat back on his haunches, running his hands up and down Katniss’s thighs before moving his own hands to the waistband of her pants and pulling them, and her underwear, down in one quick motion.

She was naked and completely ready for him, the heat and pulsing between her legs becoming even more apparent as Peeta’s hands moved to the inside of her thighs. Katniss didn’t want to beg, but the longer Peeta took, the less she was opposed to pleading with him to give her what they clearly both desperately wanted.

It took Peeta’s fingers slipping between her folds to temporarily quell the urge to beg. She moaned as he found her clit, the short circles sending a thrill through her in strong waves. Peeta’s strokes were slow and deliberate. Any other day, the way Peeta was taking his time on her would have been welcome. They both used their time together to pore over each other for as long as they could, but Katniss knew she wouldn’t be able to stand it. Her hands reached for Peeta’s pants again, a whine escaping her lips when he looked down on her with intrigue.

“Peeta,” she whimpered.

A knowing smile lit up Peeta’s face. But rather he still resisted, moving his lower half away and out of Katniss’s reach and choosing instead to dip his head down between her thighs. Katniss gasped when she felt Peeta’s mouth cover her center. Her hands found his hair as his held her legs, moving them over his shoulders.

Katniss was lost in the sensation Peeta’s mouth brought to her. It was warm, it was wet, it was causing her hips to buck beyond her control, and Peeta was happy to oblige. He allowed Katniss to use her hands and hips to guide his mouth where she needed him to be. She stopped him over her clit, tightening her grip on his hair to keep him in place. He sucked on the nerve gently as he slipped two fingers inside of her, hooking them upward to press against her top wall before letting her guide him again. She rocked her hips against his hand, against his mouth, feeling her orgasm build with his movement.

But then, Peeta stopped. His hands moved over to Katniss’s prying the from his hair.

“Not yet,” he murmured after looking up and noticing the frustration in her features. “I want to see your face every time you come tonight.”

And just as quickly as he’d removed Katniss’s pants before, he was pulling his own down. His cock sprang free and he took himself in hand to guide the head between Katniss’s folds before pushing into her. He dropped the top half of his body down, propping himself up with a hand on
either side of the bed near Katniss’s head, kissing from her neck up to her lips, capturing them between his as he began to thrust in long, vigorous strokes. Katniss brought her knees up, drawing him in deeper.

Not an inch of Katniss’s upper body was left neglected. Peeta’s mouth seemed to find every inch of skin imaginable, leaving a heat behind that Katniss hadn’t felt in weeks but was happy to let consume her while her hands moved of their own accord across the wide expanse of Peeta’s chest, around his back, and stopping on the soft swells of his ass. Taking each side in her hands, she squeezed and pulled him closer, desperate to feel as much of him as she could. Judging by the breathy moans that slipped from Peeta’s lips and vibrated against her skin, she was doing all the right things to bring him closer to the brink.

Neither one of them even noticed what was going on outside. Feed by feed cycled by on the television, all with the same unique mixture of red and pink swirling together through the sky. It was brightened by the flashes of lightning that struck the deep craters in the ground where the Capitol’s bombs had hit years earlier.

None of it mattered to them at that moment. They were both too far gone to even think about looking at the television. Who wanted to be reminded of District 13’s devastation when the heat that was coursing between their bodies was enough to pull them both over the edge with an intensity that hadn’t existed even in the grove? They were closer in ways they hadn’t been, and even more in tune with each other than ever before.

Katniss gripped Peeta’s ass harder as she felt her orgasm nearing again, a few more thrusts was all it took before her thighs were clenching around Peeta’s waist and here walls contracted around his cock. He stilled, indulging in her warmth and wetness as he watched her unravel underneath him. And when he resumed his thrusts they were slower, more meticulous. His head dropped into the crook of Katniss’s neck, the way he always did when his orgasm was close, and Katniss kept him rooted there, tangling her fingers through his hair as she felt him seize up and spill inside of her.

Peeta’s body collapsed on top of Katniss, his chest pressed against her and she felt it. The hard beating of his heart in his chest that matched the steady, forceful beats of her own. Not because they were hurt, not because they were angry, but because they were happy.
A quick note. I'm taking a short hiatus from writing this story. The pace in which I'd been writing has finally caused me to burn out where this story is concerned. And in an attempt to write the best story I possibly can, I'm going to take a short breather. This may or may not impact the weekly update schedule in the next few weeks. I'm so sorry!

“It’s a shame we can’t hunt here,” Gale said, launching a small rock between two trees. “Not that there’s any reason to be hunting for food anymore.”

“Even if there was, it’s not like we could eat anything that still lives out here,” Katniss added, stepping over the bones of what was once a large animal.

It was a miracle that anything had survived on the surface of District 13 to begin with. Even after decades, the toxicity levels still made the entire district uninhabitable. Anything that managed to thrive among the toxins showed it. They’d seen birds with wings so deformed that flying would never be an option for them, a two headed rabbit hopped around for a brief moment before it slipped into a hole in the ground. And now the squirrel, at least it looked like a squirrel, that they were stopped in front of. It was the worst they’d seen yet. It couldn’t move, resorting to lying on the ground while gasping for air, and it had what looked like an extra limb growing from its chest.

Gale stared down at the squirrel, a pained expression crossing his face. “Should we really be up here?”

Katniss shrugged as they resumed walking, kicking a stone that was covered in a sticky, black substance. The air at the surface certainly wasn’t fresh. The smells were pungent, the sounds dismal, but the twenty minutes she and Peeta had spent at the surface separately the week before had done them both a world of good. However, even with the doctor’s promise to Katniss during her physical, the second shot ordered did nothing to clear up the feelings of lethargy that being in District 13 brought on. After a brief respite from the clouded feelings in her head, it returned the very next day.

Peeta was no different. After a day of clarity and energy from the very same shot, it appeared to have worn off, too, bringing with it feelings of restlessness even worse than before. He wanted to talk to Wiress. His list of questions for her was growing by the day, and after two weeks of being in District 13, not a single one had been answered. He was pacing the compartment even more than usual, questioning everything.

Their visits to the surface were one of the only bright spots in their week. After returning, they were able to enjoy a brief period of clarity that the gray walls of the underground bunker would never provide. Though they’d both agreed it’d be better if they were allowed to visit the surface together, as their moments of clarity never occurred at the same time, the agreement was signed and President Coin seemed pretty adamant that they go separately. They’d have to be content with what she’d agreed to.

“So what’s Peeta up to while you’re out here?” Gale asked, keeping his head down and focused on his feet.
“He’s talking with Haymitch. I don’t know why, but I think Peeta actually likes him,” Katniss said, offering nothing more.

Katniss was warned by Haymitch to limit what she told Gale. With how close Gale was to President Coin, there was no telling what he may repeat back to her, even if by accident. Katniss had no argument, knowing that everything Haymitch said was true. Despite Gale being her best friend, his close ties to President Coin were just too risky.

“That was quite a sparring lesson he gave yesterday,” Gale said.

Finnick wasn’t kidding when he said Peeta could help out in training. The day before, Peeta finally had the chance, demonstrating escapes that’d be most common in combat. Before the end of the training session, he had everyone paired off and practicing, taking a different approach from Finnick’s “watch-and-learn” style.

“Did you know he placed second in the school’s wrestling competition?”

Katniss shook her head. “No. He mentioned he wrestled, but he didn’t mention that.”

“Second behind his brother,” Gale confirmed. “All three of them wrestled, and they always placed 1-2-3. But the other brother was disqualified for playing a dirty match the week before, so Peeta was able to get second place instead of third like he was predicted to.”

“Third is still good,” Katniss said defensively.

Something in Gale’s tone and the way that he nodded dismissively in response to Katniss’s answer bothered her for some reason. Why was Gale trying to talk about Peeta anyway? He was the one who was constantly changing the subject whenever she brought him up. A quick glance at Gale’s face told her that he hadn’t said everything he wanted to.

“Whatever you have to say, just say it now,” Katniss grumbled. “You’ve already brought him up.”

“I still don’t trust him, Katniss.”

“Stop,” Katniss snapped, coming to a stop in the middle of the remains of a trail they were trying to follow. “I really don’t want to do this right now.”

“What about his family?” Gale continued, ignoring Katniss’s request. “They wanted you gone and they almost did it. You can’t tell me that part of Peeta wasn’t ready to side with them. And now that you’ve caused their death…”

“I said, stop!” Katniss yelled, her voice echoing through the empty district. “I’m not sure what’s going on with you, Gale, but you need to leave this be. You trust President Coin, but you don’t trust Peeta? It wasn’t Peeta that threatened my family. I trust Peeta, and I’m perfectly capable of making decisions on my own, without your reminders of what happened in those woods. I remember.”

It would have been the perfect time to tell Gale about the way she was able to tap into Peeta’s mind that day and see that he’d been telling her the truth, but she thought better of it. Haymitch’s warning to limit what she told Gale loomed closely, and as much as she hated agreeing with Haymitch, she bit her cheek and fixed her icy glare on Gale.

“You have trust him, Katniss,” Gale said, as though what he was about to say was obvious. “You’re both contractually bound to be marketed as one in this revolution. But what about those
of us that aren’t?”

She couldn’t listen to him anymore. Gale may not have liked Peeta, but to insinuate that Peeta was anything less than genuine would never be ok with her. And to make matters worse, it only made her think more about Peeta’s life outside of the grove and the things she hadn’t seen in her visions that day when everything changed.

As she stormed off toward the guard keeping watch over them, Gale called after her. She turned, her anger still pulsing through her, and kicked up a breeze that swirled the dry, toxic dirt around Gale. He sputtered and coughed as it settled down on him, and Katniss felt a sense of satisfaction knowing he’d have to spend the rest of his day in a cleansing chamber in the hospital wing for coming in contact with a toxic substance. Without another word, she turned and left Gale.

“I’m ready to go in,” Katniss said to the guard waiting in front of the chute that’d take her back down to the bunker.

The guard looked at her watch, her eyebrows knitting together. “But you still have fifteen of your allotted twenty minutes for the week.”

“I don’t care,” Katniss said, looking back to see Gale closing in. “I’m done here.”

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During lunch, the only thing that lifted Katniss’s spirits was seeing Prim. Katniss watched her sister from her assigned table as Prim seemed to prattle on to her new friends about something Katniss couldn’t hear. Prim was thriving in District 13, and the rush of happiness that Katniss felt was almost enough to force the memories of her fight with Gale out of her mind, until Peeta’s shoulder connected with hers gently.

“Where’s Gale?” he asked.

“Hospital wing,” Katniss muttered, shoving a forkful of food into her mouth.

“What?” Peeta whispered, his voice rising in panic as his eyes examined Katniss’s form.

“He had a run in with some toxic dirt, that’s all,” Katniss explained. “He’s in the cleansing chamber that Boggs told us about.”

“Are you ok?” Peeta pressed. “You’ve been pretty quiet since you came back from being outside.”

“I’m fine,” Katniss lied, pushing her plate away from her “No worse than usual.”

“Being outside didn’t help this time?”

Katniss shook her head. Of course it hadn’t helped. But if she told Peeta that she’d only made it five minutes outside with Gale that week, he’d want to know why. How could she tell him that Gale still didn’t trust him and even went as far as to insinuate that Peeta may try to harm her one day? Peeta was better off not knowing. Though she wasn’t optimistic, Katniss hoped that her warning to Gale would prevent him from bringing it up again in the future.

Peeta said nothing more during lunch, settling for the occasional glance at the suddenly detached Katniss. She could tell that he knew she wasn’t telling him everything, but he didn’t press the subject any further. They finished their food in silence and waited to be dismissed.

Katniss wasn’t surprised to see Haymitch waiting for them at the entrance of their compartment
when they returned from lunch. He leaned against the heavy, steel door, inspecting his fingernails as the teenagers approached him.

“Is it ok for me to lean against your door?” Haymitch asked, looking at Katniss. “I don’t need you to try to attack me again.”

“It’s fine,” Katniss said shortly.

“Good, because I’m here on business,” Haymitch said, pushing himself off of the door. “Did Peeta talk to you about it?”

“No.” Katniss looked to Peeta, who cringed slightly when he remembered he was supposed to tell her something. “I wasn’t exactly in the mood for conversation during lunch.”

“Haymitch figured out a way to add a second layer of security to the compartment door,” Peeta explained, not giving Haymitch a chance to make any snide remarks. “It’ll detect any attempts at intrusion and it’ll alert Haymitch, and only Haymitch.”

She shouldn’t have been angry about it, but for some reason, she was. Haymitch and Peeta made plans to alter their compartment without telling her, and even if Peeta planned to mention it to her and forgot, he still agreed to let Haymitch do it before they even finished talking that morning. Gale’s confession of distrust rang in her head, but another part fought it. He was only trying to do what was best for their safety and privacy. There was nothing to be suspicious about. Right?

As the two opposing thoughts swirled through her head, she found herself staring at Peeta, squinting her eyes tightly as she focused on his face. She tried to get a glimpse at what else Haymitch and Peeta discussed that morning, desperate to drive out Gale’s negativity. How had she tapped into his thoughts that day in the woods? Why couldn’t she do it again?

Feelings of guilt welled up quickly, forcing Katniss to stop trying. There was no real reason to distrust Peeta at all. It was Haymitch that she was still leery about. But the fact that he’d been spending so much time with Peeta only made the worries swirl around her head more.

“What are you doing?”

Katniss was pulled from her thoughts to see Peeta staring right back at her, confused.

“Just waiting to find out what this new plan is,” Katniss recovered, clearing her throat and looking away.

Suddenly, a startled look came to Peeta’s face as he held Katniss’s gaze. His eyes moved back and forth across Katniss’s face, but he said nothing to explain it. Before Katniss could ask him what was wrong, Haymitch spoke up.

“The default way to unlock compartment doors is with handprints,” he explained. “That lock can easily be overridden with just a code by anyone who has access to the H.E.Ds.”

“H.E.Ds?” Katniss repeated.

“Handheld Electronic Device,” Peeta chimed in. “Sorry. He explained it to me earlier. The second layer is a lot more…”

“Foolproof,” Haymitch interrupted. “What you do is pick just one finger that’ll be scanned and one area on the door. Only that one finger on that one spot will be able to unlock the door, any other fingerprints detected will alert me immediately.”
“What if you can’t remember the exact spot you picked for your print?” Katniss asked.

Peeta laughed. “I asked that same question.”

“There’s a wide enough area that it doesn’t have to be the exact spot,” Haymitch said. “And instead of a generic code to wipe the lock memory of the door, you need the same fingerprints used to create the lock to clear it or disable it.”

“Meaning they can’t do anything to disable the lock without us,” Peeta smiled.

“Unless they cut your fingers off,” Haymitch added, pulling the H.E.D from his pocket after it was clear neither teenager found his joke very funny. “This is just a precaution, remember. They won’t come anywhere near this compartment again unless you give them a reason to, but Blondie wouldn’t let it go.”

The process was simple. Katniss chose to use her pinky finger on her left hand just below the first number one in their compartment number, and Peeta decided to use his ring finger on his right hand right in the center of the zero.

“That’s it,” Haymitch said, slipping the H.E.D back into his pocket. “It’ll take you a little longer to get into your compartment, but it’s as secure as it’s going to get.”

“Thank you, Haymitch,” Peeta said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Katniss muttered.

“There’s still one more matter of business to deal with,” Haymitch revealed. “Wiress is ready to see you.”

“When?” Peeta asked, a smile brightening his face.

“Right now.”

Katniss and Peeta eagerly following Haymitch as he led them down the hall to meet Wiress. There was a sense of nervousness to contend with, though. After waiting for weeks for the day to arrive, it felt surreal and a little scary.

“Wiress was released from the hospital about two days ago,” Haymitch explained as they walked. “Once she was assigned her compartment, the first thing she did was ask for you two specifically. She wanted to see you as soon as possible.”

“What happened to her?” Peeta asked, finally asking the question that nobody seemed to want to answer. “Why was she in the hospital for so long?”

Haymitch took a deep breath. He seemed to be debating whether or not to tell them. “Tortured by the Capitol,” he finally admitted. “As you can probably guess, being the only true expert on what you two are makes her pretty desirable to the enemy. President Snow wanted information that Wiress would never give him, as she’s a rebel too. They roughed her up pretty badly before we were able to get her out. She’s still not back to her old self and she probably never will be, but she’s doing a lot better than she was when she got here.”

“Is she ok to even do this?” Katniss questioned. If she wasn’t who she used to be, how would they know what she told them was accurate?

“It’s all she’s been talking about since she moved into her compartment,” Haymitch assured them. “She wants to help you two.”
“Finally,” Peeta said, letting out a breath.

They stopped in front of compartment 203 and waited as Haymitch rang the bell. In the silence that followed, Katniss’s mind began to wander. What would Wiress tell them? What were they about to learn?

After a wait, the compartment door slid open and a small, frail looking woman could be seen ambling back to her bed.

“Come on,” she said, situating herself back in bed and waving them in. “You can sit on the other bed.”

Katniss and Peeta took the bed, settling in right at the edge, while Haymitch stood off to the side, keeping watch but staying out of the way.

“I’m so happy,” Wiress started. “To finally get to meet you.” She sounded like she was struggling to put sentences together, but Peeta ignored it, extending his hand toward her.

“Likewise,” he said with a smile.

Katniss followed, noticing the shaky grip Wiress had on her hand and the nervous tick that she displayed while her hands sat in her lap. The first two fingers of her right hand rapidly drummed on the thumb of her left hand, but she smiled at both of them.

“If this is a bad time…” Peeta began, stopping when Wiress began to shake her head.

“We won’t cover much today,” Wiress said. She took a long pause before she continued. “But... I wanted to give you a little information. So you’re not completely in the dark anymore.”

“Is there anything that you think we need to know before we leave today?” Peeta asked.

“Anything that Plutarch or President Coin hasn’t told us?”

“Stick together,” Wiress said shakily. “I can’t stress enough... how important it is that you stick together. As much as possible. And be open with each other. All of this is for nothing if you can’t be open with each other. You’re not complete if you’re not on the same page.”

Katniss was speaking before she even knew what she was going to say.

“Do you mean our powers or for…” she trailed off, unsure of how to finish her sentence. “Other reasons?”

Wiress looked from Katniss to Peeta and back again, noticing the way Katniss wrung her hands nervously and Peeta stared intently, waiting for an answer. A knowing smile lit up her face.

“Anything outside of your powers... isn’t the work of your destiny,” she explained. “It’s the work of your hearts. Embrace what you feel in your hearts for each other. Uprisers and Incendiaries have been known to lose theirs along the way. Use this for your benefit.”

Katniss looked to Peeta, expecting to be greeted with a smile or look of relief over what they’d just learned. Instead, he was staring at her again with an almost offended look on his face, quickly turning away from her when she caught his eye. Why did he keep looking at her like that?

“We’ll meet together daily from now on. To discuss things,” Wiress explained. “I have a lot of things to show you... from the research I’ve collected. I want to see how you two interact so we can find the best ways for the two of you to tap into yourselves... to reach your full potential.”
“Can I ask you something?” Peeta asked. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way. I’m sure you have your own reasons for this but... why can’t you just tell us what we can do and how we can do it? How can I tap into my potential when I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be tapping into?”

“I’m glad you asked that,” Wiress said. “I’m not going to tell you... because I don’t want you to spend so much time focusing on the things you should be doing... and losing sight of how to get there.”

“I’m not following,” Peeta said. “How can we get somewhere if we don’t know where we’re going?”

“You’re aware that the two of you can cause... electric surges, right?” Wiress asked. “Plutarch mentioned he showed you that.”

“Yes,” Katniss and Peeta said in unison.

“Did you have to be told you could do that... before you did it?”

“No,” Peeta said. “Is the lightning outside the same idea?”

“Yes,” Wiress smiled. “The two of you can produce a surge strong enough... to cause a blackout in through this entire bunker. But you have to be open enough with each other to get there. That is the most important thing... the two of you are going to have to learn. I have a good feeling about you two. Trust each other. Be one. It’s the only way you’ll be able to do this.”

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They couldn’t make it back to their compartment fast enough after dinner. The door had barely slid shut before they started shedding their clothes, kissing each other fervently as they walked to the beds.

Their compartment was now quiet except for the sounds of their heavy, labored breathing as they settled down in bed together. A thin sheen of sweat covered their naked bodies as the last waves of pleasure surged through them.

Katniss wished she could hear the rain that she could see softly falling on the television screen. The pink and red clouds swirled around the raindrops, whipping them sideways and dotting the lense of the cameras. She jumped when Peeta’s voice broke through the silence.

“Katniss?” he whispered, holding her closer to his chest, a beaten tone to his voice. “Why haven’t you told me yet that Gale still doesn’t trust me?”
Chapter Notes

Thanks for your patience, everyone and I apologize profusely for not being able to keep up with my weekly updates and for not answering reviews for the last chapter. That won’t happen again. I very much appreciate your interest in my story, thank you for reading :)

“What are you talking about?” Katniss asked, sitting up in bed. She pulled the bedsheets close to her body, securing it under her arms.

“I saw it, Katniss,” Peeta muttered. He slipped out of bed, pulling his lounge pants on before pacing the room.

“You were outside?”

It was the only thing Katniss could think of to ask him. Peeta and Finnick weren’t scheduled to go to the surface for another two days. What was Peeta doing out there, and how had he heard her conversation with Gale?

“No, Katniss. I saw it,” Peeta repeated, frustrated. “In my head. It started during lunch, right after you came back from the surface. I didn’t see anything then, but I just felt like something was wrong again, like that day in the woods when I felt the earthquake before it happened. When you told me Gale was in the hospital, I thought maybe that was it and that the feeling would stop once you told me, but it didn’t.”

“When did the visions start?” Katniss asked from the bed, watching Peeta as he ran a hand through his hair.

“When we were with Haymitch.” Peeta stopped his pacing when Katniss’s hand found his arm. She pulled him gently back toward the bed, scooting close to him when he sat down. “I thought I was hallucinating,” he finished, his voice just a whisper.

It was then that Katniss realized that for the first time in Peeta’s life, an irrefutable power had presented itself, and if the look on his face was any indication, it scared him. He hadn’t had the last six years to come to terms with who he was the way Katniss had. It was all new for him.

“I thought it was some kind of negative reaction to being down here,” Peeta continued. “Like my mind was playing tricks on me or something, but it just kept happening over and over again, clearer and clearer every single time I looked at you. It wasn’t a hallucination.”

“It wasn’t,” Katniss confirmed. “I didn’t want to tell you what Gale said. I couldn’t. It’s already hard enough being stuck down here, I didn’t want to add this to it. How much did you see?”

“Not a lot,” Peeta said. “Gale saying he still doesn’t trust me, and you telling him to stop. It fades out right after that.”

For a moment, Katniss was relieved. Peeta hadn’t seen or heard Gale drag Peeta’s family into the conversation. And for that moment, she intended to keep it that way. But hadn’t that been her plan
when she’d tried to keep everything from Peeta before? And that hadn’t worked at all. Just because he hadn’t seen it yet didn’t mean he wouldn’t eventually.

“He seems to think you still have some kind of allegiance to your family,” Katniss blurted out. She had to tell him before she chickened out. “He’s worried that you’re planning to finish what they started when they were hunting me.”

“You know that keeping this from me wasn’t going to make it go away, right?” Peeta asked. He didn’t sound angry with her, just concerned. “Wiress said that.”

“I know what she said. I know. I just.. I,” Katniss stammered, trying to find her words. “I want to.. to..”

“Protect me?” Peeta asked with a smile.

“Yes,” Katniss breathed. “Just as much as you want to protect me.”

“We saw how well hiding things worked out for me,” Peeta reminded her. “Gale’s words mean nothing.” He brought a hand up to Katniss’s cheek. Katniss turned her head and planted a kiss to his thumb. “We can protect each other without hiding things, you know. I let it go way too long before I figured that out. I don’t want it to be like that between us ever again.”

“I wanted to tell him how wrong he was,” Katniss said, resting her head on Peeta’s bare shoulder. “But I wasn’t sure what I should be telling him.”

“He’s already made up his mind. It’s not your job to change it,” Peeta said sadly. “What our job is now is to figure ourselves out. Tomorrow, we have to talk to Wiress about what happened today and what happened to you in the woods a few weeks ago. We need to start getting more answers.”

Katniss nodded in agreement, pulling herself away from Peeta just long enough to lie back down and settle in for the night. In the morning, they’d tell Wiress everything and hope for the answers they’d been wanting from the moment they’d arrived in District 13.

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Katniss stared at Peeta more than she stared at her food during breakfast the next morning. He looked anxious, to say the least. His eyes were practically glued to the table top, occasionally traveling back up to scan the room in a panic before he forced his head back down again.

“Katniss?” Peeta whispered, wringing his hands together nervously. “I’m hearing other voices now, too.”

“What?” Katniss asked. “What are you seeing?”

Peeta shook his head. “Nothing. It’s just voices. Every time I look up and catch a glimpse of someone, a voice starts. Sometimes two or three at a time. I don’t know who the voices belong to, but if I keep my head down, they stop.”

Luckily, their next activity on the day’s agenda was their meeting with Wiress. But it was the waiting before the guards dismissed them that was grueling. The longer Katniss observed Peeta, the harder it got to watch him. She could tell when he’d hear another voice when his body tensed up and he forced his head down further. If he kept going, soon his face would be in his breakfast.

“Are you looking forward to going to the surface with Finnick tomorrow?” Katniss asked, trying to keep Peeta’s mind occupied. “You two get along pretty well.”
“Yeah,” Peeta nodded, refusing to look up from his tray “He’s a good guy. Says the lake in the
grove sounds like nothing compared to the ocean in District 4.”

“But he’s never seen one of your drawings of the lake,” Katniss said. “I bet he’d change his mind
if he saw one.”

“Too bad I don’t have any of them here,” Peeta sighed, raising his eyes slightly. “Or anything to
draw with at all, for that matter.”

“Maybe we can find you something,” Katniss suggested. “After we talk to Wiress we could--”

“What if I really am hallucinating this time, Katniss?”
The confusion in Peeta’s voice cut through Katniss like a knife.

“You’re not.”

“How do you know?” Peeta insisted. “Have you ever heard voices without a vision like this?”

“Well, no…”

“Then how do you know?” Peeta snapped. His eyes widening at the sound of impatience in his
voice. “I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “This isn’t your fault, you’re just trying to help.”

And she was doing a terrible job of it. How was it that Peeta could find the words to put her at
ease without so much as a pause, but when she tried to do the same, all it did was make things
worse?

“Just…” Katniss paused, making sure her voice was as soothing as possible. “Try to think of other
things until we see Wiress.”

Pathetic. She’d probably help him more if she just kept her mouth shut.

With her focus entirely on Peeta, Katniss barely noticed Prim waving enthusiastically at her from
her own table. Katniss waved back, unable to force a smile to her face, and wished that her sister
could come sit with them. Maybe she’d have words for Peeta more soothing than what Katniss
had to offer.

There was so much Katniss wanted to ask Prim, and so much she needed to hear. But with their
schedules having to be District 13 approved, there was never time for them to see each other.

“Well, no…”

“Your table is dismissed,” a guard said, tapping Katniss on the shoulder.

She and Peeta practically jumped from the table, hastily throwing their dirty trays in a pile with the
others before walking as fast as they could in the direction of Wiress’s compartment.

There’d be changes made to the compartment since their visit the day before. In place of the
second single bed that seemed customary to all of the compartments in District 13, a small desk
with books and papers strewn across it in messy organization occupied the space. Wiress sat
behind it in a swiveling chair and motioned to the two chairs placed front of the desk.

“You can sit down,” she said with an almost giddy tone.

The most noticeable addition to the compartment, however, was the man that stood behind Wiress.
He wore professional clothing perfectly tailored to his stout frame, topped off with a red tie that
was secured tightly around his fat neck. The lack of District 13’s signature uniform made it clear
he wasn’t a guard.

Katniss eyed him tentatively. Who was he?

“This is Dr. Aurelius,” Wiress said, noticing Katniss’s glare. Her words seemed to come easier than they did the day before as she introduced the teenagers to the man known as Dr. Aurelius. “He’ll be present during some of our meetings.”

“Nice to meet you both.” He leaned over the desk and shook both of their hands, moving back behind Wiress when he was done. “I’ll be helping you both where mental power and control is involved as you begin to delve deeper into your training with Wiress.”

“You’re a head doctor,” Katniss announced, a bit put off by the sugarcoated arrangement of his words.

“If you want to call me that.” Dr. Aurelius shoved his hands in his pocket and shifted his weight from one side to the other before asking, “Is he alright?”

Katniss’s attention was drawn back to Peeta, who now sat in his chair with his head bowed down, refusing to look at anyone once again. She hesitated, unsure of whether or not she should speak for him, or if she should speak at all with this man in the room. Dr. Aurelius seemed to sense her hesitation.

“Anything you say in this room stays between the four of us,” he assured her. “I’ll ask again. Is he alright?”

Katniss turned her attention to Wiress, choosing to speak to her rather than directly to Dr. Aurelius. “Just before we met with you yesterday, Peeta had a bit of a…”

“Breakthrough?” Wiress asked.

“Yes,” Katniss said, looking over to Peeta.

“Peeta?” Wiress said gently. “Can you talk? Tell me what happened?”

“I can talk,” he confirmed. “I’m just going to keep my head down if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine,” Wiress said. “You can keep your head down.”

“I think I tapped into Katniss’s mind yesterday,” Peeta began. “It was like I was watching her memory on a television. She was outside in the woods with Gale, and he was telling her he didn’t trust me. It repeated over and over for hours, every single time I looked at her.”

“Is it still happening?” Wiress asked.

“No. Not since I told her what I saw,” he explained. “But now I’m hearing voices.”

“What kind of voices?” Dr. Aurelius cut in, his interest piqued. “Do they sound like you? Are they telling you to do things?”

“No, they don’t sound like me,” Peeta said, annoyed. “They’re other people. Men, women, children, all talking. Or I think I’m hearing them talking. Maybe I’m just hallucinating.”

“Do the voices start when you look at someone?” Wiress asked. “The way the vision of Katniss’s memory started after you looked at her?”

“Yes,” Peeta breathed in relief. “But I’m trying not to look at anyone. I don’t want to hear their
“Yes,” Peeta breathed in relief. “But I’m trying not to look at anyone. I don’t want to hear their thoughts.”

“So that’s why you have your head down,” Wiress said out loud, though she was clearly only talking to herself. “Peeta, in order to stop hearing the memories of people you’re not trying to read, you have to accept what’s happening.”

“That’s it?” Peeta said, his head snapping up to look at her for the first time.

Wiress laughed. “Half of controlling your powers is accepting that you have them in the first place.”

“But I’m not exactly in denial here,” Peeta argued.

“Maybe not, but you’re still not embracing who you are,” Wiress explained. “If you fight against your powers like you were this morning, it’ll only cause the powers to fight even harder to come out.” She paused, taking a moment to breath and crack her knuckles nervously. Though her speech had evened out considerably in the last day, her nervous ticks still remained. “Similarly, if you try to force these things to happen when your mind isn’t quite ready, it’ll make it even harder to call upon that power. Your mind and your powers have to work together, not against each other.”

“How do I get it to stop?” Peeta asked.

“Is it happening right now?” Wiress moved forward in her chair. “Can you hear my memories?”

“I can’t,” Peeta said, a joyful realization washing over him. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Because you paid attention and responded to the information I just gave you.” Wiress smiled. “It’s a good thing, but it’s temporary. This will happen again.”

“How do I control this?” Peeta asked. “I know it won’t stop forever, but if I don’t want to hear memories, how do I ensure that I don’t?”

“That’s something you’ll have to work on,” Wiress said. “Finding a balance between your power and your mind. It’s not something I can just tell you how to do. You’ll probably make some mistakes along the way. Hear things you don’t want to hear, but that’s part of learning how to control your power.”

“And what about if I want to read someone’s memories?”

“That’s even harder,” Wiress admitted. “What you experienced was your power presenting itself. It’s always very strong when a power is ready to come out, whatever the reason.”

“So why would some powers be present right away and some not show up until later?” Katniss asked. “What determines when they show up?”

“There are two different types of powers that Uprisers and Incendiaries possess,” Wiress said. “Powers that exist from the first moments of their lives, and some that need time to mature. Our hopes going into this was that you and Peeta would be able to stay in the grove, where you were comfortable, for as long as possible. That way powers could mature and show themselves in a more organic way.”

“But would we have even known what they were?” Peeta asked.

“Haymitch was days away from revealed that he’d been around keeping tabs on the two of you. He was also instructed to tell you about who you are, Peeta. But the Mockingjay Hunters closed
in.” Wiress stopped, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes. Had that been when the Capitol began their torture? “Bringing you here this soon was not our plan, and this is going to be harder now because of it. Powers that should have been allowed to mature and show themselves will have to be coaxed out of you with time. It’s not going to happen overnight, but I’ll do everything I can to help this make sense to you both.”

“You said that we were born with powers that already exist,” Peeta said. “But I wasn’t.”

A wide smile grew on Wiress’s face. “Dr. Aurelius? Could you turn off the lights, please?”

The portly man was confused, but he complied. He took long strides to the lightswitch and clipped the switch with two fingers, sending the room into darkness.

“Peeta? Tell me what you see,” Wiress said.

“You’re holding up six fingers,” Peeta replied.

“And Katniss? What do you see?”

“Nothing,” Katniss said. “It’s pitch black.”

“You can put the lights back on, Dr. Aurelius,” Wiress called. When the compartment was lit up again, the smile on Wiress’s face seemed even wider than it was before. “Not everyone is born with the ability to see beyond darkness, Peeta. That is an ability that is special only to Incendiaries. As time goes on, you’ll learn that there are things that only Katniss can do, things only you can do, and things the two of you can only do together, as one.”

“Do you know what would trigger a particular power to present itself?” Peeta asked. “What made these voices show up the way they did?”

“Moments of high stress or discontentment could cause a power to present itself,” Wiress explained. “You’ve experienced visions already, right Katniss?”

“You know that?” Katniss said, her mouth hanging open.

“It was just a guess,” Wiress laughed. “This is a power you both possess.”

“It happened to me while we were still in District 12,” Katniss started, her voice becoming ethereal. “It was when the Mockingjay hunters had closed in. Peeta ran into the woods and he was standing there, between me and my family and the hunters. Seeing him there like that, forced to be there by both sides must have triggered something and suddenly I was in his head. I saw his life, heard his refusals to join his family in hunting me. Everything. But it hasn’t happened since.”

“Stress,” Wiress said with a nod. “That’s likely what brought it out for you. Have you tried it again since then?”

“Yes,” Katniss whispered. “Yesterday… on Peeta. While we were with Haymitch.” She flashed an apologetic look in Peeta’s direction, hoping he wasn’t angry.

“And what happened?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s when I saw Gale…” Peeta added.

Wiress looked at Peeta. “Elaborate?”
“The first time I saw the memory with Gale, Katniss had been staring at me. She had this look on her face like she was concentrating on something really hard,” Peeta said, turning to Katniss. “I asked you what you were doing, but you played it off like you weren’t doing anything but listening to Haymitch. That had to be when you were trying to tap into my mind.”

“Is he right, Katniss?” Wiress asked.

“Yes…” Katniss admitted, her cheeks flushing red with embarrassment. “I wanted to know what he talked about with Haymitch while I was on the surface. They’d agreed to alter our compartment but didn’t mention any of it to me until it was happening, so I wanted to know.”

“It bothered you that much?” Peeta whispered, turning away from Wiress and Dr. Aurelius. “We weren’t keeping anything from you.”

“I know. It was just that…” Katniss muttered. She looked up to Wiress and Dr. Aurelius and wished they were anywhere but in the room with them. “Can we talk about this later?”

“You should talk about it now,” Dr. Aurelius interrupted. “Get things out in the open.”

“I’m sorry, but is this your business?” Katniss snapped.

“My job is to make sure the two of you are communicating and keeping your minds active,” Dr. Aurelius said, haughtily. “I’m just doing my job. Peeta? Did you have something to say to Katniss?”

Katniss threw herself back against her chair angrily. They weren’t there to have a therapy session.

“You didn’t trust me,” Peeta said. “You thought we’d planned something and didn’t tell you about it on purpose. Because of what Gale said.”

“No!” Katniss argued. “Well… I did think about what he said, but I trust you.”

“How can you both take into consideration what he said about me and trust me at the same time?” Peeta protested. “Do you really think I would do something like that to you? That Haymitch, who’s been there to keep you alive from day one, would do something like that to you?”

“No!” Katniss repeated. “I don’t. I realized how stupid the thought was. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I only spent five minutes on the surface. I couldn’t stay up there and listen to Gale say those things anymore. I’m just… I’m not holding it together very well.” The crack of her voice caused Wiress to lean forward and speak softly.

“Katniss?” she murmured. “Is the fact that you can’t be outside for very long impacting you that badly?”

“Both of us,” Katniss admitted, a tear sliding down her cheek.

Wiress nodded, a concerned look sullying her features as she looked back and forth from Katniss to Peeta. She cleared her throat and moved back against her chair. “Any suggestions, Dr. Aurelius?”

“A hobby,” he answered. “Something you two can work on between visits to the surface to keep your minds from getting too addled down here.”

“Is there any way to get paints or chalk here so I can draw?” Peeta asked. “That was my hobby back home.”
“I can probably do that,” Dr. Aurelius nodded. “What about you, Katniss?”

“I don’t really have any hobbies,” she admitted. “Besides spending time with my sister.”

“And you haven’t been able to do that here?” Dr. Aurelius asked.

“No. They don’t exactly give us much time for visits with our daily agendas.” She could have said more. A complaint about Coin’s attempts to use her family as a way to control her, the guards in the dining hall refusing to let the sisters visit each other’s tables, but she stopped herself, letting Dr. Aurelius put everything together on his own.

“I can probably change that for you,” he finally said. “I’m your doctor now, and I can tell them it’s required that you spend time with your sister a few times a week as part of your treatment.”

Katniss’s face lit up. Maybe Dr. Aurelius wasn’t so bad, afterall.

“Great.” Wiress nodded, trying to force a smile to her face but there was nothing genuine in her expression. Something was bothering her, but she was trying not to make it known. “We got a little off track, though…”

“One moment,” Dr. Aurelius said. “We should probably talk more about the trust issues between Katniss and Peeta.”

“Dr. Aurelius, please!” Wiress barked, her voice reaching an angered tone they never would have expected from her. “Let them talk about it alone and we can revisit the issue tomorrow.”

Dr. Aurelius looked like he wanted to argue and insist that they talk about it now, but Wiress seemed to be fading fast. The nervous ticks came constantly, and she swayed in her sweat from side to side.

“Peeta?” she said, taking a deep breath in attempts to pull herself together. “There are a few things I need to tell you. First, it seems likely that by Katniss trying to force her powers out, that it triggered one of yours. I can’t explain how that happened, but it’s not surprising considering how connected the two of you are. Don’t let it scare you. For an Incendiary, it’s a perfectly normal occurrence to hear voices.”

“Good to know,” Peeta said with a nod.

After another short pause, Wiress continued. “I also wanted you to know up front that a lot of my work with you will be a learning experience for everyone involved. We know enough about Incendiaries to help you, but not nearly as much as we know about Uprisers. This is both good and bad. Good, because we’re changing history -- writing new versions of it and altering it by adding onto things that are already known about you.”

“And why’s it bad?” Peeta asked.

“Because it makes you more of a loose cannon,” Wiress revealed, drawing a mindless doodle on a blanket sheet of paper in front of her. “You’re liable to present a new power at any time. We know what you’re capable of, but there’s less in writing about how to deal with it. You have to be open to working with us so we can figure out the best approach to your powers.”

“I can do that,” Peeta nodded. “I do have a question for Dr. Aurelius, though…” he looked at the head doctor, cocking his head to the side. “Before we got here today, you seemed pretty eager to tell Wiress that you think we’re going to fail. But why haven’t you told us, yet?”
All eyes were on Peeta as soon as the sentence was out of his mouth. There was no hesitation before he continued.

“I heard you. When we first got here, before the voices stopped,” he said, making no effort to keep the accusation out of his voice. “I wasn’t sure it was you until you started talking. You think Katniss is arrogant and moody?” he spat. “You’d never even met her before today.”

“I spoke to President Coin…”

“And that’s enough to accurately judge a person?” Peeta interrupted. “You think because you’re a head doctor that your opinion is valid before you’ve even met a person? Aren’t you supposed to be more objective than that?”

“Peeta, relax,” Katniss whispered, grabbing his arm. Now who was being hasty? She was no stranger to Peeta’s mounting irritability over the last couple of weeks. And as Peeta’s irritability grew, so did Katniss’s wariness.

Though it developed in each of them differently, the negative effects of being stuck underground was never clearer. But in that moment, Katniss felt responsible for Peeta’s outburst. She’d allowed her growing feelings of distrust consume her so wholly that Gale’s accusations actually sounded rational. And she’d taken it out on Peeta. Now, with his anger already ignited, he was lashing out, and he wouldn’t be going to the surface for another day -- not that it’d help him for long.

“I like to be aware of who I’m dealing with before I meet them,” Dr. Aurelius explained. “And now that I have, I think President Coin may have been wrong about who the moody one is.”

“You listen about as well as you judge people,” Katniss snapped, her own irritation rising.

“There’s a reason for their behavior,” Wiress blurted out, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. She seemed deep in thought as she spoke. “The environment down here is oppressive to those with their power. Being down here doesn’t just affect their power, it affects their entire being. This is why I requested you be present during these meetings, Dr. Aurelius. I explained this to you.”

Wiress was frustrated, speaking in a slow and even voice that made it sound like she was talking to a child instead of a trained medical professional. She reprimanded him for undermining her warning to him and then dismissed him from her compartment with a request to talk to Katniss and Peeta alone.

“I’m sorry. I was hoping he’d be more helpful than that,” Wiress apologized. “He doesn’t have to be present at these meetings anymore if you don’t want him here.”

“He had a point about the hobbies though,” Peeta said.

“Even if he’s not coming to our meetings, can he still help make it possible for me to visit with my sister?” Katniss added.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” Wiress said. “We’ll meet here again tomorrow after Peeta comes back from the surface.”
The next week proved to be the closest thing to a settled routine that Katniss and Peeta had experienced since arriving in District 13. Their meetings with Wiress followed breakfast every morning unless it was Katniss or Peeta’s day to go to the surface. On those days, Dr. Aurelius would sit in on their meetings, quietly observing the changes in their behavior, however small the changes were becoming, after being outside for just twenty minutes. He didn’t say much. Outside of the occasional question, he sat quietly in the background taking notes.

Their meetings were slow, to say the least. Wiress looked through a notebook, nodding as she read to herself for the first twenty minutes, while Katniss and Peeta sat silently waiting for her to acknowledge them. And when she finally did engage them, she was disconnected and vague, hardly the helpful expert they’d been expecting to work with.

Luckily, the hours after lunch spent with Boggs and the other rebels had been progressing far better, and Katniss truly felt as though they’d made allies with the others in their squad. Even Gale was less confrontational after the dispute at the surface the week before. During one training session, he took time out to show the entire squad a prototype of a weapon he’d been working on with Beetee. It was a small box that fit in the palm of his hand. On the front was a blood red cross. And though Gale refused to explain exactly what it was, he assured them that despite its size, it would pack a punch.

Katniss and Peeta’s hobbies were approved. But even with Dr. Aurelius’s professional recommendation, it took a lot of back and forth in order for President Coin to finally agree to alter Katniss and Prim’s daily itineraries to include time for the sisters to spend together. If it wasn’t for Dr. Aurelius pointing out that Katniss had a slot of free time every week when Peeta was at the surface with Finnick, President Coin probably never would have conceded.

However, Peeta received his drawing tools almost immediately. And in the few free hours after dinner and before bed, he would sit, sketch, and color on the floor of the compartment, zoning out to a place where he was almost unreachable -- almost content in a world where his frustrations were mounting daily.

He barely noticed Prim and Katniss enter the compartment the day of their scheduled quality time. That day, he sat cross legged on the beds, bent over a drawing that he was working on coloring in.

“See?” Katniss said to her sister. “Our compartment is no different than yours.”

“It is, though!” Prim said, running to stare at the wall. “Mom and I don’t have a television, or any drawings on the wall. Did you draw all of these, Peeta?”

Prim was right about that. The wall of Katniss and Peeta’s compartment that used to be bare was now covered in Peeta’s drawings, all taped to the wall around the television.

“What?” Peeta said, looking up at the sound of his name before realizing what Prim asked. “Oh, yeah. I did.”

“I love them,” Prim said. “They’re all of the grove.”

Prim smiled and ran her hand along a drawing of the lake. It was all there. From the two trees on the other side of the water, the reflection of their branches and leaves reflecting on the surface, right down to the acorns that littered the ground around the area. The clusters of greenery at the bank looked so life-like, Prim reached out to grab for it, laughing when she remembered she was only looking at a drawing.
“What are you working on now?” Prim asked, stepping up beside Peeta on the bed and taking a peek.

Katniss smiled and followed her sister, taking her own look at Peeta’s drawing. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw it. Bright orange autumn leaves hung low on crooked branches. They looked like sets of hands lowering to cover anyone who sat under the large maple tree. The maple tree that had become Katniss and Peeta’s place of solace in the grove. The lake in the distance shimmered in the sun, and the lush green grass sent a painful stab straight to Katniss’s chest.

“That’s your tree,” Prim said softly. “You miss it, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Katniss and Peeta said in unison.

“So do I.”

“Why?” Katniss asked. “You’re doing so well here!”

“No I’m not,” Prim laughed. “I eat, I sleep, and I go to school. That’s it. And when school is finished, I’ll eat, sleep and go to work. There’s nothing here.”

“There was nothing for you hidden in a grove, either,” Katniss argued.

“At least she had a fighting chance in District 12,” Peeta chimed in, setting his drawing down on the mattress. “Freedom to choose how to spend her days, hobbies that didn’t have to be approved by a doctor, time to spend with her sister whenever she wanted.”

“This place is cruel, Katniss,” Prim said. “Even I can see that. The kids here? They’ve never been outside. Can you imagine that? Never knowing what fresh air felt like on your face? I hope we’re not stuck here forever.”

Katniss wanted to agree and promise her sister they wouldn’t be. That one day they’d be safe back home in District 12 where they would never have to hide again, but she couldn’t make a promise to her that she wasn’t sure she could keep.

It was Peeta cutting in that saved Katniss from having to decide whether to lie to her sister or tell her the truth. Both were awful choices.

“Do you want to take a drawing back to your compartment with you, Prim? Peeta asked, ruffling through drawings he hadn’t hung up. “How about this one?” he held up a page covered in colors. The rippling blue of the lake, green of the trees, and the sky, a twisted mix of pink and red. “That’s one of a kind. You’ll be the only one in all of Panem to have that.” He smiled as Prim took the drawing from his hands and looked at it.

“Like a Peeta Mellark original?” she asked.

“You can tell people you knew me before…” he looked around the skimpy compartment. “All of this happened.”

“Thanks, Peeta,” Prim said, holding the drawing close to her chest. “Even a little bit of home helps. I have to go to class now, but thanks for showing me the compartment, Katniss.”

Katniss gave her sister a hug. She hated that she couldn’t walk Prim back to her compartment and ensure she got there safely, but their daily meeting with Wiress was about to begin, and they didn’t have time to waste by being late.

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“Green.”

The tips of Peeta’s fingers ghosted across Katniss’s arm as they watched District 13 go from blue to green at their command. The light from the television illuminated the otherwise dark compartment just enough for Katniss to see Peeta’s arms wrapped around her torso, his fingers dancing across her skin as he whispered colors into her ear.

It was soothing for both of them. After another meeting with Wiress where nothing new was learned, neither Katniss or Peeta were in the best of moods. And the positive effects of Peeta’s visit to the surface appeared to be non-existent.

“Orange,” Peeta whispered, nipping at Katniss’s earlobe.

With almost no effort, green made way for orange. The former color swirled upward, rapidly dissipating as though it were being sucked straight out of the world as the orange tincture bled into the clouds and cascaded down to the earth.

A gust of wind picked up dust as Peeta’s hand traveled lower, whirling specks of brown through the orange when he reached Katniss’s bare thigh. She spun around in Peeta’s arms to face him. Using the light from the television to guide her, she pressed a hand to his bare chest and moved to wrap it around the back of his neck, pulling him down into a deep and ravenous kiss that Peeta returned in earnest, desperate to feel something.

He pushed his hands under her shirt and his tongue slid between her parted lips as they settled into a more serene rhythm, getting lost in each other’s touches and sounds. They allowed it to guide them.

Katniss threw her leg over Peeta’s hips and pulled herself up, settling down to feel him half hard underneath her. She ground herself into it, and Peeta sat up and secured his arms around her, pulling her body even closer before rocking his hips, driving his arousal into Katniss’s cloth covered center. There was a familiarity in the action that instantly brought Katniss back to the grove where she and Peeta would sit together, using the friction created between their bodies to tease each other before a shred of clothing was ever shed.

As slow and deliberate as their movements were, and no matter how good it felt to feel Peeta growing harder against her aching middle, there was a desperation in their actions that had nothing to do with their need for each other. It was as though they were trying to find a solace they hadn’t felt in weeks, a solace they left behind in District 12.

Between Peeta’s drawings and how easy it’d become for Katniss to change the colors of a district as desolate as 13, she was longing for home more than ever. In that moment, Katniss wanted to revel in her time with Peeta. She wanted to close her eyes and let the old feelings consume her and bring her back to a time where everyone just seemed happier, despite the struggles that still awaited them, ready to pounce the very first chance they got.

But she couldn’t.

The pit in her stomach that’d existed since the day she and Peeta arrived in District 13 had grown into a brick. It weighed her down more and more every single day, and not even being with Peeta could help her forget about it anymore.

With a frustrated sigh, she pulled away from Peeta’s lips and looked him in the eyes. “Do you ever wonder if it’d been easier if I’d just let the Mockingjay hunters kill me when they had the chance?”
“Never,” Peeta said resolutely, kissing her neck.

“Well, you should,” Katniss said, sliding off of Peeta’s lap and sitting down on the mattress, pulling her knees up to her chest.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Peeta snapped.

“If they killed me like they were supposed to, none of you would be suffering now because of me,” Katniss said.

Peeta laughed. “Suffering because of you? Katniss, Panem was suffering long before you were even born. I figured with as much time as you used to spend with Gale, you’d understand that this is bigger than you, than me… than us.”

“So now you suddenly agree with Gale?” Katniss spat. “What happened to Gale’s words mean nothing?”

“Yeah,” Peeta nodded. “What happened to that, Katniss?”

And there it was. Katniss’s admission that she had a moment of doubting Peeta’s trust after what Gale said to her hadn’t come back up since it was revealed in Wiress’s compartment the week before, but Katniss knew it was still bothering Peeta, even if he hadn’t said anything.

“This has nothing to do with that,” Katniss hissed. “And for you to bring that back up now? I thought you were better than that, Peeta.”

“Are you sure?” Peeta asked, his expression sour. “Telling me that I should be wishing the hunters killed you has nothing to do with the fact that you still think that deep down I want you dead?”

“It doesn’t!” Katniss yelled.

“Then what was it supposed to mean?” Peeta asked again.

“It was easier in District 12,” Katniss said softly. “I could have saved all of you from this if they would’ve killed me.”

“It was not easier in District 12!” Peeta argued. “I lived in fear every single day. Fear that was so strong that I didn’t even want to go home at night. People were dying every hour and their bodies were left to decompose in the streets. District 12 was hardly the utopia you seem to think it was, Katniss. It was different for you, being hidden in that grove. And I know that’s true because the only time I wasn’t terrified or miserable was when I was there with you.”

“Why does it feel like everything that no matter what I say, you have to find a way to disagree with me?” Katniss asked. “When Prim was here you made District 12 sound like everything we were missing. And now suddenly it’s not again? And you can’t tell me you’re not miserable now.”

“I am,” Peeta admitted. “I’m more miserable here than I’ve ever been. Even…”

“With me,” Katniss whispered, finishing Peeta’s sentence.

Peeta’s silence and diverted gaze was the only confirmation that she needed, but she couldn’t be angry with him. How could she be angry when she felt the exact same way?

“At least we were able to keep each other happy in the grove,” Katniss said. “We can’t even do that here. We can’t do anything here. All of these meetings and training sessions? What are they
for? *Nothing* is getting better here. It's getting worse. *We* are getting worse, and I can’t do this anymore.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I want us to leave!” Katniss cried, scooting over to the side of the two beds that was hers, making it clear that she didn’t not want Peeta close that night. She pulled the covers over her shoulders and turned her back to Peeta. “I won’t do this anymore.”

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The shrill and rhythmic chiming forced its way into Katniss’s dream, ringing out like a foghorn and tearing down the peaceful and serene vision of dipping her toes into the lake. And suddenly she was shaking -- no, she *being* shook.

“Katniss!” Peeta cried. “Wake up!”

Her eyes shot open, burning with the unexpected bright light that filled the compartment. She focused on Peeta hastily pulling a night shirt over his head as he grabbed a pair of pants and dropped them onto the bed in front of Katniss.

“Put them on!” he instructed grabbing for his shoes. “We gotta go!”

He had to yell over the alarm that was still sounding in the compartment in pulse-like wails that seared her ears. It only lowered once, and a voice began to seep out from the doorbell speaker.

“All District 13 residents are to report to ground zero immediately,” the monotone voice said. “Where they will be secured into the bomb shelters.”

“Bomb shelters?” Katniss asked, joining Peeta in his frenzied movements. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Peeta said, checking to make sure Katniss had her pants and shoes on. “Let’s go. We can ask questions later.”

Their compartment door slid open and they were immediately immersed in chaos. Other residents filing out of their compartments in attempts to make it to the stairwells clogged the hallway, loud yells and cries could be heard as the complaints rolled in. Katniss and Peeta were stuck in the doorway of their compartment with nowhere to go.

“Get out of the way!” A voice yelled before Haymitch came into view, fighting his way through the crowd to get to Katniss and Peeta. He waved them toward him. “Follow me!”

“My sister!” Katniss yelled. “I have to go get her!”

“She’s two floors up!” Haymitch yelled back. “You’ll never get through!”

Katniss didn’t care. She refused to go to the bomb shelter without her sister. She took off toward the crowded stairwell and pushed through as many people as she could, ignoring Haymitch’s calls for her to stop.

She managed to make it up an entire floor before the congestion of the crowd became too much for her to push through.

“Are you stupid?!” Haymitch hissed, finally catching up and grabbing Katniss’s arm. “Do you even know--”
Prim. Katniss could recognize her voice anywhere. She searched through the crowd frantically, finally seeing her sister and mother waving madly, trying to get her attention. She said nothing as she forced her way to them, grabbing their arms and pulling them through the crowd to her and back to where Haymitch stood impatiently. She looked around for Peeta. He had to be somewhere close if Haymitch had made it through.

“Where’s Peeta?” Katniss finally asked.

“Still at your compartment,” Haymitch explained. “He said it’d be easier if just one us went after you.”

It was harder getting through the crowd a second time to get to Peeta. Instead of one person pushing through the dozens of nervous residents, four bodies were forcing their way through, eliciting angered shouts and shoves from the others.

Finally, they made it back to where they’d started. Their end of the hall had thinned out considerably, leaving the furthest half almost empty. And as Katniss scanned the small crowd of people that still remained, she realized one thing very quickly -- Peeta was nowhere to be found.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to ichooseupeetachu for prereading and cheerleading :)

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