The Sun Thief

by bubblegum1425

Summary

In the land of Panem, over a decade ago, the royal house Mellark was overthrown by the usurper Coriolanus Snow. Though the terror-filled reign of Snow and his sons has now nearly extinguished the last spark of hope in Panem's people, one boy with a bow and his Merry Band seek to restore the faith and overthrow the King. An Everlark take on Robin Hood. Fantasy AU

Notes
Author's Note: As I wrote in the summary, this story is a take on Robin Hood. It is most heavily influenced by the Disney animated version of the tale though I promise this is no children's story. There will be many other elements not directly related to Robin Hood or any other specific fantasy/fairy tale, but rather I'll just credit my deep love of the genre and countless hours spent reading as a child. :) 

I have two thank yous to make. First, I need to thank nightlockinthecave for making such an awesome banner for me for this story...That can be seen over at FFF. My username is the same (bubblegum1425). And a second thank you goes to titania522 (ct522). She beta-ed this story for me, but first she read the prologue before I had even thought up the rest of this story and told me she wanted to hear more. Without her enthusiasm and encouragement, I would have stopped writing this tale before it even got started.

This is my first fanfic and reviews are very welcome. I don't own the Hunger Games. That belongs to the amazing Suzanne Collins. I just wanted to play in her world, and I hope I do her characters justice.

The course of true love never did run smooth

-William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream
Prologue--A Prince Lost

The man raced along a low stone passageway, his long black cloak whipping out behind him. The torches along the walls cast flickering shadows across the man's haggard face. Water dripped down the walls. The smell of mold and decay filled his nostrils. His stringy blonde hair was matted with sweat and grime. And blood.

Sir Haymitch Abernathy was not a man who was often afraid. He knew the horrors of war. Death had always been his closest companion. He had been in more battles than he cared to count and seen men torn to pieces in any number of horrifying ways. There had been the ransacked villages with all the inhabitants murdered no matter what the age. The battlefields stained with blood and bile. He had heard the screams of the dying filling the air with their piteous moans, begging for help or for their girls or for mercy. Only there was never anyone to hear them.

No, Haymitch had seen too much in his twenty-five years to be much afraid of anything anymore.

But he was afraid now. And the echo of his last conversation rang in his ears…

"Oh god, I have failed to protect him. Them. All of them…"

"Take him. Please take him. You must hide him. You have to keep him safe. I have made sure he will forget…"

"Look always for the sun Haymitch. He will remember when the moon joins the sun. They will need each other to survive…"

"He will be the last…"

"It is over."

Haymitch clutched the small unconscious boy in his arms closer to his chest. He stole a glance at his slack face, peaceful in sleep. The boy was a ethereal child. There was simply no other word to describe him. Even in this dark musty passage under the lake, somehow the boy's mop of soft curls still shone as though the sun had taken up permanent residence in his hair. Deep sorrow welled up inside Haymitch as he thought how this child would undoubtedly be made fatherless and brotherless in the coming days, if he hadn't been already. And perhaps motherless too, though she had never acted much like a mother in the first place.

That witch. Now exposed as the traitor she was. A betrayer of all she was supposed to protect. All across Panem, people would now know the evil plot she had set forth with that ice-cold brother of hers. Haymitch had tried to warn the king. God he had tried. But the king, for all his good qualities, was soft to the will of his wife and easily deceived by her honeyed tongue. And now it was too late to stop the avalanche of terror she had wrought. It made him sick to think of what the days and years to come would bring.

Haymitch hurried on.

The passageway began to slant upwards, and Haymitch felt a slight breeze blow across his face. Nearly there, he thought. He increased his pace, desperate to be out of the secret passage that he hoped was leading him from the castle and under the lake to its far side as had been promised. He pounded up a set of stone steps before stepping cautiously out through the tall weeds that concealed the tunnel's low entrance.
The acrid smell of some burning living thing hit his nose with all the subtlety of a rancid pile of manure. Haymitch whipped his head up to look across the lake where he could see the castle burning, illuminating the water with a kind of sickening red glow. Ash floated down lazily onto Haymitch like some demented version of snow sent straight from Hell.

Haymitch gritted his teeth and hauled himself up onto the bank. Once he slipped in the mud and let out a loud curse, almost dropping the boy. Haymitch looked at the child suspiciously for a few moments before he let out a sigh of relief when the boy didn't even slightly stir. The boy was a quiet reserved child as far as Haymitch had seen of him at court, but if Haymitch had to guess, any five year old would cry in the circumstances they now found themselves in. Whatever that potion had been, it had done its job well, and the boy slept on.

He let out another sigh when he saw the horse tied up next to a tree a few yards away. Chaff was a drunk no doubt, but at least he had not failed in this task. Haymitch removed his cloak, wrapped the boy tightly in it, swung himself onto the horse, and took off at a break-neck gallop through the forest. He could only pray that damn cat had done his job as well and alerted Her. It would not be long before Snow, Queen Helen, and the rest of their bastard followers realized one Mellark had escaped.

Haymitch urged the horse to fly through the forest, willing it to be as swift as the mockingjays he could hear singing out to each other overhead. The farther he rode, the more the guilt began to well within him. He had left behind King Richard, the princes Bannock and Rye, the household staff, and his own sworn brothers of the Royal Guard. Knowing Snow, he would not let any one of them live. The man only killed when it suited a purpose, but he would execute every person captured tonight. And the queen, Haymitch suspected.

Haymitch felt his lips curl into a grim sort of smile at the thought of Helen realizing her brother cared for her no more than he cared for anyone else...that is, not at all. Snow only loved power. He would brook no chance of anyone leading a rebellion against him, and that included the sister who had helped him orchestrate this sudden rise to power. Most of the court was probably already in Snow's pocket, and those that weren't would most likely bow down to him out of fear, and the need for survival. He could only imagine how bad it was going to get for the peasants.

A sudden flash of violet light caused Haymitch to pull up short. Haymitch squinted around, trying to peer through the darkness until—

"Hello boy." The soft voice floated up out of the darkness like a whisper on the wind.

"So that ugly ball of fur did find you then eh? Guess he's good for something after all."

A staff with blue flame glittering on its end suddenly lit the clearing, revealing a diminutive older woman clad in a midnight blue gown. Her long white and grey hair was gathered at the back of her head into a bun. Her only other embellishment was a necklace with a moonstone pendant. It glinted in the blue light, seeming to give off an otherworldly light. One second it reflected indigo, the next violet, then turquoise until Haymitch tore his gaze away so he could hop down from the horse.

"Buttercup is always good for something. Take care what you say to him, or he may give you more than just a scratch," the woman said with a laugh in her voice. Haymitch watched as an orange and brown tabby cat padded into the light, and then bounded up onto the saddle Haymitch had just vacated with a leap that no normal cat could have achieved.

Haymitch snorted. He didn't have time for this.
"You will take him then Mags?" he said gruffly. "You and Boggs are the only ones I know who can keep him safe, hidden. Give him the skills he will need to live, and the guidance he will need to grow. He cannot become like his mother."

The laughter in the woman's brown eyes died and suddenly was replaced by a deep sadness. "Nor can he become like his father."

Haymitch opened his mouth to argue, wishing there was an argument to be made. But King Richard had failed to protect his family and his people. And now all their hope would rest in this tiny boy with the sunshine hair. A boy who would not even remember he was a prince come the morning. Instead of an argument, all Haymitch could do was shift the boy into Mag's waiting arms.

"He will not remember who he is. Not until the sun and moon combine or some such bull shit."

Haymitch saw Mag's eyes widen for just a second, like she knew whatever King Richard had actually meant by that garble. Haymitch opened his mouth to ask if she really did know, but before he could get a word in, words came out of her mouth that made him forget his question—

"Buttercup will be going with you. You need him much more than I now, and I foresee a time when another will need him even more than you."

"I don't need no damn mangy cat that I'm obligated to take care of woman. And I especially don't need one that will apparently abandon me at some future unspecified date. Least you could do is tell me when."

The laughter returned to the old woman's eyes as she assured Haymitch that the damn mangy cat could take care of himself before she asking where next his journey would lead.

"To the Seam. It's the one area of the country no one has ever given a shit about. Lord Everdeen is supposed to be a good man. Perhaps I can persuade him to take me on as a member of his household guard." Haymitch began to laugh. "I'll just get myself some nice peace and quiet until the revolution begins."

Mags eyes again grew serious at his words, this time with concern in her eyes. Haymitch really didn't enjoy seeing it because he could tell it was concern for him. And he could take care of himself just fine.

"The future is muddled. And I only see glimpses of things to come. No true outcomes are determined. The choices of many will determine whether we will see this new evil lifted from the world. But I see a hard road ahead for all of Panem. The darkness of winter descends. The snow has come. And your path will not be an easy one, my dear boy. But take comfort in Buttercup, and in the hope that you have given Panem tonight with your bravery and courage. Do not lose faith that spring can come again."

At her words, the tears sprang unbidden to his eyes, and he turned suddenly away to hide them. Haymitch went to haul himself back in the saddle, noticing that Buttercup was now perched in front of the saddle like he was about to grab the reins and ride away. Actually, Haymitch thought, he probably could.

Haymitch had his foot in the stirrup, about to whisper a mumbled goodbye and speed off, when the impulse suddenly struck him, quick and sharp as a needle. He swung back around to where Mags still stood with the boy in her arms. She gave him a knowing look.

Haymitch strode forward and pushed back the cloak, his cloak, which hid most of the boy's face,
and brushed back the flop of curl that fallen onto the boy's forehead. The boy sighed in his sleep, and a small smile formed on his face. He looked like he was having a good dream, Haymitch thought, and hoped it was the true. Good dreams would be hard to come by in this new Panem. He leaned forward and gave the boy a peck on the cheek, whispering to him—

"I loved your father like a brother, and your brothers like they were my sons. I am so sorry I could not protect them, that I failed them. But I will see you again one day. I will look for you. Be strong until that day. Be safe until that day."

Haymitch took one last look at the boy before issuing a quiet murmur of farewell to Mags, not daring to look the old woman in the eyes lest he betray the turmoil and anguish within him.

He spun on his heels, strode to his horse and jumped into the saddle. With a hard kick, he directed the animal eastward to where he knew the Seam road lay. He could not look back. He would not look back. He must not look back. The sharp pain he felt in his chest, his grief over this night, threatened to swallow him whole.

But then Haymitch felt Buttercup settle his warm weight over his lap. The cat gave a soft meow filled with sorrow, Haymitch could feel. But it was one of comfort too. Haymitch sighed. While the pain still remained, at least he knew he was not alone. Perhaps the old witch had been right.

Haymitch allowed a single tear to escape down his cheek as he whispered into the blackness—

"Goodbye little prince."

"Goodbye sunshine boy."

And finally, Haymitch uttered his last farewell as like a whispered prayer. As though uttering the boy's name could act like a shield against the cold emptiness of this bitter night and all the evil to come—

"Goodbye Peeta."

He road on into the night.
A Princess to Be

12 years later…

Katniss

Lady Katniss Everdeen opened her eyes with a start as Glimmer's cloying shriek rang through the carriage. The sunlight streaming through the open curtains danced across Katniss' face as she glanced across to where Glimmer and Marvel sat.

"Oh Marvel! My love! You shouldn't have. It's so gorgeous. Wherever did you find such an exquisite gem? That village was such a wretched place. I've never seen such dirty pathetic people."

"Anything for you my darling. The Baron bequeathed it to me as a gift. He told me only someone as beautiful as the jewel itself could possibly be worthy of being its wearer. He absolutely insisted I give it to you."

Katniss rolled her eyes as she watched the crown prince and his wife from her corner of the carriage. Glimmer squealed loudly, clapping her hands in delight, as she turned so Marvel could drape a necklace with a sapphire pendant inlaid with tiny diamonds along the chain around her perfect porcelain neck. Katniss held in a snort of disgust as she took a closer look at the piece of jewelry. It was the one the Baroness had told Katniss was an heirloom that had been in her husband's family for centuries. She had worn it at the feast held in honor of the royal visit.

Katniss highly doubted it had been given as a gift though the baron, as a member of the lowest aristocracy, certainly could have been trying to buy himself some favors. He hadn't seemed to care at all about his starving subjects but only for himself and his family.

Glimmer lunged over to Marvel and began peppering him with kisses as Katniss swiftly closed her eyes at the sight. She did not need to watch them fawn over each other...again. This whole journey had been nothing but that, and Katniss was more than ready for it to end. Just a few more weeks before she would not have to be in their presence all the time anymore.

But it wouldn't be just a few more weeks. Not really. The tour would be ending yes, but Glimmer and Marvel would become a permanent fixture in her life in just a few short months. Katniss fought to keep down the bile rising in her throat that arose every time the thought of her own wedding entered her mind. She didn't belong with these people.

She didn't belong with Marvel, long, lanky, with a shock of brown hair to his shoulders, and a pointed nose that gave him the look of a weasel. He lived up to his appearance. Marvel was always sneaking, sniveling, and weaseling to gain an advantage over his adversaries. He dealt in veiled threats and secret disappearances in the night, leaving anguished families with questions that would never be answered. He was well suited to his commision as head of his father's secret guard.

She didn't belong with Glimmer, who was everything appearance wise that a princess ought to be, with her flowing blond hair, light blue eyes, and tall, thin frame. But Glimmer was shallow. And vain. She didn't see anything beyond her own reflection in a mirror. The concerns and cares of others never received a second thought in Glimmer's head.

And she certainly didn't belong with Cato, King Snow's second son and Katniss' husband-to-be. Katniss opened her eyes just a slit to glance at the sleeping man beside her, hoping Marvel and
Glimmer wouldn't notice she was awake. Cato was a large fit man with straw-like blonde hair and cold dark blue eyes. His hands were calloused from thousands of hours in the yard drilling with the soldiers. The times Katniss had allowed him to kiss her, those hands had scraped her cheeks with their roughness. The man was a brute, plain and simple. He enjoyed death, and abused his position as commander of the army at every turn, reveling in terrorizing those weaker than himself. He took what he wanted, whether it was gold or land or women. And sometimes he still took even when he wanted nothing at all.

And then there was King Snow himself. Katniss felt a sense of deep terror roll through her at the thought of the king. She shook her head vigorously. She couldn't think of him now. The man scared her too much.

Katniss ground her teeth, going through the mantra she had taken to repeating any time these thoughts entered her head. This was for Prim. She needed to protect Prim. Prim could not survive that house. This was for Prim.

Prim. Her innocent fourteen year old sister. The only person Katniss was sure that she loved. The small girl with the golden yellow hair and soft brown eyes, who was always begging Katniss to sing her a song. The one who was kind to everyone and made friends with anyone, no matter their station. The girl who loved animals, and kept pet goats in the yard. The one who loved taking care of others, no matter if they deserved it or not. At that thought, Katniss' anger flared as quickly as a spark of lightning sets fire to leaves.

If there was one person who did not deserve any care, it was their mother. And that was exactly who Prim always cared for. Prim would sit with their mother for hours, spooning her broth or reading a book to her. She combed their mother's hair and helped the maids dress her, sometimes even helped bath her. And even when she was having one of her episodes, where she would stare out the windows over the fields of their manor for hours, present in body but not in mind, Prim would always be there for when she returned.

Katniss did none of these things. In fact, she tried hard not to think of Lady Adelaide Cray, Duchess of Twelve, formerly Countess Adelaide Everdeen of the Seam, as her mother at all. The woman Katniss knew as her mother had disappeared the day her father died. Katniss remembered it like it had happened yesterday.

"Forgive me Lady Adelaide, but I bring grave tidings," the lead foreman said with a trembling voice, twisting his cap anxiously in his hands.

Katniss stood behind her mother, eyeing the man with as angry a stare as she could muster. What could possibly be wrong on this beautiful sunny day? That morning, her mother had come to the teaching room where Katniss and Prim were at their lessons. She dismissed the tutor before revealing the cakes and scones she had stolen from the kitchens that cook had just set out to cool. All three of them had raced out to the meadow that acted as a bridge between the manor and fields to eat the treats and lounge among the flowers, laughing and smiling. Mother had braided Katniss' long hair, weaving it with flowers just the way Katniss liked while telling the story of when she and father had painted Haymitch, the head of the household guard, from head to toe with clay while he was sleeping off a bout of drink just so he would be forced to take a bath. And Katniss knew soon father would come back from his inspection of the fields. She knew he would swing her into his arms, peck her twice on each cheek, whisper I love you in each of her ears, and then sing a song, as was their ritual every day. Her father's voice was beautiful, and all the birds stopped to listen when he sang. It would be the perfect ending to a perfect day.

Katniss was broken out of her reverie at the sight of the tears beginning to leak from the man's eyes. She had never seen a grown man cry. He slowly stuttered out-
"Lord Aaron. He. We. We had just finished inspecting the wheat nearest the river. By the woods. I, I did not see exactly what happened Lady Everdeen. He told me he wanted to gather some flowers for you. The blue ones that grow only in the wood. He said you loved those, and that he would not be but a few minutes. He..

"What the devil happened boy? I've aged five years in the time it took you to get out that sentence," Katniss heard a gruff voice say. Haymitch strode out from around the corner of the manor, his tabby cat Buttercup following in his wake as always except if the cat was cuddled in Prim's arms.

"I am sorry sir. It's just… I, heard him screaming sir. The workers, we all heard him screaming. Never have I heard such a desperate scream. He, he was, he was…"

A thrill of foreboding suddenly raced through Katniss. Father!

"He was set upon by a nest of tracker-jackers sir. He. Is dead sir. I am sorry. He is dead."

Katniss felt her body go numb as she watched Haymitch's already pale face, wasted from drink, turn an even paler shade. Her mother gave an anguished scream of despair and collapsed onto the ground. But Katniss did not move.

No.

Father.

Katniss felt her hand curl almost unconsciously over the necklace she always wore. The chain was made of purest silver. There was a pendant on its end where within a circle of gold hung a mockingjay with an arrow gripped in its beak. The circle was studded with yellow diamonds all along its rim and an emerald lay in the mockingjay's eye. It was the symbol of the Everdeen house, and a gift from her father. It was the most beautiful thing she owned, and she knew it was worth far more even than that necklace Marvel had given Glimmer. Katniss missed her father terribly.

In the six years since his death, the woman Katniss had known as her mother, always so full of life when he was alive, had all but disappeared. She had been so in love with her husband, her heart left with him when he passed. No, Lady Adelaide had not even keep one piece to spare for her daughters. Katniss would never forgive her for it. The neglect had been hard for Katniss to understand but utterly devastating to Prim, who had only been eight at the time. Katniss had taken care of Prim as best as she could, trying to be both mother and sister to her. And all the while, the anger and bitterness Katniss felt towards her mother festered. Katniss lost faith in love. If the person who was supposed to love her most could not even rouse herself to care of her daughters, there simply was no reason to trust it.

And with no male heir to inherit her father's estate, it had also appeared for a brief time that the Everdeens would lose everything that had been in their family for generations. Bitterness coursed through Katniss that she was deemed incapable of managing her father's lands simply because of her gender.

But then a surprising proposal of marriage had come her mother's way from Duke Edgar Cray. Katniss remembered his speech of how uniting their two households could not make more sense. He controlled the lands of the Hob, which bordered the Seam, the land the Everdeens had always ruled. He also had an heir, a son named Antonius, who was a high ranking officer in the King Snow's Grand Army. And of course, he would work to procure good marriages for Katniss and Prim to members of the aristocracy "worthy of their beauty," when the time came. He spoke sweet words of love to her mother, and how her beauty was renowned throughout the world. Katniss didn't think her mother registered any of his praise, but she nonetheless agreed to marry Lord
Cray.

The Seam and the Hob had united just as Lord Cray had intended and had been renamed District Twelve as declared by the King. The King wanted to "reorganize" Panem into twelve districts so as to prevent "confusion" among the people when they traveled or when foreigners visited the land. But Katniss knew better. It was just another way to destroy any identity or sense of belonging that the people had to their homes and to each other. But there was nothing that could be done, and Katniss had become the stepdaughter of a Duke of District Twelve.

Katniss had been deeply sorrowed by the loss of her title as a lady of the Seam. It was a wound that bleed even to this day, along with the gaping hole her father's absence left in her heart. But otherwise life had gone on much the same. Her stepfather came to live at the Everdeen manor, but mostly ignored Prim and Katniss, and even her mother, except for an occasional family dinner or two each month. Her step-brother rarely visited as he continued in his army post. The fields were farmed as always, albeit with a harsher hand than her father's had been. Haymitch continued to putter around the yard pretending to guard the family, talking to Buttercup if he got too drunk like the cat could actually understand him. And Katniss had grown up.

It was not until two years ago, on the eve of her fifteenth birthday that Katniss heard the rumors of her stepfather's lust for young women. One day, she had heard two servants whispering about the chambermaid just let go from the household after she was found to be with child. The maid had refused to name the father, and Lord Cray had promptly dismissed her for having a child out of wedlock. Katniss had hid behind a door and listened as she heard the name of her stepfather fall from the servants' lips, whispering, wondering if he in fact was the father of the maid's child. The maid had, after all, been called to clean his chambers many times. Katniss remembered the fear that had run through her at the whispered words, a fear which had magnified tenfold when the maid was found dead in a ditch a few days later, her stomach run through with a sword.

In retrospect, other such incidents had happened before. Maids let go for strange reasons. Her stepfather's men riding into the manor's courtyard with scared looking young peasant women squirming in the saddles and even girls no older than Katniss whom she saw knocking at the side door of the manor late at night. They were let in by a servant and left a few hours later, always with a gold piece in their hands. By then, Katniss knew all the rumors had not been rumors at all.

And then, not six months ago, her stepfather had attempted to enter Katniss' own bedchamber.

Katniss wrinkled her nose as she remembered how she had awoken that night to a loud thumping on her bedroom door. She had leaped out of bed to make sure her door was locked from within as she did every night, listening hard at the keyhole. She could hear him, Cray, mumbling to himself about how pretty Katniss had become, how he wanted to taste her. The wave of revulsion she had felt in that moment had only been dampened by an even greater fear for her sister. She knew if Cray wanted to possess her, it would only be a matter of time before his attentions turned to Prim.

The next day Katniss announced to an astonished Cray, her rather blank-faced mother, a wide-eyed Prim, and the rest of the house that it was time she and Prim presented themselves at court as it had been years since the Everdeens last visit. Katniss would be writing that morning to their cousins, the Marquee Jonathan Undersee, his wife Lady Kathryn, and their daughter Madge, to inform them of the Everdeen girls imminent arrival and request for housing. Katniss, Prim, and Haymitch, who had insisted that he be allowed to accompany them, had set out a week later for the Capitol.

Katniss had gone with a heavy but determined heart. No matter what, she would not leave Court until she found a husband. She would not allow Prim to return to that house where Cray could prey on her sister at any time. Katniss was not experienced in the ways of flirting or romance nor did she think herself beautiful, but Madge had helped her, teaching her how to powder her face,
apply rouge to her cheeks, and kohl to her eyelashes. A designer named Cinna had provided her with some magnificent gowns.

Katniss smiled slightly at the thought of her first meeting with Cinna. He had walked into the room, his all black attire contrasting dramatically with the caramel color of his skin, and a soft smile lit up his kind face. He had curly dark hair and wore no adornments besides a single gold hoop earring in his left ear. Cinna asked about her circumstances curiously. It was unusual for a high born lady to demand so many new dresses in such a short time period. Normally so closed off, somehow the man had made her feel at ease, and Katniss had confessed the difficulty of her situation. Cinna had looked at her for a long moment thoughtfully before smiling and saying, "then we must set you on fire."

Katniss hadn't known exactly what that meant, but the gowns Cinna had provided were beautiful. The first day she was at court, she wore a dress of dark green with small green beads embroidered on the bodice and hem. Cato was not there that day because as Katniss learned later, he had been bedding some small time baron's daughter, a wench by the name of Clove. But plenty of other men had courted her attention that day, much to Katniss' surprise.

The second day, Katniss had worn a cream and white dress that was as light and airy as powdered snow. Cinna had told her as he helped her put it on that he was betting on her. Much to her shock, Cato had taken one look and proclaimed she was a vision of the moon come to earth, followed shortly by a declaration his undying love for her. Katniss had accepted his proposal because she could think of no better way to keep her sister safe from harm than by becoming a princess. No one would dare touch the sister of someone directly related to the king, even if only through marriage.

And that was how Katniss now came to find herself on this ridiculous tour with her fiance and future brother and sister-in-laws. After their engagement, Snow had suggested Katniss introduce herself to the people of Panem through a several months long tour through the districts, presenting tokens to the lords and gifts of food to the peasants.

Katniss hated it. She hated being dressed up like a doll, making the speeches of gratitude and joy, and dining with the various members of the aristocracy who fawned over her as though she was their very newest play thing. The worst were the nights when Cato got drunk in the banquet halls. He would invariably ask her to dance, pawing at her bodice as they swayed on the floor before sloppily trying to kiss her, the stench of the alcohol on his breath always overwhelming.

Katniss knew he wanted her in his bed. He had told her so every time this had happened. And Katniss had allowed it, just once, on the night of their engagement. Katniss had thought if she went to bed with him, she would be able to fully accept Cato and the future to which she had committed herself. But she had been wrong.

Cato had been drunk that night too. He had not even bothered to undress her but rather had just unlaced her bodice to gain access to her breasts. She could still feel his hot breath upon them as he reached beneath her skirts to pull down her undergarments and find her entrance. It had hurt some when he entered her, but after that Katniss really hadn't felt anything at all. As Cato had thrust inside her, all she could remember thinking was how odd it was that women could apparently find enjoyment in this act. For Katniss, she had felt only relief that it was over when Cato had reached his completion a short time later and slumped off her without a word. Katniss decided that night she would not lay with him again until she had to on their wedding night.

Since then, Katniss had always given some excuse for why she could not come to his bed. She needed rest; she was having her monthlies; she could not become with child before they were wed... It was that last one that seemed to reach Cato. King Snow's wrath would be terrible if a child was conceived out of wedlock. As the Snow family's claim to the throne was already
questionable, even if no one ever talked about it, all children had to be legitimate, even those born to Snow's second son. Still, whenever Katniss told Cato she would not come to him, he would angrily stomp off to bed whichever woman he could find that would have him. Katniss did not expect he would remain faithful in their marriage.

"Katniss my dear. If you keep making those faces, I'm afraid you will develop wrinkles far before your time. And on the eve of the big wedding too."

For the second time that morning, Katniss was startled into opening her eyes as the sound of Effie, the group's ridiculous chaperone, sounded out directly across from Katniss. The woman gave her what Katniss assumed Effie thought was a concerned look. But it was always hard to tell what look Effie was trying to convey beneath the powdered white wig and layers of makeup Effie always wore.

"Yes Lady Katniss. We can't have you looking like an old maid for my dearest brother Cato on your wedding night now can we? He needs to be pleased with what he finds, not disgusted."

Katniss felt the heat rise in her face as Marvel and Glimmer began to laugh. However, their guffaws were enough to wake Cato from his slumber with a grunt.

"Good God. Have me made progress at all? Where are we?"

"We are currently on the ocean road your majesty and should be leaving District Four in a few hours," Effie said in a bright voice.

"A few hours? I'm already bored," Cato said with a bit of anger in his voice. He grabbed his knife from where it hung in a sheath around his waist and flicked it into the velvet covered side paneling of the gilded carriage.

"My Lord! That is mahogany! I am sure there are better things we can do with our time than ruin the upholstery." The scandalized tone in Effie's voice sent Glimmer and Marvel into even more peals of laughter.

"Oh Effie hush. Even if Cato chopped this carriage to pieces, the king could commission a hundred more, just so Cato could hack them to pieces all over again."

Katniss rolled her eyes at Glimmer's words and turned to look out the window. The sky was a cloudless blue, and the sunlight glinted off the gently rolling waves of the ocean. The waves of water moved gently inland across a thin white sand beach before rising to small bluffs dotted with sea grass. Seagulls wheeled across the sky, occasionally diving down to scoop up crab and fish.

Typical Glimmer, Katniss thought. Not even one thought given to the amount of hours just one new carriage would take to build. The people already lived like slaves, toiling for King Snow and the other members of the aristocracy. She did not think any craftsmen also needed to be forcibly made into fashioning a new hack because Cato was bored.

A sense of sadness rolled over Katniss as she thought about the people of Panem, taxed to the point they could no longer afford food or land. They were starving and downtrodden. She had seen it in their faces throughout the tour. Broken. Just like Katniss.

She briefly allowed herself to muse about what the country could have been like if the royal house Mellark still ruled. Panem would most likely be a far happier place. King Richard Mellark had been a good man who ruled the land with kindness and justice. Katniss had apparently met him and his sons once though she did not remember, but when her father had been alive, it was one of his favorite stories to tell.
He had taken Katniss to court with him when she was but five years old to present the yearly tributes from the Seam. The King’s two eldest sons Bannock and Rye were far older than Katniss at fifteen and seventeen. They had spoiled her with treats and had asked her to sing a song for them, and Katniss had sweetly obliged, singing her favorite song "Deep in the Meadow" for the princes. Her father spoke of how all the people in the hall had stopped to listen. The King himself had bowed to her, thanking her for the beautiful song while the youngest prince, Peeta, had stared at Katniss with an awestruck expression from his behind his father's robe.

It had not been long after Katniss sang for them that the King was betrayed by his wife to Snow. And now King Richard was long dead along with his sons. There had been rumors in the first days following Snow’s takeover, whispers of hope that the youngest prince had somehow managed to survive. His body was not one of those displayed before the burnout castle as a warning to all Panem of what would happen to them should they cross the Snows. In fact, if the rumors were true, the young boy was never found at all. But it had been twelve years with no sign of the lost prince and most everyone had given up hope the child had lived. The name Mellark was now even taboo to speak. Just a kind word about their rule could result in a visit from Marvel's secret guard. It was common knowledge Snow’s spies were everywhere.

Katniss sighed. It was silly to think of what might have been. She could not help the people of Panem anymore than she could help herself, and she had Prim to think about. Prim was what mattered. The one good thing in her life. She was doing this for Prim.

Katniss turned her face away from the window to look at the other four people in the carriage. This was her reality now. She pushed her pain deep into the hidden place within her heart where she kept all her sorrow and resolved to be a happier companion for her future family along the rest of this tour. She repressed one last grimace as she said-

"Cato my love. I am sure we can do something to relieve your boredom. Let us play a game for now and hope something along this road will present itself to entertain us."
Peeta

Peeta dodged through the trees, sweat dripping down his face. He could hear Thread's men chasing behind him, hacking their way through the brush with their swords, shouting as they went. He snorted. At least it was easy to hear which direction they were coming from. If Thread wanted to capture him, he really was going to have to hire smarter men. Peeta looked around. Now he just needed to find that damn animal.

Running into a clearing, Peeta sighed with relief at the sight of the grey horse tied to a tree. He reminded himself to thank Gale later as he untied the animal and gave it a slap, sending it galloping off towards the road. Peeta quickly tossed his bow up into the nearest tree and sheathed his sword. Grabbing the lowest branch of the large oak, he swung himself up just as Sheriff Romulus Thread stomped into the glade with his men trailing close behind.

Peeta looked down upon the tall man with grey speckled hair, dark glinting eyes, and evil sneer on his face. The man looked off angrily in the direction the horse had ran.

"Damn the boy! Damn him! One of his fucking company must have had a horse ready for him. He's heading back towards the village. After him. I will have his head on a pike before this day is out so help me God!"

"MOVE!"

Peeta held in a laugh as the men scurried off into the bush with Thread barking orders behind them. He let out the breathe he had been holding and glanced at his surroundings.

Sunlight filtered through the trees and danced along the ground. The cicadas buzzed joyously in the bushes and a mockingjay flew past trilling out to its mates. The leaves rustled and the branches of the tree creaked as Peeta felt a slight breeze drift across his face. He could hear the waves of the ocean hitting the beach from a quarter mile away. Peeta sighed. Mission accomplished.

"Look's like you've made Sheriff Thread into an even bigger fan of yours Peet. I didn't honestly think that was possible. I don't know why you didn't finally introduce yourself to him."

"Well all he would have had to do was look up," Peeta said with a slight smile as he swung down from the tree. "But he heard the horse galloping off and went after it. Is Gale still around? I need to thank him for giving up his horse. Rory must have had to share his with Gale after they left Gale's here." Peeta paused at that thought. "Rory and Gale and one horse. I hope they didn't kill each other."

"Nah. It's Gale. Always willing to sacrifice for the cause. And I doubt Rory got much of a choice. You know big brothers. They keep little brothers in line."

Peeta smiled though really, neither he nor Finnick knew about the relationship between brothers. Finn had been an only child, and Peeta, well, he had never really had any family at all. With a slight shake of his head, Peeta asked-
"Where are the others? Did everyone get out safely?"

"They've gone on ahead to prepare. Everyone was ok as far as I know. We distributed all the grain to the villagers thanks to your diversion. I still don't know why Thread chose to go after your short ugly mug rather than someone as beautiful as me, but it is what it is."

Finnick popped a sugar cube into his mouth in what Peeta assumed Finn thought a provocative way. Peeta rolled his eyes as Finnick began to waggle his eyebrows up and down. Slight on his height aside, they both knew why Thread had chosen to go after Peeta rather Finnick. Being the leader of a band of thieves had its fall backs.

"Come on Finn. We need to go thank the royal princes for providing such a nice distraction for Baron Claudius that he didn't even notice we merry men of the forest raiding his storehouse."

"Hah. Don't let the girls hear you calling us merry men. Jo at least would try to kick your ass."

"Well 'merry people' sounds ridiculous and 'merry men and women' is too long. And I'd be more afraid of Rue. You never hear her coming."

"True. Very true," Finnick said, nodding his head in agreement. He tossed Peeta the reins of the second horse. "All right. The hours have been passing, and the morning grows short. Lead on oh wise and fearless leader." Suppressing another eye roll, Peeta climbed up into the saddle and shouldered his bow across his chest. He kicked the horse off at a fast trot through the trees with Finnick following close behind.

"I hear Princess Glimmer is a sight to behold my friend. Alas my heart has already been claimed by another but mayhap you can show the fair maiden you're ah...sword. Discover what she's been missing, you know?. Marvel can't be that good of a fuck. And of course, that hand of yours has to be getting awfully tired these days. When was the last time you made the beast with two backs? I'd think a princess would be quite worthy of ending your drought," Finnick said in a teasing tone.

"Shut up Finnick."

XXXXX

Peeta looked down the long ocean road from his perch on one of the highest branches of a tall tree. It would soon be time. The royal carriage was a giant thing that had to be pulled by eight horses for it to move at even a moderate pace. Peeta had watched from atop Baron Claudius' storehouse roof, arrow at the ready in case he was noticed, as the Princes Cato and Marvel, Princess Glimmer, the Lady Everdeen, and that odd looking escort of theirs had climbed into the carriage early that morning. The poor horses strapped to the grotesque contraption had struggled and strained so much to pull the carriage out of some mud that Cato had had to command some of the royal guards to get down from their own steeds to push. He and Finnick had now been waiting over three hours for the signal that it was finally approaching. Peeta sighed for what felt like the hundredth time that day. He really shouldn't be surprised.

The same scene had pretty much played out everywhere across Panem. He and the rest of the group had followed the royal family as they introduced the soon-to-be princess to the people of Panem. Peeta grimaced. He had only seen Lady Everdeen from afar, but he still had heard nearly every one of her simpering speeches while keeping watch for his men. He could almost quote her words at this point. Every speech began with praise for King Snow's strength and wise rule, and how grateful she was that the country had such a kind and benevolent leader. Then she would praise the power of the Capitol, mentioning all the gifts she had been given and wonders she had found there. Of course, she heaped glories on Marvel and her fiancé for being such good
protectors of the realm as well. And then she would finish each speech talking of the deep love she and Cato had for one another. The people of Panem were to use their loving relationship with one another and even stronger love of the King to use as an example to follow as they strove to forge their own bond with the King and his family.

It made Peeta want to vomit.

If Snow wished for the people to love him, he was going to have to do better than having his future daughter-in-law distribute rotten food. But Snow didn't want people to love him. He just wanted to remind everyone of the power he had over their lives. Praise once for the dear crown prince Marvel, who had people hauled away by his secret police at a moment's notice. Praise twice for his brother, who ordered his army to rape and burn their way through the villages and countryside any time he got bored. And praise thrice for the foodstuffs no pig would even eat given out as "gifts" to the people by the princess-to-be. The magnificent clothing the royal family and their retinue wore. The balls and feasts held in their honor. The gold plated carriage that took eight horses to pull at a steady pace. All just tools to grind at the already broken souls of Panem's people. A reminder of what they did not and could never have.

Peeta's heart contracted in anguish at the thought of all these things. All this pain. He was trying show them good still existed in this world. He wanted to show them a light still existed in the darkness even if it was only a small flame.

He heard the rumors every time he went to the towns to give out what he and the rest had stolen. The people talked about the young outlaw band lead by a man with skill with the bow that no person alive could match. The Sun Thief. That's what they called him. For the ray of hope he gave them was as golden as the hair on his head.

Peeta was glad, and yet he knew it still wasn't enough. Something bigger would need to happen to truly ignite the country to take back what had been stolen from all of them when the Snows came into power. Peeta didn't know what it was, but he would keep trying until that day came.

Death did not scare him. He had nothing to lose. No parents that cared for him. No siblings who watched out for him. No lover who wished to grow old with him. Even his followers would get on without his leadership should he be killed, though they maintained they couldn't, but he knew would ok. No, no one really needed him. So he would go on robbing the rich, to feed the poor until he was felled by a sword, or an arrow, or the executioner's axe. He smiled grimly. Reaching old age wasn't in his cards.

Peeta spared himself a brief glance across the road to the beach and the great expanse of the sea just beyond. The afternoon sunlight glittered upon the open water, and he could see the ocean birds flitting high in the sky. How nice it would be to be free like that, flying without a care for the insignificant creatures that were bound to the earth. He thought about the drawings, spare paper and charcoal he always kept in the bottom of his quiver. He wanted to draw the beautiful view and that carriage was moving so slow…

Suddenly, a streak of blue flame shot across the sky and a mockingjay's song echoed through the wood. The signal. They were almost here.

"You really sure you want to do this Peeta? Robbing a baron is one thing, but I think there's a law against robbing royalty," Finnick said with a hint of nervousness in his voice, breaking Peeta out of his thoughts. "Annie is going to kill me if I don't come back alive."

Peeta looked down to where Finnick sat below him. He reached down to give his friend a reassuring pat on the back, hoping to erase the apprehensive look from his face.
We have a good plan. That monstrosity moves so slow, their royal majesties will be dying for some entertainment. We'll be long-gone before they even notice anything is missing. There's enough gold with them to pay for food for a month for an entire district. I saw them loading the tax collections into the carriage. We need this. The Baron's storehouse didn't have nearly the amount of food those people needed," Peeta said seriously. "The others will be ready. Not to mention, I have my bow and you your trident." He shook the bow strapped across his chest for emphasis. "They love their games Finn, but we're the better players."

Finnick sighed. "Sometimes I think you worry too little Peet."

"And sometimes you worry too much."

Finnick just shook his head, but then brightened a little. "Well come on then. Let's get ourselves pretty. It's not every day I get to recite poetry for some princesses while my dear old "dad" draws them in all their regal glory."

Peeta smiled again. Finnick didn't have do anything but be himself for this venture. In the three years Peeta had known him, Finnick could get a girl to bed with one kind word of praise and a flash of his cheeky grin. His sea green eyes, thick copper hair, strong body fit from his days at sea, and tall stature did the rest of the work. He could make them forget their family's expectations, their lovers, and even a time...or three...or ten...their husbands. Then Annie had entered their lives. She had crept up on Finnick, and he had willingly tamed his wild ways.

Peeta didn't mind. Finnick was a thousand times more happy, and after all the misery Finn had gone through, he deserved a little happiness. But that didn't mean Finnick had forgotten how to attract women. And in their line of work, that occasionally was necessary.

He and Finnick dropped to the ground from the tree. He watched Finnick pull a lute from a bag on his horse and begin to tune the instrument. Peeta drew out what looked like a dead rat from his pack. The thing looked ridiculous when it wasn't on but the person who had made it had been extremely adept with a needle. He fastened the tiny straps barely visible to the naked eye behind his ears to give himself a grey and white streaked beard. He then grabbed some dirt and rubbed it over his face for good measure. To finish the look, Peeta pulled out a drawstring bag of flour from within his tunic and doused his hair with it to whiten out the blonde. He grabbed his drawings and paper from within the quiver before shouldering it and his bow across his back. He climbed upon his horse, threw his cloak over his weapons, and hunched over. To most anyone, he would now look like a worn out dirty old man with a twisted spine. The only key now was to not look anyone directly in the eyes as they were unfortunately the one thing he could not age.

"How do I look Finnick?"

"Like you died yesterday and missed your own funeral."

"Wonderful. Let's go."

XXXXX

Peeta could see the dust from the heavy carriage rising into the air before it had even pulled around the bend in the road. A thrill of anticipation and perhaps a bit of nervousness ran through him. The game was about to begin.

"Better start Finnick and remember to throw out some praise for the escort. She'll be the one who most likely doesn't want to stop to slow up the tour and throw of their schedule."

"Aren't you supposed to be mute?," Finnick said as he began to play the lute in his hands. Peeta
remained silent as his answer and watched as the royal carriage pulled into view along with a
guard of twenty or so soldiers surrounding it and a wagon full of luggage trailing behind it. Peeta
knew his men would make quick work of that. He looked at Finnick as he called out-

"HAIL TO THEIR ROYAL MAJESTIES! ALL GLORY AND HONOR TO THE PRINCES,
PROTECTORS OF THE REALM. ALL PRAISE TO THE PRINCESSES, BEAUTIES
BEYOND COMPARE!"

The carriage ground to a halt. A woman with a curious expression and the most amount of
powder and rouge Peeta had ever seen on any face popped her head out from between the drawn
curtains. Peeta had to physically will himself to not let his mouth drop. He glanced at Finnick
whose mouth was now open in shock at the woman's ghastly appearance, but he quickly
recovered-

"Oh… OH! And hail too, to their majesties’ escort. To call her beautiful would not do her justice,
for no face in the world compares to hers."

Peeta winced as the woman giggled shrilly and said in a high voice, "Pray tell me good sir, what is
your name? You play the lute so beautifully and your words are most kind." Finnick smiled as she
very obviously looked him over from head to toe and promptly began to preen herself.

"My name is of little consequence fair lady, but you may call me John. I was present with my old
father Robin here this morning when Lady Everdeen presented her gifts to the town. Her words
stirred me to such love for King Snow and his children that I at once set forth on the road in hopes
of seeing them once more before they departed this district. I wished to see the strength of Prince
Marvel and Prince Cato, and of course, the beauty and grace of Princess Glimmer and Lady
Everdeen."

The escort let out another shrill giggle while a second woman with blond hair, blue eyes, and a
gigantic sapphire necklace between her ample breasts poked her head out of the curtain. Peeta
realized this must be Princess Glimmer. She was as beautiful as the rumors said she was but before
she even spoke, Peeta could tell she had only cobwebs for brains. And how the hell was she
don't fall over with that mammoth gem around her neck?

"Your words are like poetry Sir John. Why, if the woman of the court heard you, I imagine all the
ladies would be at your side in an instant."

Was she really flirting with Finnick when her husband, the crown prince, was sitting next to her?

"I have more words fair maiden if only your majesties would pause to hear to them. Surely you
must be tired from such a long journey. The sunlight shimmers upon the waves and the hour for
drink and food is at hand. Please let me entertain you while you dine."

The curtain was yanked back and a man with blonde hair sneered out at Finnick, not pausing to
spare Peeta a second glance. Prince Cato. A sudden pain lanced through Peeta's heart as an image
of blood spattered on the ground flashed before his eyes. The prince did not know Peeta, but Peeta
knew him. "Are you looking for payment? If you are, I have a sword that has not been used for in
a long while," he threatened with an evil smile. Finnick hastily put up his hands in protest.

"Nay. Nay my lord. I only wish is to pay homage to your lieges with my words and to bestow a
gift." He thrust Peeta's drawings at the Prince. "My father's tongue was removed long ago as
punishment for a crime he did not commit under the cruel reign of the Mellarks." Cato's eyes
flashed with anger, Peeta saw without surprise. He had instructed Finnick in what to say during
their ride down to the road. If there was one thing Cato hated, Peeta knew it was mention of the
one name that suggested Cato wasn't a legitimate prince. He would do anything to spite the name
of house Mellark. "Though he is aged and unjustly had the power of speech taken from him, his skill with charcoal, ink, and paint has no equal. It would do him great honor if you would let him draw something for you. Perhaps a picture of your fair lady? As a reminder of her beauty for when you are parted from one another."

Cato paused for a moment and rifled through the drawings. He didn't look enthusiastic, but Peeta knew he would be hard-pressed to refuse a "token" of his lady to carry with him. It would not be chivalrous, especially after the escort exclaimed, "How romantic! Oh Prince Cato! You must! Lady Everdeen will be so pleased." It also helped that Glimmer was practically salivating over Finnick. She placed a hand on Cato's arm, suggesting it was due time for a rest. Cato grudgingly agreed.

Finnick clapped his hands in supposed joy and suggested the beach would be the perfect spot for a meal. Cato nodded at the guards, and they began to pull out chairs, cushions, blankets, and even a table from the luggage wagon.

"Come father," Finnick said with a wink. He tugged Peeta down from the horse. "Let me help you to the beach." He took Peeta's elbow by his arm as Peeta shuffled slowly towards the shore. Just as they set foot on the sand, Finnick whispered, "One drawing should be enough time Peet. Look, Cato is instructing all the guards to come to the beach. Idiot. They won't see when the others come out from this far away."

Peeta glanced back over his shoulder and felt Finnick stumble slightly. He cursed, but Peeta paid him no mind as he watched the Lady Katniss Everdeen make her way down to the beach. Whereas Glimmer, Cato, and Marvel were laughing and chatting, she was looking around her with a scowl on her face, like this was the last place she wanted to be. The escort, Effie, he heard Glimmer call her, was twittering at her incessantly about how lovely it was that Cato wanted a portrait of her. The scowl on Katniss' face deepened, and she wrinkled her nose. Her expression confused Peeta. Weren't she and Cato madly in love? Her speeches said as much.

But one thing Peeta knew for sure was that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen with her slender figure, luminous grey eyes, olive toned skin, and hair wound into a simple braid for travel that fell over her shoulder to where it just hit the top of her breast.

Shit.

Peeta suddenly looked around and realized that everyone was staring at him including Finnick, who was looking at Peeta like he'd gone insane. How long had he been standing there? "Is your father all right?" Effie the escort asked with a bit of concern on her face. Finnick gave a strained sounding laugh. "Not to worry beautiful lady. His brain is a bit addled from his time in the wars long ago, but I promise you he is harmless." Finnick gripped Peeta's arm harder than was necessary and yanked him to sit down in a chair set down by the guards, who were now in the process of setting out the royal family's meal.

"Now fair Lady Everdeen, please sit across from my father. Allow him to observe you for a minute, if you may. It's all he needs. Then before long your strong Prince will have a momento of your beauty to keep with him always," Finnick said with his most winning smile and tried to guide her toward the seat he was gesturing towards. Katniss stared at Finnick for a long second, and Peeta watched as his smile faltered slightly. It appeared she was immune to Finnick's charms, Peeta noted with a feeling of satisfaction. He quickly felt appalled with himself. Katniss was royalty and a pampered Capitol brat and stood for everything Peeta was against. She was also in love with another man, a tiny voice in the back of his head said.

Katniss looked at Cato, and he nodded calmly at Finnick, who led her to the seat opposite Peeta. His eyes widened as he watched his friend nimbly untie a mockingjay necklace from around her
neck and slide it off without her noticing. Peeta tensed slightly. That wasn't part of the plan. He and Finnick had done this routine with other nobles. Their one rule was that they couldn't take anything that a person wore. It was too easily noticed, but Peeta supposed the jewel's clear value was too much to pass up. Still, Peeta would have to deal with Finnick's recklessness when this was over.

"How, how would you like me to pose?," Katniss said uncertainly, startling Peeta out the glare he was giving Finnick. He looked at her. The sadness and possibly even a bit of fear he detected in her eyes sent a sudden stab of...of something...through his heart. What the hell was happening to him? Peeta grabbed her elbow to turn her so she could be in profile and so he would not have to look at her eyes anymore. He pointed to the ocean as an indication of where she should look.

Finnick again clapped his hands. "Perfect! And now my lords and ladies, let me sing to you a poem of love, which I was inspired to write only this morning when your visit moved me to such joy." He strummed the lute, taking particular care to look at Glimmer and Effie and began to sing...

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields

...Peeta looked at Lady Everdeen and began to sketch. She was stared out at the ocean with the look of someone whose heart and mind were far far away. He wondered what or who she was thinking of…

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals

...A sea breeze suddenly gusted inland and whipped the hair tucked behind her ear onto her cheek. Peeta was struck by a sudden impulse to reach out and tuck the strands back where they belonged…

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle

...Peeta brushed her arm lightly to indicate she could now move or eat if she wished. She nodded without even sparing him a glance but continued to look out at the sea. Why did she look so sad? And why did he even care?...

A gown made of finest wool

Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,

With buckles of the purest gold;

…Peeta shook his head. He shouldn't even be entertaining these thoughts. He was the leader of a band of thieves, and everyone depended on him to make the right decisions. He would not allow himself any distractions…

A belt of straw and Ivy buds,

With Coral clasps and Amber studs:

And if these pleasures may thee move,

Come live with me and be my love.

...Peeta watched Finnick move close to Glimmer as she gave him a doe-eyed besotted look. He glanced at Prince Marvel, whose stony expression made his displeasure clear. Dammit. Finnick was laying things on too thick. They needed to get out of here…

The Shepherds' Swains shall dance and sing

For thy delight each May-morning:

If these delights thy mind may move,

Then live with me and be my love.

Finnick concluded his song with a grin. He then boldly brushed Glimmer's hair back from her face with a "Your fair face should never be hidden dear princess, even by your own lovely tresses." Peeta noticed him slip Glimmer's necklace off just as he had with Lady Everdeen. DAMMIT Finnick! Marvel stood up in a rage, and Peeta noticed him grip his sword. Peeta stood up to block him, pretending to stumble over his shaky "aged" legs. Whatever the others had managed to steal from the carriage and wagon would have to do. It was time to go.

He gripped Finnick's arm as though he needed support, giving it a hard squeeze that Peeta hoped conveyed his anger. He shoved the now completed portrait into Finnick's hand.

Finnick turned quickly, avoiding Peeta's smoldering gaze and gave Cato the drawing. "Ah my Lord. See what wonderful skill my father has? It is a fair likeness no? May it be of great comfort to you when you must be away from your Lady love."

Cato spared a short glance at the drawing and grunted before shoving it at Katniss. Peeta looked out of the corner of his eye and watched her eyes widen at the drawing. She looked surprised. Considering she must have had a fair number of artists paint her portrait over the years, Peeta wondered why a rough sketch would cause such a bewildered look.

Peeta suddenly heard the mockingjay's call sound from the wood. They were done. It was time to leave. Peeta began to moan and gripped his head in his hands, falling to the ground in fake agony. He reached out to touch Cato's shoe, which the oaf promptly kicked away with a snort of disgust.

"I thought you said he was harmless peasant."

"Oh your majesty, he is. I promise he is. Sometimes the afflictions in his mind take a hold of him, and he will forget where he is. He will sometimes even forget who I am at his very worst, who he himself is," Finnick said with great fake sadness.
"Oh you poor dear!" Effie exclaimed, given Finnick a gentle caress over his arm. Glimmer on the other hand, looked alarmed. "Afflictions of the mind? Is that something I could catch?" Peeta stared at her in amazement. Yes, he had been right in thinking her brain was nothing but dust. But Peeta's staring seemed to make her even more nervous, which fit what he was trying to do perfectly.

"Nay. I do not think so m'lady, but it distresses me to see you so upset. I will take my father home so you can continue your meal in peace, though it will sorrow me greatly."

Glimmer just nodded and clutched at Marvel's arm like death himself had already come to claim her. "Then be gone peasant," Marvel commanded. "For upsetting my wife so, I am of half a mind to arrest you. How dare you have even come near us knowing your father is so ill!"

Peeta watched Finnick smile weakly as he and Peeta backed away. "Please my lords. I meant no harm. We will leave you now. I wish you safe journey, and look forward to celebrating with all of Panem when the union of Prince Cato and beautiful Lady Everdeen occurs." He bowed deeply. "You do that peasant," Cato said and suddenly pulled Katniss into a deep possessive kiss as though he had only just now realized Finnick had been flirting with his woman.

Peeta quickly turned away from the sight as an unfamiliar sense of rage swept through him. He let Finnick begin to pull him back towards the horses. Yes, it was most definitely time to go.

But then he did something, the consequences of which would echo through his life and the lives of so many others for years to come.

He looked back.

He knew immediately what a mistake it had been. Cato had stopped kissing Lady Everdeen, and she was now looking at the two men as they edged away from the party. Peeta could still see his drawing clutched in her fist. Her eyes widened as they looked directly at each other, and he could see the confusion etching itself over her lovely face as she tried to make sense of his young eyes in a seemingly far older body.

Peeta quickly turned away, praying they could at least get back to the horses before she realized what was wrong. He thought it was obvious how intelligent she was even if she hadn't spoken much. Or maybe her intelligence was just obvious to him. He didn't know, but he knew she would figure it out. It was just a matter of time.

Peeta groaned as sure enough, not even a few seconds later, a clear voice rang out-

"THIEVES!"

Chapter End Notes

Poem is called The Passionate Shepard to His Love. It was written in 1599 by a poet named Christopher Marlowe at the height of the Renaissance. Also, this is an Everlark fic, if that wasn't obvious. Gale is present in this story but any Gale-Katniss shippers beware... This is not one of those stories.
Katniss

"THIEVES!" Katniss called out in as loud of a voice as she could manage. She knew something had been odd about those men when they had appeared so suddenly on the road. She had even tried to warn Cato that they could be bandits but as soon as he had heard the name "Mellark" mentioned all he had seen was red. She had known it would be fruitless to reason with him at that point so she had dropped the matter.

Then, when the old man had taken her elbow to help her to the seat, the energy she had felt at the touch of his hand had caused her to tremble. It had confused her, but she didn't think much of it until she saw the drawing he had done after Cato had cast it aside with barely a glance. No one had ever drawn her like that. All the portraits she had done over the years showed her as though she was a porcelain doll, fragile and weak. But that drawing, that simple charcoal sketch…She felt as though it was the first time someone had actually seen her for who she truly was or at least wanted to be. In the picture, Katniss was looking out over the water with a faraway but fierce and protective look on her face. Her pose was strong but not rigid, and her eyes sparkled with sunlight reflected from the sea. Katniss had never seen herself look so beautiful. She didn't understand and a deep feeling of unsettlement had come over her. It didn't look like a drawing a senile old man would or even could create. Who was this man? Something was wrong. She had just known it even if she couldn't pinpoint what it was, and she had sighed with relief when they had hurried away after upsetting Glimmer.

Then Katniss had seen his eyes.

The spark she had felt at his touch had seemed to increase ten fold when she looked into them. Never had she seen a blue like that in a person's eyes. It looked like the bright blue of the sky and clear blue of a tropical water had combined within them to create a new color. They were young eyes, filled with an emotion she couldn't place. Katniss had been overwhelmed with bewilderment and…fear. How could eyes like that be in such an old face? Katniss had reached for her father's necklace as she always did when the need for comfort arose, but she had found it gone. She had looked around frantically before her own eyes were drawn back to the two men now almost to the road, and she understood why the old man's eye did not match his face.

"THIEVES!" she screamed again. The men were nearly to their horses! They had to be stopped.

"Lady Everdeen, calm yourself! To raise one's voice is not becoming of a lady," Effie exclaimed.

Katniss just looked around in panic and noticed Glimmer's sapphire necklace was also gone. "Glimmer look! Your necklace! Marvel. They've stolen your gift!" She watched Marvel look at his wife for a few moments before understanding finally dawned on his face. Glimmer began to screech with anger, adding to the chaos. With a shout, he commanded Cato to draw his swords while simultaneously drawing his own. He ordered one group of guards back to the wagon to grab the weapons stored there while commanding the second group to capture John and his "father."

Katniss jumped as Cato gave a loud roar and whipped the double swords from his belt. He took careful aim and threw them straight at the bandit's horses. Katniss' own heart wrenched with terror at the animals' great screams of pain as the swords entered their bodies. As they fell to the ground,
the two bandits leaped off to avoid being crushed under their dying steeds. She watched in
astonishment as the younger one, John, yanked a great trident from where it had been hidden
under his horse’s saddle and bared the weapon in front him, ready for battle.

As the royal company roared towards the two men, a sudden volley of arrows landed in front of
them, causing them to pull back in surprise. Where had those come from? Katniss looked around
to for the source, but the bedlam increased to new heights in that moment.

A group of twenty or so men suddenly emerged from the woods brandishing swords and axes.
They did not come directly down to meet the princes but instead sprinted towards the guard’s
horses and those attached to the carriage and wagon. Katniss understood. Sending the animals
away would not allow any of her own retinue to pursue them. They would get away, and her
father’s last precious gift would go with them. She would not let that happen.

Katniss sprinted forward with not a thought for the fact that she did not have a weapon or any
training to fight.

The clash of metal on metal rang out through the air as the guards, Cato, Marvel, and Katniss
reached the bandits now working to free the horses. Katniss noticed a small man with an axe
trying to cut one of the harnesses. She ran at him and shoved him in the back, taking him by
surprise. The man stumbled and practically flew into Cato, who had just rounded the side of the
carriage. He rounded back on Katniss with a cry of "I’ll fucking kill you." She could not see all of
his face shadowed as it was beneath his hood, but his eyes glittered with malice and murderous
rage. Katniss edged backwards while he moved towards her with axed raised just as she heard the
head guard yell out that the extra weapons stored in the wagon had been removed. With an
explosion of curses, Katniss saw Cato look around to vent his anger at this new turn of events
upon whomever was nearest to him. He noticed the small man nearly at his side and with an evil
grin, began to swing his sword. The man, who in his own fury was focused on Katniss, did not
see death coming down to greet him.

"Jo! No! LOOK OUT!" a tall man with grey eyes and olive skin much like Katniss own yelled
from the other side of the carriage. He made to leap over the harness, but Katniss could tell he
would not make it in time.

A sudden clang of wood on metal echoed through the air and all present seemed to pause and
watch Cato's sword spin through the air from where it had been struck out of his hand by an
arrow. Cato gripped his wrist and howled in pain. Katniss looked to the top of the carriage where
the old man of all people now stood, straight backed and tall, with a great wooden bow in his
hand. He grabbed a sword from his side and leaped into the air, landing with a thud next to
Katniss. He swung the sword upwards to cut the last harnesses away from the horses when
Katniss moved to block him.

"Give me back what is mine criminal."

His blue eyes met hers, and she again felt that same energy a before, a strange feeling of
connection, like she had met him in another life. His eyebrows raised in surprise and then anger.
"Move Lady Everdeen. You are in my way," he said in a deep voice.

"You speak!" Katniss growled. She grabbed at the hilt of his sword, holding it with all her
strength in an attempt to stop him. But he was stronger than he looked.

The man yanked his sword upward and out of her hands and roughly pushed her to the side.
Katniss tripped over her skirt and went tumbling to the ground. She looked around for something,
anything to stop him and noticed Cato’s sword a few feet away from her. As Katniss crawled
towards it, she heard him cut the horses loose and send them running with a loud slap, calling for
his men to retreat as he did so.

Katniss struggled to her feet just in time to see the bandits sprinting towards the woods. All around, the princes' men were groaning on the ground. Katniss grimaced. So much for the vaunted skills of those in the King's army. These men had handled them so easily, and she had no idea where Cato and Marvel were though she even from here she could hear Effie and Glimmer sobbing on the beach. Katniss gripped Cato's sword in both hands and reminded herself to be brave before she took off in the direction the man with the bow had fled.

Katniss entered the wood, running a quarter mile...a half mile...a whole mile, before she finally stopped in fear. She had traveled too far from her protectors, and they probably had no idea where she was. To her slight shock, she realized she wished Cato was with her. He wasn't pleasant, but he was big and knew how to fight. And for all his brutishness, she knew he would not let her come to harm, if only for the sake of his own pride. Katniss took a deep breath to try to calm her racing heart.

For a second, the silence was deafening, but then Katniss heard the distant sounds of galloping horses. She realized the robbers must have had their own horses hidden in the trees, but she had seen Cato kill the two horses of the "entertainers." They had to be hiding in these woods until their fellows could come retrieve them. Katniss looked around and caught the brief flash of a black cloak through the trees. With a triumphant smile, Katniss moved through the wood as quietly as a deer. The sound of a babbling brook reached her ears, and Katniss peeked out from behind a tree.

The man was kneeling by the stream cupping water into his mouth and was panting heavily in the heat of this early summer day. She swiftly noticed the bow laying on the ground beside him. He was unarmed! Her brow furrowed as she also noticed the hood of his cloak that was now thrown back from his head was caked in a strange white substance. Was that...flour? She had suspected he was younger than he appeared, but if he had been using flour to hide the color of his hair, Katniss realized he might be younger still than even she had imagined. She padded up behind him as silently as she could and placed Cato's sword at his neck. She watched his back go rigid with deep satisfaction as she spoke-

"Do not move ruffian. You can feel the blade at your neck, I take it. I will not hesitate to kill you if you move so much as a finger."

Anger shot through her as the man answered in an amused tone, "Is that your first time holding a sword Lady Everdeen? I can feel you trembling from its weight though I at least give you credit for sneaking up on me. Few people can claim to have done that."

"What does it matter if this is my first time holding a sword?" She scraped the blade lightly against his neck. "I still have you at my mercy."

"Do you now?," he said in the same amused tone. Then, with a quickness she would not have thought possible of any man, he spun around and met her sword with his own, sending it flying for the second time that day. Katniss turned to run but before she had taken even three steps, she felt his hands grip her arm and pull her to the ground. Katniss yelped as she felt him pin her arms above her head. She kicked out at him, but he promptly straddled her legs, rendering her effectively paralyzed. Katniss again found herself looking into his blue eyes as his face appeared above her. His beard was slightly askew. It was fake! Katniss felt like a fool at the evidence of his trickery.

"Now who is at whose mercy?." he said with a cock of his head and the hint of a smile on his face.

"How dare you! Let me go! Let me GO!" She tried to kick at him again even though his weight
was more than enough to keep her from moving her legs.

"Lady, if you struggle, you will only exhaust yourself more," he sighed. "You've had a trying day. To raise your voice like this is simply not becoming of a lady." Katniss flushed as she heard him echo Effie's words deliberately. "And of course, you might raise the alarm to our location. Your Prince will have undoubtedly noticed your disappearance by now. But don't fear, I'll let you go back to your love as soon as my party comes to pick me up. You've made a rather large mess of things today."

Katniss snorted in disgust. "I made a mess of things? You are a thief. A criminal. If you had not taken my necklace, there would have been nothing for me to even notice of your deceitful ways."

A flash of annoyance Katniss did not quite understand passed over the man's face. "I did not take your necklace though you are very foolish to risk so much for it. Running into the woods to face armed thieves over some jewels?" Katniss felt a swoop of fear travel through her. Was this man going to harm her? He stared at her silently for a moment, as if he was trying to read her thoughts. "Imagine if I were a common thief? I do not think many of them would hesitate to take advantage of a beautiful woman like yourself."

Katniss glanced down her body to where the man straddled her body, becoming acutely aware of how her breasts were heaving in anger at his words. She looked back up at him only to notice that his own eyes had followed her gaze downward. She flushed an even deeper red. She hated this man!

"Are you not a common thief?"

"No."

Katniss blinked. That wasn't the answer she had expected, and it only made her angrier. She kicked at him for third time.

"I do not believe that! If you were not so common, you would unhand me this instant. Actually, you would not have even touched me in the first place. I am a high born lady! And you, you-"

Katniss was suddenly interrupted as another man's raucous laughter rang out into the air. She and the man both turned their heads towards the sound.

"When I said you needed some time with a woman, I didn't think you would take me so literally," the copper haired man said as he spun his trident in his hand. Katniss found herself yanked to her feet and her arms being twisted behind her back. She glanced at the man beside her and was surprised to see the color rising in his neck.

"Knock it off Finnick. It's because of you we are in this mess. What the hell were you thinking?"

"Those necklaces were worth far more than anything else they had. You talked before about feeding a district for a month. If we can sell those jewels, we could be feeding several districts for a month."

Feeding districts? What were these two talking about? Then Katniss decided she just didn’t care. They were just common thieves no matter what the one had said.

"You have no right! No right! That was my father's gift to me." The man holding her gave her a strange look, but the one called Finnick laughed again. "Fair lady, I am sure you have plenty of jewels given to you by your father. After all the generosity you have shown the people of Panem, surely you can have a heart and spare a few of the extras."
There was a hard edge his voice, which sent Katniss into another state of confusion. Was he talking about the gifts given in her name on the tour? The guards had gave those out. She didn't even see what was contained within those bags. She was spared from answering the man as the sound of several galloping horses drawing near echoed through the wood.

A boy who looked so much like the grey-eyed, olive-toned man from earlier that Katniss knew this boy had to be his brother entered the clearing, leading two horses behind him. He looked maybe a little older than Prim.

"God you two are hard to find. Gale and Darius are hurt. We had to return to the Great Sea Tower instead of going on to The Falls like you wanted to do. I'm sorry." The boy's mouth then fell open as he noticed Katniss for the first time.

"How badly?" came a voice filled with her concern from beside her. The boy continued to stare at Katniss like she was a the strangest thing he had ever seen while horses pawed at the ground nervously in the following silence. "Rory! How badly are they hurt!?"

"Sorry. I, uh, sorry." He shook his head as though to clear the dust out. "Not too badly. Thresh said they just need a night of rest, and The Falls are way too far of a ride for tonight. Also, Johanna's pissed off that you didn't let her take on Cato today. Just warning you."

The man sighed deeply. "She would have been dead if not for my arrow. She wasn't paying attention."

"Many of us would have been dead today without your arrows. I am sorry for my recklessness," Finnick said with tinge of remorse in his voice. The injuries of these unknown people, Gale and Darius, seemed to trouble him based on the look of worry now on his face.

"Don't think this let's you off the hook, Finnick," the man said, but his voice was considerably softer in tone than the one he had used earlier with the man. He gripped Katniss' arm tighter and turned her in his arms so she was now facing him. "I am sorry Lady Everdeen. I know I promised you earlier that I would release you when I left this place, but now Rory here has gone and revealed the locations of our next two encampments." Katniss saw Rory grow red in embarrassment over the man's shoulder. "You'll have to come with us."

Katniss opened her mouth in protest but before she could utter a syllable, she felt a hand come up and brush away her hair in an almost tender way. But then she felt a sudden pain as his hand gripped her tightly at the pressure points in neck. Spots appeared before her eyes.

She felt him swing her into his arms as her knees went weak, and the blackness crowding the edge of her vision enveloped her. The last thing she heard was a whispered "I'm sorry" that she wasn't even sure was real.

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Katniss felt the sunlight flashing across her face as a merry singing voice floated into her ear…

Blow the wind Southerly,
Southerly, Southerly,
Blow the wind
South o'er the bonnie blue sea.
Blow the wind Southerly,
Southerly, Southerly
Blow bonnie breeze,
My true lover to me
…Was she dreaming? She felt someone's arms, strong but gentle, holding her securely in the place in the saddle. She sleepily registered that the song was one that her father used to sing. It had always made her mother laugh because her father had never even been on the sea. Was father here? Was he the one holding her? Only his arms had ever made her feel this warm and safe...

They told me last night
There were ships in the offing
And I hurried down to the deep rolling sea
But my eye could not see it
Wherever might be it,
The bark that is bearing
My lover to me.

...She felt his arms pull her closer to his chest, and Katniss smiled despite herself. She had missed his hugs so much since he'd been gone, and she now sunk down into the comfort and peace his arms brought. She turned her face into his chest to snuggle deeper into his embrace when the scent of cinnamon and dill suddenly enveloped her. Cinnamon and dill? Katniss felt a twitch of bewilderment. Father had always smelled of the fields and woods and the sweet good earth.

"Jesus Finnick. You've been away from Annie for two days, and yet you act like you've gone years without seeing her."

"Perhaps my lad when you've finally found a girl, you will understand the hardships of being away from a woman. Hasn't your brother educated you at all? He's certainly had enough practice."

Katniss felt a short laugh rumble through the broad chest at her back. How crude. Father would never laugh at such things! She considered that for a moment, and then sadness crept over her as it dawned that this wasn't Father at all but one of her captors. The safety and comfort she felt was just a delusion. Wasn't it? She sighed and let the misery she felt pull her back into her slumber…

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Katniss awoke with a start at the sound of a woman shouting off in the distance. She strained to hear what was being said but could make out only occasional phrases..."Should have let me." "I'm capable." "I could have done it!" The tone of the voice was very angry.

Katniss could see a large fire several yards away outlining perhaps twenty or so figures in the flickering light. She strained to see the source of the angry voice and could see two people, one quite tall and the other small, just at the edge of the fire's light. The small figure was waving their arms wildly while the tall one put up their hands in protest. All the others seemed to be silently watching the volley with their mouths hanging open in disbelief.

She turned away from look the sight so as to gain a sense of her surroundings, but it was too dark. She felt a rough dry stone wall at her back and a coarse woolen blanket beneath her body. Her feet were tightly bound, but her hands were only loosely tied behind her back. The smell of grass and the sea filled her nose. Katniss looked up and saw she was in some sort of circular tower. A few stars were just visible through an open roof perhaps one hundred feet above her. Katniss took a deep breath. She knew she had to get out of here but first, she had to somehow remove her bindings. She started looking for something sharp, a rock perhaps, when an even louder shout than before interrupted her concentration completely.

"I'll kill her!"

Katniss looked up in alarm. The small person had turned in the firelight, outlining their profile. A
streak of fear ran through Katniss as she saw the axe the person held in their hands. It was the man she had stopped from cutting the harnesses today. The one she had almost gotten killed at Cato's hand. She watched as the man suddenly jumped out of the circle into her direction. A loud cry of surprise went up from the rest of the group and several figures leaped to their feet, attempting to stop the man, but the man was too fast and darted around their outstretched hands. She frantically felt for something, anything with which she could get off the bindings. She felt her hands snag on a jagged edge of the stone wall, but the man was prowling towards her too quickly. The streak of fear became an inferno inside Katniss. Was she really going to die like this?

Suddenly a man's calm voice, filled with warning, echoed sharply throughout the tower.

"Johanna."

The small man visibly winced and froze in place. Katniss' mouth fell open. The small man was actually a woman? A woman was allowed to fight? To join a group of bandits!? Katniss had never heard of such a thing.

She looked around wildly as a man seemingly materialized out of the darkness from a side of the tower. She could see he had a bow and quiver strung across his back and was carrying some sort of animal in one hand. He stared at Johanna, and she seemed to quail under his gaze even though he had only spoken one word to her. Katniss then watched her shrug deeply at the man before abruptly turning back towards the fire with a growl of acquiescence.

The man too turned towards the fire to speak with the tall man Johanna had been yelling at. He spoke only in a low rumble so Katniss could not make out what he was saying, but an odd thrill ran through her as the fire reflected off what Katniss could now see was his blond hair. She wished she could hear him.

He gave the animal to the tall man and walked away from the light. She did not see his face, but Katniss swore she saw him glance her way before he disappeared completely into the darkness. When she was sure he had gone, Katniss looked back towards the fire and subsequently jumped as a soft voice came from directly beside her-

"Don't worry Lady Everdeen. Johanna isn't so scary once you get to know her. She's honestly always like that."

Katniss looked to her side to see a small curly haired girl with caramel colored skin peeking out from behind a pile of broken stones with a gentle smile on her face. She looked perhaps no more than a year older than her Prim. Katniss laughed grimly.

"Does she normally attempt to kill people?"

The girl's smile widened as though Katniss had told a joke. It reminded Katniss of Prim, who always found some light even in the most upsetting situations. It made Katniss ache for sister's embrace.

"Well no, or at least she doesn't normally threaten people in the group, but then we've never had a guest before."

"A guest?" Katniss said angrily. "I have been cruelly mishandled. I've had by dear father's gift stolen from me, and I think it is clear I've been taken from my family against my will today. I am now bound, and someone has attempted to kill me. I would hardly call that appropriate behavior towards a guest."

The girl hopped out from behind the pile of rocks and gracefully bounded to sit in front of Katniss.
"It's more for your safety than anything else. I think they all assumed you would try to escape once you woke up. This tower is very old and crumbling in a lot of places. You could get hurt if you wandered away." Katniss snorted. This girl was clearly enamored of her band of ruffians, but her words did remind Katniss of what she was supposed to be doing...escaping. She began to saw the rope binding her hands over the sharp rock edge she had discovered a few minutes ago. Realizing she needed to keep this girl distracted from her own actions, Katniss spoke-

"Who are you?"

"Rue."

"You're young to be with such a group," but Rue shook her head at Katniss' words.

"No one in this group is very old, and I'm not even the youngest." Rue smiled broadly. "That's Rory. I have him beaten by a month. It's so fun to tease him about it and get him flustered. I know I don't look it, but I'm nearly sixteen."

Rue's smile widened even more at the look of surprise on Katniss' face. "I'm just small for my age Lady Everdeen, and it isn't like you aren't one to talk." She knudged Katniss teasingly. Katniss glanced down at her body. She had always wished she were a little bigger, at least in some areas. Her eyes were drawn to her breasts as she recalled the many jokes Cato had made about their small size since the night they had lain together months ago. The look on her face must have not been to Rue's liking as she gave Katniss a sudden embrace.

"Oh Lady Everdeen, please don't be offended. I meant no harm, I promise. You are one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. All the men think so. I heard them talking about it."

Katniss flushed an even deeper red. She had never viewed herself as beautiful, and she was not sure if she should find it flattering that complete strangers found her beautiful. Rue seemed oblivious to her discomfort and chattered on. "But don't worry. Everyone is a gentleman here. They just admired you Lady Everdeen, and not only for that but because you took Peeta by surprise today. Finnick and Rory told us all about it. It even made Gale and Thresh laugh, and they wouldn't know a joke even if it slapped them in the face. Darius laughed so hard water came out of his nose."

Katniss head spun as she tried to follow the rush of the girl's words. Some of the names sounded recognizable while others were completely foreign to her. Peeta was a name that vaguely surprised her. She knew it was common practice among the peasants to name their children after their sovereigns in hopes of curryng favor from the Lords. Even her own father had been honored that way, and of course there had been many baby boy named after the Princes Bannock, Rye, and Peeta Mellark. But ever since the Mellarks had fallen over a decade ago, most had taken to calling themselves by their second names lest they risk punishment from Snow. Then again, Katniss thought, if you were part of a group of outlaws, it probably didn't matter by which name you went anyway. Katniss was pulled out of her thoughts as Rue tugged on her sleeve to gain back her attention.

"How did you move so quietly today? I'm the quietest and quickest one here. That's why I'm so useful, but no one allows girls to fight."

Katniss shrugged and realized she felt a little dizzy. Rue's words reminded her of how long the day had been. Unable to make much sense of Rue's words, Katniss asked a question of her own.

"Useful? But no one allows girls to fight."

"No one cares that I'm a girl, Lady Everdeen. All anyone cares about is that you have skills that
can help the group. I don't really do much fighting as a whole, though certainly everyone is expected to know how to use at least one weapon." Katniss watched Rue point to a small sword at her waist. "For protection you see? Before they defected from Snow's army, Homes and Mitchell trained new soldiers in swordplay. They now work with the beginners in our group after Peeta gives the first lesson." Rue giggled. "And you'd think Holmes or Mitchell or one of the other ex-soldiers would be the best when it comes to battle. But you should see Gale with his crossbow or Johanna with her axe! And Finnick is truly fearsome with his trident. Oh! and just wait until you meet Lyme and Paylor. They're amazing with their swords and bows, and of course they aren't even the best. That would Everdeen!" Katniss waved to indicate she was alright, but she could tell Rue had noticed her swaying slightly. It had been a very long time since Katniss had eaten, and her lightheadedness was increasing.

"Forgive me Lady Everdeen. You must be hungry!" Rue gave Katniss a reassuring pat. "I like you Lady Everdeen. I can tell you are brave even if the others don't think so. You don't seem spoiled to me. I'll get you some food." With that statement, she scampered off towards the fire.

Katniss realized this was her chance to escape, and she shook her head to rid herself of her dizziness. She and Rue had been talking so long that she was almost through the rope already, and it gave way with a soft snap a few seconds later. Katniss rubbed her wrists. Her hands may have been loosely bound but rubbing up against the rock had chafed her skin. She began to work at the knot binding her feet and cast her gaze about, trying to decide which way she should go. She peered into the darkness, but it was as black as ever.

As the knot gave way, Katniss prayed she could remain as quiet as Rue seemed to think she could. She silently got to her feet and decided she would feel along the stone wall in the direction the man with the blonde hair had walked off into earlier.

She looked at the fire for a moment. Rue was talking to the largest figure in the group as she put food on a plate. Katniss felt a sudden surge of remorse that the girl would find her gone when she returned. In spite of herself, Katniss had begun to like Rue. She was so like Prim in many ways, from her mile-a-minute chattering to her warmhearted smile and sweet-tempered disposition. However, it was obvious she had been deceived into thinking these criminals were good men. Katniss thought it probably had more to do with Rue's seemingly innocent nature than any malicious intent on her part.

Katniss whispered goodbye and edged silently along the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Blow the Wind Southerly is a traditional English Folk song from Northumbria. Most people have heard the melody even if they wouldn't recognize the words. The fragment I used was written in an English publication called The Bishoprick Garland in 1834. I shall for the most part be trying to alternate Katniss' and Peeta's POV every other chapter. However, Chapter 4 will be in Katniss' point of view otherwise Chapter 5 shall return to Peeta's POV.
Katniss

Katniss guided herself quietly along the wall, taking great care to stay out of the fire’s light. Fear prickled within her as she strained to see through the darkness. The damp ground sucked at her feet, and she knew the hem of her dress must be covered in mud. Cinna would probably have been chagrined if he could see her treating his beautiful creation in such a way, but then Katniss knew he would have laughed and made her something even more spectacular. Katniss wished he was with her now. Images of Cinna and her sister and even Effie passed through her mind before she mentally scolded herself for becoming distracted.

Focus. She needed to focus. She looked around, feeling so blind in the dark.

Where was the entrance to this place? The man had walked off right here! Frustrated tears formed in her eyes. She took another step and found herself pitching forward as she tripped over a brick that had fallen into the grass. She grabbed at the wall in an attempt to stop her momentum and had to repress a cry of pain as her hand scraped roughly over the stone. Her knees hit the ground with a soft thump, and she felt a hot trickle of blood begin to seep from her hand.

“And here I had been told all ladies of nobility were all blessed with the grace of the angels. Such a disappointment. Though I must say you do look fairly terrifying at the moment, beautiful specter of the darkness.”

Katniss started and scrambled to her feet, holding her hand protectively against her body while her head swung wildly from side to side in search of the familiar flirting voice. Then she spotted him, the copper haired man from today. He was staring at her with a rather amused expression from atop a large boulder. A torch was jammed into a crack in the rock, and the silver trident he was casually twirling in his hand glinted menacingly in its light.

“You!”

“Me.” He said calmly. “Did you truly think Rue was the only one watching you Katniss Everdeen? You don’t strike me as stupid.”

Katniss glared at the man while trying to remember his name. John? No. That was not his name. What was it? John was only the false name he had given to her group today while he put on his ridiculous act. He was the one who had spoken so crudely about her when that other man had her pinned to the ground. She flushed at the memory and pulled herself up as proudly and bravely as she could to confront him.

“How dare you address me so informally sir. I am a Lady and far above you in class. And in manners for that matter.” Katniss almost winced. That had sounded like something Effie would say. Katniss didn’t even care about class rank, but she had to press on. “I demand you return what you took from my companions and I today. If you do, I will ensure you are not executed for your crimes and your insolence.” The man’s amused expression only grew more pronounced at her words.

“Fair Lady,” he emphasized, “I do not think returning all the jewels and gold in the world could save me from death if I were captured. Your blessed King is not exactly a forgiving man. And
even if I did want to return your things to you, I sadly do not have the authority. I’m on punishment for even taking them from you in the first place.”

“Punishment?”

“Yes.” He set his face in a serious manner as though he were imitating someone else but his eyes still danced with laughter. “Laundry duty for a week when we return to camp Odair.” He groaned at the seeming thought of it. “Have you ever washed for twenty-five or so men and women? It takes forever.” Katniss raised her eyebrows at him, and he gave a great laugh. “No I don’t suppose you have. Ah well. It could have been worse. He went easy on me truthfully. And the real punishment was being assigned to watch you instead of being allowed to enjoyed the celebration of today around the fire though guard duty is turning out to be far more interesting than I thought.” He gave Katniss a furtive glance. “You are far different from what I was expecting Lady Everdeen.”

Katniss shifted nervously from one foot to the other and suddenly his name came to her.

“How so? Finnick.”

He smiled at the sound of his name. “You were not impressed with me today. That doesn’t normally happen.” Katniss narrowed her eyes. Bastard. When Finnick had appeared at the carriage today, Katniss had recognized how conventionally handsome he was. It hadn’t shocked her in the least when Glimmer and Effie had fallen all over themselves in front him. But for however good-looking he was, Katniss had felt no similar sense of attraction as the other ladies so obviously had.

Finnick seemed to guess where her thoughts lay because his smile widened. “You almost managed to sneak up on Peet, which doesn’t ever happen. Actually, just how he acted with you in general doesn’t happen. I find that intriguing.” He looked her up and down in a way that made Katniss feel uncomfortable. “And that’s not to mention your rather bold escape attempt. I was watching making your way along the wall.” Katniss felt her face fall. Had she been so obvious?

“Not a surprising escape if your guard knows you are doing it.”

“No. But that you attempted it at all is rather astonishing. I suspect if your two lovely companions from today were here, they would mostly just be weeping at this point. I appreciate your lack of tears,” he said with a small mocking bow. Katniss was then surprised to see a thoughtful look cross his face. “You were also kind to Rue.”

“Well, she is a sweet girl and obviously quite innocent. It’s quite tragic that she would end up in a group like yours.”

Finnick’s expression suddenly hardened and the amusement in his eyes died. “You don’t know what you are talking about.”

At his cold expression, Katniss was suddenly reminded that they all were nothing but common thieves...no matter what that man had said today. In particular, the man before her had taken one of her most precious possessions. She looked at him with a cold expression of her own.

“I know precisely what I am talking about. You yourself just admitted you took my necklace, and I suspect have stolen from many others who were most likely just as undeserving of your vagary. You disgust me.”

Katniss darted forward around the rock that Finnick was still sitting while he shouted at her to freeze. But Katniss found she didn’t care anymore. She just needed to get away from this place
and these people. Her panic rose as she saw the people gathered at the fire leap to their feet and run towards her.

She spun quickly to avoid them and saw Finnick charging at her from the direction she had come. Someone grabbed at her arm, but she pushed whomever it was away, and they fell hard with a muffled shout. Katniss looked about before taking off the one way she had not gone yet. Someone was yelling at her to wait, to stop, but Katniss would not. She could somehow feel that the others were not fast enough to catch her. As she ran, a grin formed on her face. It had been a long time since she had felt this alive.

That’s when the arrow came whistling through the air.

It landed a hairsbreadth from Katniss’ feet, and she let out a startled screamed. Where had that arrow come from? Her eyes widened as she turned around and saw all the men and women spread out in a line in front of her. Rue stood at one end with a sad and almost wary expression on her face that pained Katniss to see, but her eyes were drawn to a new figure emerging through a gap between two tall men.

He was not quite as tall as some of the others, but Katniss could see he was strongly built from his rather broad chest. A sword was hanging off his narrow hips and the defined muscles of his arms rippled as he walked towards her with a bow clutched in his hand. His ash blonde hair fell in gentle waves over his forehead and curled around his ears. Her heart skipped a beat as he moved closer to her, and she was finally able to see his face clearly.

Day old blond scruff was patterned across his tanned face and along his well-defined jaw. There was a small smattering of freckles peppered across the bridge of his nose from too many days in the sun and his long golden eyelashes were visibly reflecting the firelight. As he came to stand in front her, he gave her a small, slightly crooked smile and a dimple formed at the side of his mouth.

He was the most handsome man Katniss had ever seen, and she had to clench her legs together against the sudden confusing rush of warmth she felt at the apex of her things. Katniss looked up into his eyes

“Lady Everdeen,” he said with a slight nod of his head.

Katniss gasped. She had heard that voice before, and she had seen those eyes, those crystal blue eyes. This was the true appearance of the man from today? If he was older than Katniss, it could be by no more than a few months, maybe a year at most.

Katniss swayed as she felt the events of the day and now this sudden shock catch up to her. It was too much. She tried to speak but only managed a garbled cry, and then the world went black for the second time that day.

XXXXX

Katniss awoke with a feeling of distinct embarrassment at the knowledge she had fainted in front of this group of criminals. While she had not been given a choice when her mother had abandoned Katniss and her sister to the world, her ability to survive had become a source of pride. Katniss was not weak. Just as the sun always persisted in rising, so too did Katniss rise to meet any challenge life dealt her. She took care of herself and her sister. She did not need anyone. She never flinched, and she never cried. And she most certainly did not faint. Even if she was their captive, she would not be a helpless damsel in distress. They would not see her like that again. She opened her eyes.

Katniss saw she had been moved closer to the fire and was now just a little ways outside the
circle, where the men and women were still talking and laughing. It could not have been very long since she collapsed, Katniss realized. As she sat up, the blanket covering Katniss fell off her shoulders, and she was surprised to find that she was not bound like before. Katniss supposed they assumed she would not try to escape again now that it had been made clear that she was being watched.

Katniss moved to stand and felt a small sting in her palm when she pushed off the ground. She looked curiously at a carefully tied blue cloth that now covered her hand. There was certain tenderness in the way it had been meticulously bandaged. She would not have expected them to take care of her in such a way and wondered who it had been.

“The sleeping beauty awakens!” Katniss looked over to the fire where she saw a man perhaps a year or two older than her with flaming red hair, freckles so numerous his face looked a shade darker than the rest of his skin, and a broad grin looking at her in delight. “Come and sit by the fire Lady Everdeen. I promise I don’t bite.” Katniss almost smiled. He too was flirting with her just as Finnick had, but his teasing tone was of a much different sort than Finnick’s manner. Katniss suspected this man was like this with everyone he met whereas Katniss was still unsure of what Finnick’s intent had been.

She moved cautiously towards the fire as the eyes of everyone around the fire fell on her. Rue was sitting directly across from where Katniss stood. She gave Katniss an encouraging sort of smile, which Katniss returned. It looked like she still had a friend within this band after all, and it gave Katniss the extra confidence she needed to speak.

“I am glad to hear you don’t bite, good sir, but how are you to know what I may do? Perhaps it is I who may bite you?” Katniss said, surprising even herself with the rather crude statement. The man’s mouth fell open as the entire group burst into laughter at his shocked expression.

“You certainly have spirit Lady Everdeen. It’s not every day Darius is rendered speechless. Normally he doesn’t shut up.”

Katniss glanced to her side where she saw Finnick standing with an almost admiring look on his face. His smile was far softer than any she had yet seen on his face and that, combined with the lack of trident in his hand, made him far less imposing than he had been earlier.

“Not speechless for long Odair!,” Darius said with a laugh and a shake of his head before addressing Katniss. “Well Lady Everdeen, I think it is high time introductions are in order don’t you? It appears you will be staying with us for a while yet, and I would hate for you not to know my name.” Katniss brow furrowed at his words, but she decided to let it go for the moment. It was better to know who she was facing when she made her next escape attempt.

“Finnick has already kindly introduced me, but I’ll say it again just for your benefit. Darius Alevi is my name. You’ll meet some surly sods in this group but rest assured I am not one of them,” he said with a wave of his hands towards the rest of the group. “And of course you’ve already met our wise and oh so humble second in command, Finnick Odair.” He bowed in Finnick’s direction, but Finnick just snorted and told Darius to get on with it. Darius bowed again.

“Let’s see. As you’ve met one second commander, you should probably know the other. That would be Gale Hawthorne, the fellow with the dashing smile over there.” Katniss looked to where Darius was pointing. It was the man olive-toned skin and grey eyes very much like Katniss’ own, who she had seen yelling at Johanna. He had a very handsome face too, though nothing compared to the man from earlier. Katniss blushed at the thought and quickly turned to give Darius a quizzical look, as Gale had such a deep frown on his face Katniss wondered if he had ever smiled in his life. Darius winked. “Well I’m sure it would be dashing if he ever decided to use it.” He then pointed to Gale’s left side. “I also believe you have already met Gale’s brother Rory. Twice
as smart and three times as handsome as his big brother. We’ll find you a girl yet boyo.” Rory blushed deep red while Gale’s face became even more sullen. Darius seemed to realize he was treading dangerous ground and pointed quickly to a young woman.

“You heard Johanna Mason’s dulcet tones earlier this evening. She does apologize that she woke you and promises it won’t happen again.” Katniss looked at the girl who had threatened her life. She was indeed slight, but Katniss could see her arms were toned and sinewy. Katniss thought she was probably much more powerful than Johanna’s small frame at first suggested. She was wearing a man’s tunic and breeches, and her choppy black hair fell to just shoulder length. She was glaring at Katniss so furiously, Katniss was sure it was taking all the willpower Johanna had to not grab the axe that lay at her feet and throw it straight at Katniss’ head.

“Darius. Make fun of me again, and I’ll show you what it truly means to be in pain,” Johanna said without taking her eyes off Katniss. “And don’t you come near me, spoiled Capitol brat, or I’ll make sure you know what pain means too.” Katniss flinched.

“Johanna, could you be more unpleasant?” Darius said with an exasperated sigh. “Don’t mind her Lady Everdeen.”

He turned again and pointed to where Rue was sitting next to a hulking man with ivory skin who Katniss thought could probably crush a skull with just one of his hands. “You already know Rue Martel.” Rue grinned at Katniss. “But Thresh Halacare you don’t. Don’t let his size scare you madam. He’s really very sweet unless of course, you try to steal his dinner. Then even I can’t save you.” Thresh gave Darius a sharp look before a gentle smile formed on his face that suggested to Katniss that Darius might actually be telling the truth about the giant man’s nature.

And so the introductions continued as Darius made his way around the circle. Katniss counted twenty-two in all.

There was Thom Emory with his olive skin, brown eyes, and rather plain but kind face. Katniss suspected he was from The Seam just as she guessed Rory and Gale were, given their similarity in skin tone to Katniss’ own. She hoped she could ask one of those three about it later.

A man named Flavius Raimbeaucort said his name excitedly before Darius even started to introduce him. His manner was so flamboyant and reminiscent of those people Katniss had encountered at court that it did not surprise Katniss in the least when he said he had been a stylist in the Capitol much the way Cinna had been for her. He was responsible for the disguises the group wore, which he said he enjoyed much more than dressing courtesans. The challenge it provided for him was apparently what he “lived for.”

When Darius introduced Homes and Mitchell, Katniss recognized their names from when Rue had mentioned them during their conversation. They were two members of an entire regiment of defected soldiers, which also included Castor, Pollux, Messalla, Woof, Blight, Martin, and Dalton. Katniss didn’t bother trying to remember their family names. And Tax and Titus Vivelle were two brothers from District 6 who silently nodded at Katniss with cordial smiles, surprising Katniss yet again that such friendliness could be found in a group of outlaws.

But Katniss was most surprised by Lyme and Paylor, two sisters from District 2, whom she also remembered Rue talking about. Swords hung at their sides and large bows were strapped across their backs. Much like Johanna, they wore tunics and breeches, but they also each had an armored breastplate. Their father had apparently been a poor lord only blessed with daughters, but he had treated them like sons.

Katniss and Prim had grown up learning the “soft arts of womanhood” such as sewing, music, dancing, etiquette, and all manner of things Prim had enjoyed but Katniss had found useless.
Being taught how to be a proper wife your entire life was rather boring, and Katniss was no exception to that line of thinking. Envy coursed through Katniss as she listened to Paylor and Lyme describe a childhood filled with an education in grammar, language, law, and science with swordfights and archery lessons in between.

She wondered how two such women could willingly become thieves or really anyone in this group for that matter. None of them seemed to be common vagabonds and bandits she often heard so much about from the men in the Capitol. Katniss could not even count how many times she’d about such brutish evil men who would just as soon violate a woman as they would look at her.

Katniss had even heard Cato boasting of how he and his men were always having to battle and punish would-be thieves and rapers any time he returned from his travels. The peasants as a whole wanted nothing more than to abuse their lords’ generosities and ask for “more more more.” At least that is what Cato always said. So why should their thieves be any better? But the behavior of these thieves did not wholly square with their reputation at court, and it disconcerted her..

“Well let’s see. I think you have met everyone Lady Everdeen.” Katniss looked around the fire, knowing there was one person who had not made his reintroduction. But then--

“Oh yes. Sorry m’lady. How could I forget our illustrious leader? Though I believe you’ve already made his acquaintance earlier today as well or so Finnick and Rory told us,” Darius said with another wink and pointed to where the beautiful boy from yesterday again emerged from the darkness.

“Peeta, say hello again,” but Peeta said nothings so Darius continued speaking. “He is also known as the Sun Thief. Though if you’re Romulus Thread, he’s invariably known just as a string of rather colorful curses. I’ve learned so much from that man’s foul language,” Darius said happily. “And we all make up The Sun Thief’s Merry Band of Men.” Katniss heard Johanna snort at the moniker and watched her grip her axe. “And women too, of course,” Darius added with a careless wave in the direction of Johanna, Rue, Lyme, and Paylor.

Beyond Johanna’s disapproval of the name, Katniss saw a distinct ripple of pride form on the faces of the people gathered in the flickering light. Katniss looked around and saw everyone looking at this boy, this man, this...Peeta...with clear admiration and...was that love she saw in their eyes? What had he done to deserve such loyalty? Even though she knew none of them or him, it was blatantly obvious that these people would follow him to the ends of the earth. She could see it written all over his follower’s faces, even the ever-angry Johanna’s. For Katniss, she mainly just found it was surprising that he was their leader at all. No one in this group looked older than their mid-twenties, but Peeta might be the youngest besides Rory, Rue, and now Katniss herself.

Katniss looked up at Peeta. Even in darkness, his blue eyes were still radiant in the firelight. He was looking at her intensely, but his face was unreadable. Whatever he was thinking, he kept his thoughts hidden.

“Darius. You’re on watch. Everyone else needs to get some sleep. We’ll be up before dawn,” he said in a rather gentler voice than Katniss would expect for someone in command. Certainly Cato had never used such a kind tone with his own men. Nevertheless, she watched as most everyone got up and drifted away from the fire without protest though Katniss caught Johanna casting her one last glare. Rue, however, walked over to Katniss and gave her a tender hug. “Don’t be afraid,” she whispered. “No one is going to hurt you, I promise.” She gave Katniss one last squeeze before walking off to bed. With that, Katniss realized she was alone with Peeta.

He still remained silent but looked at her for a moment as though trying to make up his mind about something. Katniss straightened her back and gave him as haughty a glare as she could manage,
daring him to come closer. He might be a criminal, but she was a lady and an Everdeen. Her papa, whom she had thought about so much today, would expect better of her than to cower.

He sighed as though he didn’t like what he saw in her look, which Katniss found strangely offensive. She opened her mouth to ask what his problem was, but he turned away from her before she had even begun to form a word. He crossed the fire pit and gathered some roasted squirrel, dried fruit, and salad greens onto a small wooden plate. Katniss gave him a wary glance as he came to sit beside her and offered her the food.

“‘It’s not poisoned if that’s what you are worried about.’ Katniss did not speak. She should not be taking anything from this man after the grief he had caused her today, but her stomach rumbled in betrayal of her silence. He sighed again though she saw amusement in his eyes. “You must be hungry. And I’ll eat it if you don’t.” Never truly one to pass up a meal, Katniss grabbed the plate from him. It had been just been too long since she had eaten, but she still refused to speak to him.

When she finished the meal, Katniss watched him unlace a water canteen that he had strung to his hip and offered it to her. “Here. You can keep it.” Katniss took the canteen without hesitation and drained half its contents in one gulp. She looked at him, but he had turned away from her to stare at the fire. The fire cast strange shadows across his face. Katniss found herself staring at his lips, wondering if they were as soft as they looked before she cast the embarrassing thought away.

A voice that sounded oddly similar to Effie’s was screaming inside Katniss’ head. It was asking where her manners were and why wasn’t she thanking him for taking care of her, but Katniss resolutely ignored it. “I know what blood poisoning is! Sir? …” Katniss said in annoyance, forgetting her vow of silence. She looked at him questioningly as he tugged at the blue cloth around her wound. “What is your family name? I did not hear Darius give it. Or should I just call you Sun Thief?”

Katniss thought she saw a flash of pain cross his handsome face but when she looked more closely, she realized she must have imagined it. His face was arranged in the same unreadable expression as before.

“I do not have a family name as I never knew my family,” he said in a tone that communicated he would allow no questioning on the matter. “And I am hardly a Sir. Peeta works just fine Lady Everdeen. The Sun Thief is only a name others call me, and one I’d honestly rather not be called at that.”

Katniss looked up at him in bafflement, but he was not looking at her. Instead he was focused at the rather ugly gash across her palm from the fall. He poured water over it and began to scrub gently. The tenderness with which he touched her puzzled Katniss, but it was not as bewildering as what he said next.

“I’m sorry about this. Finnick should not have let you wander as he did. He wanted to see what you were capable of after your actions this morning. He didn’t mean for you to get hurt, but it happened nonetheless. I promise it won’t happen again,” he said in a voice laced with regret.

Katniss’ heart fluttered again, and she could feel her self softening towards him slightly. Providing
the food and water, his gentle hands which were now rebinding her cut, and his remorseful words altogether were more thoughtful gestures than Katniss had experienced in years from anyone.

But Katniss was not ready to give in just yet, and so she steeled herself against him.

“Hmmphf. A cut is nothing. Did you not shoot at me? Or take me captive in the first place? Rue claimed all of you were all gentlemen today, and yet I’d hardly call those actions chivalrous behavior.”

Peeta began to laugh, and Katniss could not help but note they almost musical quality of the sound seemed to fill the entire tower. A sense of joy shot through Katniss. There was so little laughter in her life and the one person who usually brought her happiness was far away. Why did this man’s laughter affect her so? Especially when everything she had just said was true! “I will thank you kindly not to laugh at me, Sun Thief.”

Peeta abruptly stopped laughing at the use of the name he had confessed to disliking and gave her a hard stare. “I was not shooting an arrow at you, Lady Everdeen. The way you were walking, you were going to end up in the sea.” Katniss burst snickered in disbelief.

“You just didn’t want me to escape. I had already gotten well ahead of your Merry Men.”

“You were never going to escape Lady Everdeen but choose to believe whatever you wish. You’re not worth my time arguing with,” he said calmly, but Katniss noticed with satisfaction that his neck was reddening in suppressed anger or at least annoyance. She was getting to him.

“It’s not like you’ve given me any reason to trust you. How could I trust you? First you stole my necklace, which still has not been returned to me. And then you kidnapped me! I have never been treated like this in my entire life. Prince Cato would never treat me so horridly. When you are brought to justice for your deeds, I can’t imagine anyone will be more satisfied than I.”

“Cato?! He is your standard for chivalrous behavior?,” Peeta said as real anger crossed his face.

“Of course! He is my fiancé. And a nobleman at that. Actually, more than noble, a prince, which you most definitely are not.” It was a lie, and Katniss knew it. The amount of chivalry Cato had wouldn’t fill a thimble, but Peeta created such confusing feelings for Katniss that she didn’t even know how to address them. Anger was easier.

Peeta stood up. His blue eyes blazed, but Katniss detected a hint of sadness within their depths as well.

“Well, rest assured, I wouldn’t dare try to compete with good Prince Cato, even if I wanted to.” Katniss’ eyes widened. His words stung, and Katniss realized she felt... hurt. She wasn’t sure if it was because he had not believed her about Cato or if it was because he said he would not want to compete with Cato. She tried to tell herself it didn’t matter.

“You may sleep on my pallet tonight.” He pointed to a roll of bedding with a small pillow at one end a few feet away. “We shall be moving camp in the morning. You will be coming with us, as Rory unfortunately revealed our next location to you today.”

“You could just let me go, Thief. I wouldn’t say anything. Just return my necklace, and I would gladly go.”

“As you don’t trust me, so I don’t trust you and as for your necklace, it shall be used to pay back the districts you and your party abused on your tour.” She started to protest, but he cut her off--

“I’ll remind you that you are being guarded Lady Everdeen. Any more escape attempts would be
ill advised, but if you try it again, I’ll make sure you regret it. You’ve been warned.” Before she could so much as utter a word, he strode away from her without a backwards glance. Katniss looked after his retreating back with a stunned expression on her face.

Katniss didn’t know how long she stood frozen before finally making her way over to his pallet. She laid down gingerly on the bedding and was suddenly overwhelmed with the familiar scent of cinnamon and dill. It had been Peeta’s arms that had made her feel so safe today, she realized with a jolt. Katniss choked back a sob for reasons she didn’t understand and buried her face in the little pillow.

It was a long time before she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

All last names used for the characters not given full names by Suzanne Collins were taken from family names of real people who lived during the Middle Ages.

My goal is to still alternate Peeta’s and Katniss’ POV as much as possible, but Katniss’ perspective fit best for the purpose of this chapter. Chapter 5 will be in Peeta’s POV.

:)
A Boy Confused

Chapter Notes

Well, this update comes only 4 days after the last update, which probably won’t be the norm, but I was really excited to write this chapter. Now that most everyone has been introduced in my tale, you'll be seeing more "forward progress" in Katniss' and Peeta's relationship, starting with Chapter 5. Though I make no guarantees that it'll be all smooth sailing...since when is it ever for these two? ;)

A thank you again goes to my wonderful beta, ct522/titania522 for her correction of my, at times, wacky grammar and her continued overall support of this story.

Reviews are very welcome. Hope everyone enjoys this chapter, and I thank you for your continued reading!

Peeta

...The acrid smell of something burning filled Peeta’s nose, and he could see a raging fire consuming the stable below his window. The horses were trapped and screaming in pain from the inferno. Why was no one helping them? He could help them. He knew he could. He raced to the door but before he could even turn the knob, a gentle hand pulled him back. He began to sob. Why couldn’t he go? He just wanted to help the horses. He could be brave. A man with a blurry outline was frantically gesturing to him, trying to explain something, but Peeta could not understand the words. Suddenly, the man knelt before Peeta and embraced him so tightly he could barely breathe. It confused him. It felt like goodbye, but for some reason, Peeta knew if the man left that it would be the last time Peeta ever saw him. It made him sad. The man seemed to realize this and gave him another hug before he handed Peeta a cup of some sweet smelling liquid. For the first time, Peeta realized he was thirsty. He’d been in here for hours, and he thought he had been forgotten about before the man had come into the room. He took a sip happily and almost immediately felt sleepy. Why was he so sleepy all of the sudden? He battled against his increasingly heavy eyelids. He could hear someone pounding at the door and screaming even louder than the dying horses. Who was that? Why were they banging so loud? Terror suddenly ripped through Peeta’s heart as a giant black hole opened in the wall opposite the door. Peeta could see a shadowy figure moving in its depths, moving ever closer. Coming for him...

Peeta awoke with a start at the sound of the mockingjay singing out above where his head lay against a stone battlement. He looked at the animal and swore quietly under his breath, giving it a hard stare. The bird just cocked his head and trilled happily as though it knew that it had broken Peeta out of one of his many recurring nightmares. Peeta had never understood why, but the birds had always followed him everywhere. No matter what district he was in, one or two of them would pop up shortly after he made camp. It had become something of a joke at this point.

All the group would make wagers as to who would spot a mockingjay first and whoever did would get to make one request of Peeta, which he tried to fulfill as long as it was within reason. It was all rather silly, but at the same time, it was a bright spot in otherwise frequent dark days. Therefore, Peeta was more than happy to oblige their demands. Most of the time, it was just a simple request for an extra lesson with swords or a day off from watch though he cringed at the memory of Annie’s request that Peeta teach Finnick to dance. As she had told a gaping Peeta and
protesting Finnick, there were few things she missed about her old life but dancing was one of them. Neither he nor Finnick had been able to say no to that but it hadn’t been so bad in the end. Finn was a fast learner, and Peeta had been able to shove him off onto Annie fairly quickly with mastery of a carol or two. At the very least, it had given everyone a good laugh. Rue had won this last time when they’d first arrived in District 4. He still needed to make her request of cheese buns if, that is, he ever got the time. Peeta never had enough time for anything.

With that thought in mind, Peeta stood up from where he had been laying at the top of the crumbling old structure. He was the only one who dared come up here. Under the Mellark’s reign, it had been a great watch tower used as a look-out to the sea for any sign of enemies or even just ships coming home. But in the chaos and war following their fall, one whole side of it had been destroyed by Snow’s army. Even Peeta, sure-footed as he was, rarely braved the unstable steps that wound around the tower up to the partially fallen-in battlements. But he had given his bedding away and had decided the clean air would do him some good rather than be consumed by the stench of decay that permeated the bottom of the place. At least that was what Peeta had told himself last night. Unwanted and unbiden, a sudden image of fierce grey eyes and a scowling face flashed in Peeta’s mind, and he unconsciously glanced over the stairs to the ground below where all the company was still asleep.

Katniss.

She lay next to the smoldering remains of last night’s bonfire. He could see her curled up almost into a ball, unmoving, with her arms wrapped protectively around herself. Peeta felt strangely glad she had finally been able to fall into a more comfortable slumber. He had watched her from above for far longer than he cared to admit to himself as she tossed and turned in her sleep most of the night. He had wondered if she too suffered from nightmares before he had quickly dismissed that thought. What could have possibly happened in her privileged life that would trouble her so greatly that it visited her in her dreams? Still, once she had cried out some unintelligible word, and Peeta had been halfway down the stair before he realized what he was doing. Coming to a halt in surprise at himself, he had stood there paralyzed before some of her last words had echoed through his head.

”Cato?! He is your standard for chivalrous behavior?”

“Of course. He is my fiancé. And a nobleman at that. Actually, more than noble, a prince, which you most definitely are not.”

Peeta certainly wasn’t a prince or a nobleman. She was right about that. He had been poor his entire life and what he now acquired in gold or jewels or even food, he promptly gave away. He was a thief and a good one at that. It was a label he and everyone here wore as an invisible badge of honor against the atrocities that were now being committed across Panem by the crown.

But there had been a lot more to Lady Everdeen’s statement than just pointing out to Peeta that he was not a prince. He knew what she had really meant. He was of the lowest class, as common today as he was on the day of his birth. He was unmannered, uncivil, and unworthy of her attentions. He guessed she just missed Cato. He had highly doubted her captor’s face was the person she wanted to see at the moment, and Peeta had subsequently turned away back up the stairs.

In spite of all that, Peeta still regretted how he had spoken to her. She was here against her will and being furious about her situation was to be expected. Stomping off angrily was not how Peeta generally reacted, even in the most stressful situations. He was always the picture of calm because his men depended on him to be. Yet around Katniss Everdeen, he felt like a different person entirely. He found her...attractive. He could at least admit that to himself, but it wasn’t like he hadn’t been around beautiful women before. Yet he had never been affected like this.
Peeta looked out over the ledge of the tower to the sea below. The sky was still black above him but in the east, the sky had lightened considerably as a hint that dawn was soon approaching. Everything still lay untroubled and quiet. This had been Peeta’s favorite time of morning ever since his stay with the baker’s family.

Back then, this time was the period in which he was able to prepare the day’s bread without disturbance. He still remembered the peace and contentment he felt each morning, loving the way the smell of the rising dough filled his lungs. Peeta had been almost...happy, and it had been the one time of day when he wasn’t screamed at constantly or on the worst days, beaten. Then sometimes Cashmere had awakened early too, and they had… Peeta shook his head violently to stop him thoughts. Those were no longer good memories. He didn’t want to go down that road this morning and decided it was time to wake Finnick and Gale to discuss the day’s plan.

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“Could you have woken us any earlier Peet? Just because you like to wake up before the sun doesn’t mean the rest of us do,” Finnick said as he yawned loudly and slapped his cheeks in an effort to wake himself up.

“I don’t think Thread or the Princes’ men are going to wait to begin searching for us just because you want to sleep in Finnick. We crossed some lines yesterday. I don’t think the group is going to be ignored by the crown anymore. Stealing grain is one thing but taking jewels and coin directly from royalty is another.”

“I said that yesterday, Peeta. You didn’t seem to care about then.” He gave Peeta a stern look but then his mouth split into a wide grin. Peeta knew he didn’t actually care if the group’s notoriety increased.

“Not to mention stealing a princess.” Gale’s voice echoed slightly against the stone as he approached where Finnick and Peeta were standing in an enclave of the tower. “Though I don’t really object. If some of us are ever captured, we can use her as a bargaining chip.”

Peeta gave Gale a stern look of his own. “That isn’t why I brought her here Gale. She overheard Rory saying we would be going to The Falls. If we didn’t need rest and if that wasn’t the safest place for us to be, I would have let her go.” Gale just shrugged. Peeta guessed he shouldn’t be surprised at Gale’s words. They had been working together nearly as long as he and Finnick had, ever since the day he had found Gale whipped, bleeding, and left to die on the side of the Seam Road. He was one of Peeta’s best friends and also one of the few people Peeta could say he trusted completely. Peeta never doubted his loyalty. Gale was also the one of the group’s best strategists, and it had been he who had originally come up with the stunt Peeta and Finnick had pulled yesterday. Sometimes though, Gale’s pragmatism got in the way of his good heart.

“That’s right Gale. And if there is one person who needs rest, it’s you,” Finnick said with a laugh as he clapped Gale on the back. Gale frowned at Finnick for a second before a smile crept across his face as acknowledgement of the truth of Finn’s words. Gale never stopped working and knew it too. “Who knows? If we stay in hiding for a month or so, you might finally have some success with Johanna. Believe me, we’d all like it to happen just so we don’t have to hear you two arguing anymore. Although,” Finnick looked at Gale with mock thoughtfulness, “I will say your volley last night with her was entertaining enough. You really shouldn’t have put an end to the fun Peeta.” Gale gave Finnick a murderous stare, and Peeta decided to end the conversation before things came to blows. Finnick and Gale were good friends, but Finnick got great enjoyment out of seeing how quickly he could light Gale’s considerably short fuse.
“Ah yes. A murder in the night would have been so entertaining, Finnick. And you’re still on laundry duty for the next week for stealing those necklaces. No asking Annie for help either.” It was Finnick’s turn to glare at Peeta, but Peeta continued speaking before he could argue.

“Gale, you’re coming with me. We’ll distribute the money as best we can today. Hopefully the roads won’t be crawling with soldiers yet. Those guards most definitely didn’t walk away unscathed yesterday and with all their weapons stolen, it’ll take them awhile to get organized. They’ll probably ask Thread for help, and he’ll most likely think we’ll be fleeing away from Four into the upper districts.” Gale nodded in agreement and walked away to begin preparations while Peeta turned to Finnick to give his instructions.

“I want you to ride ahead with everyone but Holmes, Castor, Pollux, Darius, Rue, Thresh, Johanna, and Lady Everdeen. Take whatever we aren’t giving away and get supplies from Beetee. We’ll see you tonight at The Falls.”

Finnick looked at Peeta in surprise. “You’re taking Katniss with you?”

Peeta hesitated a second before answering, feeling slightly uncomfortable under Finnick’s suddenly shrewd gaze. “She’s going to be with us for at least a month Finnick. I...I just want her to try to understand who we are and why we do the things we are doing. I’d like her necklace by the way. You can give the sapphire to Beetee. He’ll know what to do with it.”

Finnick pulled out the mockingjay necklace from a small pouch on his belt but did not hand it over to Peeta right away. He outlined the mockingjay with one finger and gave Peeta a quizzical look. “You don’t want to use it? It’s by the far the most valuable item we’ve ever had.”

“It’s far too recognizable. I can’t risk Beetee being caught with it when he is one of the few in Three who is willing to help us.” Finnick gave Peeta a skeptical look and even Peeta knew it was a weak excuse, not when Beetee could easily remove the jewels and melt down the gold. “I want to have something we can use in case supplies run low. Before that royal tour started, you know how low we were on things Finn.” There. That was a better explanation and one Finnick couldn’t argue against. But Finnick only continued to eye Peeta in contemplation, as though he was trying to understand something. After a few moments, his eyes lit up in revelation.

“You like her.”

Peeta’s mouth opened in shock and shook his head. “No, I don’t Finnick. I just want to be prepared for any situation. They’ll be searching harder for us than ever before. I wouldn’t be surprised if we have to lay low for longer than a month.”

“She is certainly beautiful. And...different. I heard her make you laugh last night. Haven’t heard you do that in a long time. I can see why you would find her attractive,” Finnick said as though he had’t heard Peeta’s words. Peeta could feel the heat rising over his face in frustration.

“No Finnick. Im--”

Finnick cut Peeta off with a wave of his hand. “Just be careful Peet. She may act differently than any other noble we’ve encountered, but she’s still Capitol. Still a royal. And we can’t afford to lose you.” Finnick placed the necklace in Peeta’s palm and walked away with a “See you tonight.” Peeta gazed after him, trying to ignore the very confused thoughts Finnick’s words had stirred in his mind.

He looked at the stunning necklace now in his palm before slipping it into the inside pocket of his jacket. Finnick was wrong. He had to be. He strode off in the direction Finnick had taken, not allowing himself any further thoughts on the matter.
“I do not wish to ride with you!”

Peeta crossed his arms over his chest. All around, the camp bustled with movement as the group prepared for departure. Finnick and the others had already left, and Peeta had awoken Katniss a few minutes ago to give her some dried meat and fruit. He didn’t need her fainting from hunger today and slowing everyone down when so much would depend on their ability to move quickly. She had taken the food without protest much to his relief, and he had just informed her she would be riding with him today. She was now refusing to meet Peeta’s gaze as a soft blush began rising in her cheeks.

“You misunderstand me. I’m not giving you a choice in this. My men will have enough to deal with without adding you as an extra burden and though you may not believe it Lady Everdeen, you’ll be safest with me.”

Katniss’ blush increased and she suddenly met his calm blue eyes with her furiously flashing grey ones. For just a second, Peeta could not help think how mesmerizing she was standing there in her muddy gown with fists clenched in anger.

“Fine. I won’t like it though.”

Peeta laughed so loudly he could see the rest of the group turn in his direction, the shock evident on their faces. Looking at their expressions, Peeta realized that perhaps he did need to laugh more. “You don’t have to like it and from you, I honestly wouldn’t expect any less. You only have to come with me Lady Everdeen. My horse is over there,” he said pointing to where Gale and the others were waiting, saddlebags bulging with the gold they would soon be distributing. He grabbed her elbow to guide her, but Katniss wrenched her arm out of his hands and stalked over to the animal. She turned back to Peeta with an expectant look on her face. Oh, she was going to be a challenge, Peeta thought to himself with a grin.

He strode over to the horse and pulled himself into the saddle. He looked down at Katniss who was now looking uncertainly up at him with a hint of fear in her eyes. Peeta reached his hand down to her. “I won’t hurt you. Trust me.” Katniss sucked in a breathe at his words, and he could see the shadow of their conversation from the night before reflected in her face. There wasn’t any trust between them, and they both were aware of it. Peeta realized he was going to have to make her get into the saddle, but just as he began to shift back to the ground, he felt her hand take his lightly. “Ok,” she said softly. Peeta looked at her in surprise before a feeling of gratitude stole over him.

He gripped her hand tightly and pulled Katniss up to sit in front of him. She stiffened slightly as he brought his arms up around her to take the reins. He didn’t know why, but he felt the need to reassure her again. “It’s going to be ok. I told you. I won’t hurt you.” With that, he kicked the horse off at a gallop.

This had been a bad idea. That had been all Peeta had been able to think since they had begun riding over an hour ago. He had expected her to sit side-saddle the whole time as most noblewomen did, but she had hiked up her dress above her knees to ride astride shortly after they had left the tower. It had shocked him, and his eyes had automatically drifted to her halfway exposed thighs before he even had a chance of stopping himself. Peeta knew he wasn’t the only one to have looked, but he was obviously the only riding with her. And that had been the start of his trouble.
Since then, Katniss had not said a word to him, but she had relaxed a little as she had gotten more comfortable in Peeta’s arms. Or perhaps she had just tired of sitting so ramrod straight, Peeta mused. Regardless, her back was now resting against his chest and though he knew she wasn’t doing it deliberately, her hips were shifting into his groin with every stride of the horse. At the moment, he was doing everything he could to prevent more blood from rushing to his cock, but he was half-hard already from the nearly unbearable friction she was creating against him. Peeta was embarrassed to admit that he knew he would need a release later.

He had already grudgingly admitted to himself that he was attracted to Lady Everdeen, but Peeta was certain it was only on a purely physical level, regardless of what Finnick has said that morning. Peeta was just praying she hadn’t noticed, and it was with utter relief that Peeta noticed the trees beginning to thin a short time later.

He called the group to a halt and commanded them down from their horses. Peeta slid off his own horse and turned to help Katniss down, but she slid off the animal with a serene look on her face.

“I’ve been riding since I was a little girl, Sun Thief. I don’t need anyone’s help with anything,” she said with a small but amused smile on her face.

Wait. Was she teasing him? That was certainly a change. Peeta felt mystified at her sudden swing in mood. He probably would have her statement amusing on another day, but they were about to begin the most dangerous part of their mission. It was much easier to steal things than distribute them to those in need, and he couldn’t muster up a joking reply to her words.

“It’s Peeta. And you’ve made it more than apparent that you don’t want anyone’s help.” Katniss’ brow furrowed as though his reaction wasn’t quite the one she had wanted, but Peeta turned away to address his men.

“All right. We go on foot from here. Johanna, Gale, you’ll take the south today. Holmes, Darius, go east. Castor, Pollux, to the west. Rue you’re with me. Thresh, I want you to stay at the edge of the brush with Lady Everdeen and watch the fields. The noblemen’s’ watchdogs will be surveying the people as usual, but I want to know if Thread or any of the royal guards appear or of course if you are in trouble.” He whipped out an arrow with a bright blue arrowhead from his pack and gave it to the large boy. “Use this as a last resort to signal us. Otherwise send a mockingjay.”

He then turned back to Katniss. “Lady Everdeen, I’m not going to gag you or bind you, but I expect you to remain quiet today.” Katniss raised her eyebrows at the command. “If you try to scream for help, Thresh has my full permission to do whatever is necessary to silence you.” The scowl that had so often been on her face returned, but Peeta had one more warning to make. “In your grimey state, you do not look like the royal woman you are. Your prince’s guards and maybe even Thread’s men would recognize you, but the ones out in the fields won’t. They’ll most likely think you are an escaped laborer, and they are not kind to those who they think are shirking their duties. If only for that reason, do not try anything today.” Katniss said nothing and skepticism was written on her face, but Peeta saw a tiny bit of confusion and something else he couldn’t quite place in her eyes.

“Come on everyone.” The company shouldered their packs and followed Peeta’s lead to where the treeline ended. As they all looked out beyond the brush, Peeta heard Katniss gasp in shock. Peeta knew that sound. It was the one he had to repress every time he came upon a scene like the one that lay before them.

Vast farm fields unfolded for as far as the eye could see in either direction while a distant town could be seen off to the north. Peeta could see smoke rising from a few chimneys, but for the most part the town looked quiet. The same could not be said for the fields as the cries of the laborers
burst into the air. Guards were walking down the rows of grain and corn as they oversaw hundreds of workers. They were screaming at one person, hitting another, threatening whole groups with their evily glinting swords. In others words, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

In the field nearest to them, an old man was being whipped mercilessly by a maniacally grinning foreman. It took every ounce of self-control within Peeta not to shoot the guard as the old man’s blood spilled onto the ground, but Peeta knew it would only risk everyone’s capture. This was a scene that had already played out a thousand times and would play out a thousand more until Snow was brought down. Only reminding himself of that ultimate goal was enough for Peeta to tear his gaze away from the scene.

He glanced at Katniss. She was trembling from head to toe, and her eyes were wide with horror. So she had a heart beneath her sometimes icy exterior after all.

Without pausing to think about what he was doing, Peeta placed his hand over hers. She looked up startled, staring at him for a second before opening her mouth seemingly to speak. But she was cut off by a biting voice whispering into the silence--

“You’ve never seen this have you, your highness?” Johanna said. Peeta looked at small dark-haired girl with sadness. Her bitterness at the atrocities before them was unfortunately understandable.

Johanna’s father had been whipped in much the same way the old man was now by the son of the Lord of District Seven for the crime of not cutting down a tree fast enough, and no one had found him until it was far too late. Her mother had done her best for Johanna, her three brothers and two sisters but without the even measly pay and grain rations that were given to the peasants for their labors, the family had starved. Johanna had buried the rest of her family within two years of her father’s death. Her deepest desire was to kill the man who had killed her father, Seneca Crane, wherever he was now. Peeta tried not to take life if he could avoid it and commanded everyone in the group to do the same, but Peeta would not begrudge Johanna that death if the time ever came.

“Johanna, don’t. It’s ok. Someday they’ll all pay. Peeta will get us there. You’ll see,” Gale said as he placed a hand on Johanna’s arm. Katniss’ hand suddenly clenched Peeta’s more tightly at use of the word “all.” He looked at her and could see she feared she was included in that vaguely defined category. Peeta didn’t honestly have an answer to that question, but he squeezed her hand back in what he hoped was a reassuring way.

“I know,” Johanna said and gave Peeta a hard slap across his back in what he assumed she at least thought was an affectionate way. Her loyalty too was unquestionable, but he sometimes wished she were a little less brash…or at least less hard-hitting. He grinned at Jo, but then his smile faltered when he noticed Johanna’s eyes widen as her gaze fell on his and Katniss’ still joined hands. Peeta quickly let go.

“All right. We have three town areas to hit today with at least an hour’s ride in between. Be back here before noon if you can. Look for the designated houses and remember, if you can’t get into them, you can always leave the money in the churches. The Fathers know what to do. I don’t feel like rescuing any of you today so don’t get caught.”

That was always Peeta’s last line, and it wasn’t true at all. They all knew he would come for them if they were captured; he’d done it before. But at this point, the executioner’s axe would come swiftly for all of them, and there would most likely be no time for rescues of any sort. Still, the line made everyone laugh, and it was better than saying goodbye.
As the others departed, Peeta tied a piece of cloth around his head over one eye. He threw his cloak over his head and shifted the bow and quiver beneath it to aid him in affecting a crooked posture like the day before. Rue playfully threw dirt at him before she ground some mud into her own clothes. When he and Rue were partnered, they always pretended to be two sickly young beggars. Rue affected a convincing hacking cough, and Peeta always found people were put off by his supposedly twisted spine and “partial” blindness. No one usually bothered them, and it was the perfect excuse to go door to door. They were just unusual in that they handed out coins rather than asked for them.

Rue whispered goodbye to Katniss with a hug and told Katniss not to worry. The tender look that appeared on Katniss’ face at the Rue’s embrace almost made Peeta want to grab her hand again. He was beginning to realize there was a lot more to Lady Katniss Everdeen than her original appearance implied, and Peeta could at least admit he wanted to know her a bit more. By her reactions today, she seemed to be warming up to him a little too even as a small voice in the back of his head suggested maybe Peeta just hoped that.

“Thresh. Remember. Only use the arrow as a last resort. There are too many people out there for someone not to notice the direction it will be coming from if you shoot it.” Thresh nodded silently in understanding while Katniss looked at him with her piercing eyes. Peeta thought’s again turned to the morning’s conversation with Finnick. Did Peeta really want her to understand the group better? Yes, he did but...maybe...just...maybe he wanted her to understand him even more, to see he was more than a poor ill-mannered peasant boy. He shouldn’t care. He shouldn’t, but, he realized he did anyways. He opened his mouth to speak, but for once, Peeta had no words. He simply gave her a nod and walked off down the road with Rue at his side.

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“Just wait until you see where we are going Lady Everdeen! I know your tour was supposed to take you through District Three but you were only supposed to visit the the main estates right? At least that’s what I noticed in the past two months,” Rue said excitedly as she guided her horse to fall in step with Peeta’s own.

“Two months? You were following the tour since Twelve?”

“Oh. Yes. Your visits distracted the Lords,” Rue said with a laugh. “Their guards were always ordered to protect you, Glimmer, and the princes rather than their storehouses.” Peeta felt Katniss stiffen against his back with what he was almost sure was anger. She had gone on her tour willingly, as far as Peeta knew, but he guessed she didn’t enjoy hearing how he and the band had been using her to their own advantage. Peeta wished Rue hadn’t brought this up now even if he knew she had meant no harm by it.

It had been a surprisingly good day without any complications for once. Everyone had been able to distribute the stolen coins easily in all three areas. Peeta and Rue had been the only ones approached by a local guardsman, and he had quickly waved them away the second he heard Rue coughing. He and Rue had moved so swiftly through the last town that Peeta had been able to ask a baker at one of the designated drop off points for some flour and cheese. The man had slipped Peeta his requests with gratitude and many thank yous for what Peeta was doing for their people. It was nice to be thanked, but what had made Peeta most pleased was the knowledge that he would finally be able to fulfill his promise to Rue.

When they had returned to the brush where Thresh and Katniss were waiting, it had been to wide grins and relaxed expressions on every one of his friend’s faces. Katniss had greeted him with a timid smile, and for once, Peeta had allowed himself to feel truly happy, and it was with a light heart that they had set out for the encampment.
Peeta had asked her to ride behind him for the journey to The Falls as he was rather unwilling to put himself through the morning’s...excitement...again. Still, Peeta had felt the familiar sensation of blood rushing to his lower body when she had clasped her hands together below his navel, much to his mortification.

But even beyond that, Peeta was astonished at how right it felt to have her so near him. She hadn’t said anything during the long ride, perhaps unsure of how to join in with the now gaily laughing people following along behind Peeta, but it was not an uncomfortable silence. It didn’t make sense. He wasn’t entirely sure if she’d even begun to warm to him, and Rue’s continued comments weren’t helping the matter.

“Peeta was going to wait until District Two to do the singing and drawing act, but he decided to change the timing when Sheriff Thread almost caught us yesterday.” Peeta winced, and he felt Katniss go even more rigid than she had already been. Rue was making it sound like what Peeta and Finnick had done yesterday was a regular thing, which it wasn’t. It was only something Peeta pulled out when absolutely necessary. Yesterday, the amount of gold he knew was the in the carriage had been just too much to pass up when considering the amount of people who would be able to afford a reasonable amount of food for a month or two.

“Did you like the drawing Peeta did of you? You should see some of his other ones, if he’ll show you. I can sing, but I wish I had more talent like him. Next time I win Peeta, I’m requesting a painting lesson,” Rue said in a teasing tone and gave a sweet smile.

Oh God. The drawing.

When Peeta thought of the sketch he had done of Katniss, Peeta realized for some odd reason he didn’t want her thinking the way he had drawn her was something he did with every young woman he had come across. In fact, Peeta had never drawn anyone quite the way he had Katniss. Usually, he just did a fairly standard portrait because that was what most people expected, but Katniss had been too captivating or an ordinary picture. He couldn’t smile back at Rue as the last feeling of happiness fled from his heart.

Katniss dropped her hands from around his waist and gripped the back of his cloak loosely.

Now Peeta was absolutely positive of her anger. He felt her lean away from him as if she wanted to be as far away as possible from his body. It was only then that he realized Rue had stopped talking. He glanced at her, but she was looking at Katniss. Her stricken expression told the whole story.

She looked at Peeta with apology in her eyes, but Peeta just gave her a reassuring smile. It wasn’t her fault. Nothing Rue said was untrue, and it was a reminder of where Peeta’s focus should be anyways. Everyone had made it through the day unscathed, and they all would be in the safest place possible for a month. Peeta was already itching to work with his bow. He didn’t need the practice, but he liked to anyways. He had no reason to feel unhappy.

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Mist swirled through the air, and the sound of falling water roared in Peeta’s ears as it fell from the cliff several hundred feet above them. Peeta looked up.

The Falls.

It was one of Peeta’s favorite views in all of Panem. He had tried many times to capture its look with paint and paper but even with his skill, Peeta had never quite been able to convey the moving torrent as it gushed into a black pit below the earth. Though it was well known to many
throughout the country, few people ventured out this far to where the woods met the beginning of the rocky mountain cliffs and fewer still knew the secret that it contained.

It had been a desperate day indeed, the first time Peeta had come to this place. He and Finnick had just joined up the month before and were still figuring out how to work together as a team. While only fourteen at the time, Peeta was already an experienced thief. Finnick unfortunately was not and had also still been weak from his time on the slave ship. Therefore, it hadn’t been surprising when Finnick made the mistake of picking the local sheriff’s house to rob. That had also been the first day Peeta had made the acquaintance of Sir Romulus Thread.

Thread had discovered Finnick breaking his strong box and had not reacted kindly to it. Peeta still remembered the panic and fear that he was about to lose his only friend and had shot from nearly three hundred yards away to prevent that from happening. Thankfully Peeta’s aim was beyond extraordinary, and he’d left Thread pinned to the wall by four arrows. They had fled with strongbox in hand, laughing in Thread’s face and crowing about their own cleverness. But Peeta had learned a lesson in humility that day when Thread’s vicious pursuit nearly cost them their lives.

Thread had sent his own personal guards as well as all those who oversaw the fields after the two, and he had been relentless. They were chased for two days right up to where the water now thundered down above Peeta. The sheer cliffs of this area had offered no hiding places but one, and it had only been by pure luck that Peeta had discovered it.

Finnick and Peeta had scrambled along the cliff wall in search of any enclave that might conceal them but knowing they were likely at death’s door. All had seemed hopeless when Peeta had noticed a thin black line of space behind the waterfall. He had slipped into it and been completely shocked to find a tunnel wide and tall enough for a horse to fit through. Only if a person was at the exact right angle could they see this wonder that the water concealed. Peeta still didn’t know who had made it, but he always offered up a prayer of thanks to whoever it had been.

Peeta felt Katniss bring her arms back up around him as he directed his horse into the darkness of the tunnel. He almost gripped her hand as he had done earlier, remembering his own fear that long ago day, but he smiled slightly. He knew her fear would soon fade away just as the sound of the thundering falls grew more distant with each passing step deeper into the rock face.

The light of the setting sun suddenly hit the side of Peeta’s face, and he heard Katniss gasp in wonder. They were on the edge of a small hidden valley between the cliff and the mountains above. One end was bordered by the rock wall that supported the waterfall outside while sunlight streamed through the opening on the other end. That border ended in a second waterfall, which drained into a canyon a thousand feet below them. Peeta was sure he and the others were the only ones to have seen it many hundreds of years. Several large pools of water fed from underground streams dotted the near landscape, and he knew hidden not too far away were a pair of hot-springs, which the group used for bathing. Birds flew overhead and crickets chirped in the tall grass. Peeta could even hear the bleating of a wild goat off in the distance. He was home.

“Welcome friends! And noble Lady,” Finnick’s voice boomed through the air. He waved to them from atop an outcropping of rocks near the tunnel entrance. “And extended greetings to the noble Lady of course!” Finnick said with a wink to Peeta once he saw where Katniss was perched. He pulled his horse to a halt as the rest of the band called out hails of greeting and came to meet their leader.

“Were you able to get the supplies Finnick?”

“What Peeta? Not even a hello from you? I expect a better greeting for your best friend,” Finnick said while he walked forward with pure happiness evident on his face. Peeta doubted his good
mood had much to do with their return but more likely that he was back with Annie. He really was in no mood to play Finnick’s games. He slid down from the horse to stand in front of Finnick.

“Finnick. I’d like an answer.”

Finnick raised his eyebrows at Peeta. “Of course I did Peet. We have supplies enough for a month, and Beetee has the jewels now as well. He sends you his regards. Said he’ll get them sold to the right people but that we’ll have to get the money from them distributed to Two.” He heard Katniss gasp of horror from where she was still seated on the horse. Finnick looked up at her, and his brow raised even higher at her expression. Maybe she was angry rather than just horrified? Peeta wasn’t sure, and he decided he shouldn’t care.

“That’s fine. That’ll be the first thing we do once we finish here.” He avoided his best friend’s eyes. Peeta didn’t need to see the suspicious look he knew he’d find on Finnick’s face with the question of why Peeta hadn’t told Katniss that her own necklace lay safe in his jacket pocket on his lips. Peeta already knew that answer.

He wanted to her to accept him as he was without any grand gestures of kindness that might make her feel as though she owed him.

“Just be careful Peet.”

Finnick’s words shot through Peeta’s head, and the realization of what he had been fighting to deny all day finally hit him like a lightning bolt…

He did like her. Finnick had been right. He liked her, and right in this moment, he wasn’t even sure he understood why he did.

Oh fuck.

He turned to address her. “Lady Everdeen, I---HEY! STOP HER!”

Katniss had slipped down off the horse and was now sprinting towards the tunnel entrance, darting around many outstretched hands. She was indeed quick, just as Peeta had observed last night. But he was faster.

Just as she reached the mouth of the tunnel, Peeta caught up to her. She gave a startled cry as Peeta grabbed her roughly and threw her over his shoulder, his temper flaring. Hadn’t he warned her not to try this again? He turned quickly on his heel and stalked back to where the rest of the group was now watching him in open-mouthed shock.

“Trying to escape again Lady Everdeen?”

“LET ME GO!” Katniss pounded on his back with her fists, causing Peeta to wince. She was a lot stronger than she looked though maybe that shouldn’t surprise him. “YOU GOT WHAT YOU WANTED FROM ME. YOU’LL GET YOUR DAMN MONEY. THAT’S ALL YOU CARE ABOUT!”

His temper flared even higher. All he cared about was money? He guessed he had been wrong to think she was beginning to understand him or even soften towards him at all. God, he was a fool.

If that was her only conclusion from the day then Peeta knew he could easily forget the way she had begun to make him feel. “LET ME GO THIEF!”

The sound of her continued refusal to use his name stirred a powerful feeling of anger in him at her inability to see him as more than just that label. Peeta pulled her from his shoulder to rest in his arms. The startling quickness of the movement caused Katniss to grip around his neck for just a
moment before she let go as though she’d been burned. She tried to punch at Peeta’s head, but he ducked her blow. “Put me down,” Katniss said in a voice filled with rage.

“As you wish, my Lady,” he said in a voice dripping with sarcasm. Katniss looked startled at the sound of his acidic tone. Peeta stared back at her for just a second, knowing what he was about to do was probably going to be something he would regret, but his hurt got the better of him.

He dropped her into the pool of water now at his feet.
A Revelation

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Sorry for the slight delay in posting this! My goal as a whole is to still post a chapter every week, week and a half max, but I made this chapter extra long as an apologetic offering because I will be going on vacation for a week beginning Sunday!

I don’t expect I will have the opportunity to write that much while I am away and what time I will get is going to go towards an Everlark one-shot centered around my vacation location. That shall be posted shortly after I return. :) But because of that, my next projected update for this story is approximately 2.5 to 3 weeks from now. I hope this chapter will tide everyone over until then!

Another deep thank you goes to titania522/ct22 for her wonderful beta-work and all around awesomeness.

Please see my end author's note if you are curious about the two games I mention in the writing. Fair warning...this chapter is where the story starts earning its "Explicit" label. Reviews are, as always, very welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Katniss

The water was cold. So very cold. That was the first thing Katniss thought as its frigidness hit her body and cut off her scream of shock.

Her second thought was that Peeta was trying to drown her and that she had been a fool to trust in his claim from earlier in the day that he would not hurt her. Thankfully, she knew how to swim. It wasn’t a skill many from District Twelve knew, dotted as it was only by forests and fields, but her papa had insisted on it. She kicked through the water, coming up sputtering to the surface of the pool and looked at the almost comical scene before her as she began to tread the water to stay afloat.

The company was again spread out in a line just like the first time Katniss had tried to escape and even the looks of astonishment on most of their faces were much the same as the night before. A few though were looking on with satisfaction, as though Katniss deserved this. Johanna had such a smug look on her face that Katniss wanted to punch her, and she only saw Rue and a red-headed woman standing next to Finnick with true looks of concern on their faces. But even they said nothing, seemingly unwilling to protest their leader’s actions. Katniss burned with humiliation.

As for Peeta, he was still standing at the edge of pool, now with arms crossed over his broad chest. His expression had fallen back into that unreadable mask that he had worn when Darius had reintroduced her to him. He seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

“You tried to drown me!” Katniss charged, her voice trembling with rage.

“No I didn’t Lady Everdeen,” Peeta said as he ran his hand through his curls in seeming
frustration. “Why in God’s name would you think I’d do that?”

“Perhaps because you clearly don’t want me here? It’s been fairly obvious to me. You had me ride with you this morning because you said I’d be a burden to your men! Well, I assume I’m a burden to you too then. You have my gold; you don’t need me.” Peeta’s eyes widened in surprise at her words. Katniss knew he hadn’t really said those things, and that she was taking his words completely out of context, but her temper wasn’t about to let her stop throwing them back at him. 

“But then, of course, you claim you can’t let me go because I could report your location. So why not just kill me and make it easier on yourself?! You may have claimed you wouldn’t hurt me, but I wouldn’t trust you to hold to your word. In fact, you’ve already broken it! VILLAIN!” Katniss splashed the water for emphasis to make her point.

At her last word, Peeta gave her a cool look, and Katniss felt a chill run down her spine as his blue eyes turned to ice. Before now, her fears had only been vaguely defined. Yes, being held by a band of thieves as a whole certainly scared her, and what she had seen yesterday in those fields yesterday was troubling. And she was worried about Prim of course, Haymitch too. Maybe even a little bit concerned about her mother. But overall, if Katniss was honest with herself about this past day and a half, she wasn’t as scared in this position as anyone would probably expect her to be and it was only now that she realized it was because of him. His steady presence had been reassuring to her in a way she hadn’t recognized until just then, and now she was watching the warmth in his eyes die.

It was easy to see she had crossed some sort of line, but Katniss clung hard to her anger as she always did when things troubled to her. Luckily, it was not so difficult while she was still in this cold pond.

“Stand up,” Peeta said coldly. “And you’ll see I wasn’t trying to drown you.”

Katniss looked at him suspiciously for a second before she stretched to her legs down towards the bottom of the pool. After only a few moments, her feet hit the bottom, and she saw that the pool could be no more than four feet deep. Her feet had probably only been a few inches from the ground while she had been treading water. She stood up shakily and made her way to the shore before stalking over to him, water dripping from her dress as she went. She was unsure of what to say, but he saved her the trouble--

“I told you last night, Lady Everdeen, that you would regret it if you tried to escape again. It would appear I keep my word sometimes,” he said sardonically. Katniss flushed with embarrassment but held his gaze. She would not be intimidated.

“Now let me be very clear. You are here because I am not willing to sacrifice the lives of my men for your desire to be with your precious prince.” Peeta practically spat out the last words, stepping so close to her that they were nearly chest to chest. Katniss felt her eyes widen. He almost sounded... jealous? But she knew that was impossible, and she actually smiled slightly at the silly notion.

Peeta unfortunately noticed her gesture and clearly thought her smile was directed either towards the thought of his men dead or the memory of her “precious prince.” A look of surprising disappointment broke through his mask before he carefully rearranged his expression into a neutral position once more. “You think me a villain. I promise the next time you attempt to flee, I will make sure to live up to your expectations.” He then stared at her as though expecting some kind of answer, while Katniss remained silent, meeting his cold gaze with one of her own. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of hearing her acquiesce to his threat, but he seemed just as determined to wait for her to acknowledge him.

They continued to look at each other, battling silently, neither willing to give in for what seemed
like hours but could have been minutes at most. She could feel the eyes of everyone in the camp still watching them, but for the moment, she didn’t care.

Crickets chirped. Birds twittered. Light from a torch shadowed the ground with strange designs. Water dripped down her legs and pooled at her feet, and the seconds continued to race by, trying to keep up with Katniss’ rapidly beating heart. The world seemed to rolling back upon itself until all Katniss could see was him.

A lazy breeze tossed his wavy hair across his brow. His chest was heaving, as though he had just run miles, and she thought she saw his hands trembling out of the corner of her eye. His cerulean eyes never once left her face, and his pupils began to dilate, the ice within them slowly morphing into something Katniss couldn’t quite identify. But she knew it wasn’t anger.

All life stilled in their presence. It was only her. And it was only him. And nothing else mattered.

Katniss was again struck by how handsome he was, even as most of her mind screamed with continued anger at his behavior. She felt like she was on fire. Burning with humiliation, burning with fury, burning with…

A soft trilling sound from behind her broke Katniss out of the trance she had been in. She turned quickly and stared at the bird that had made the sound. It was standing on a small rock near the edge of the pool. Katniss recognized it immediately and took a step towards it in delight.

“A mockingjay?” Katniss said in wonder. Even though it was the symbol of her house, she had never seen one up close before. So beautiful.

“A Katniss wins!” Rue’s giggling voice suddenly echoed through the clearing, shattering the silence. Katniss whipped back around with a startled gasp and took back in the scene she had been ignoring for the last few minutes.

The astonishment on most everyone’s faces had gave way to looks of puzzlement. However, Gale’s usual frown had deepened with obvious displeasure, but Katniss couldn’t even begin to guess what he was upset about. Johanna’s expression had morphed into something much more sour, and even Darius, whom Katniss had learned during their riding today was never serious about anything, no longer had a smile on his face. Only Rue was laughing.

Katniss glanced at Peeta, but he didn’t seem to realize the change in his followers’ moods. In fact, he wasn’t even looking at them but was gazing at the mockingjay with a rather dazed expression on his face. She watched as Finnick walked up behind him and gave him a surprisingly gentle pat on his back before he turned to Katniss with a small smile.

“You continue to be a mystery to me Lady Everdeen. Usually the mockingjays don’t come this close unless Peeta is not within fifty feet of anyone else. I’m going to be so curious what you choose to ask for.”

“Here you go Katniss! You don’t mind that I call you Katniss do you? I heard Darius saying you asked to be called Lady Everdeen, but I want to be friends, and I think friends should call each other their birth names don’t you?,“ the blonde rather voluptuous girl said in a giggling voice.

Katniss just shrugged, but Delly seemed to take that as a yes.

“Perfect! Friends we are! Now don’t tell Johanna that I stole her dress. I’m pretty sure it’s the only one she owns, but in all the time I’ve known her, I’ve never seen her wear it. I’m almost positive she’s forgotten she owns it.”
Katniss could only give Delly a look of trepidation as she eyed the blue woolen garment in Delly’s hands. Johanna may have forgotten it, but Katniss was highly doubtful seeing it on another woman wouldn’t trigger her memory. Still, it wasn’t like Katniss had much of a choice in the matter. Her dress was soaked and her trunk full of clothing was probably still sitting on that wagon miles and miles from here.

Katniss looked out over the camp, searching for Johanna. Tall torches were set up in a ring around a natural clearing, though on one side the torches split off to illuminate a pathway that seemed to lead to a rocky outcropping high on a hill. In between the trees, Katniss could see other tents dotting the landscape. Another bonfire, bigger than the one from last night, illuminated the center of the wood.

As far as Katniss could tell, most of the group was gathered there, seated on logs laid out around the circle. Occasional uproarious bursts of laughter reached her ears. The sounds of a lute, drum, and tambourine floated softly through the air, and a few people were even dancing in the firelight. But she didn’t see Johanna’s small figure among them.

“They’re all so happy to be back here after being on the road for so long. I missed everyone so much,” Delly said as she followed where Katniss’ gaze was directed. “It was such a relief when Finnick and Peeta came here a few days ago to let Annie and me know they would all be coming home soon. It’s one of the few places we all feel totally safe. No one knows about this valley except us, as far as we know, though of course there is always someone on look-out duty for any trouble. Everyone has to take a turn, but I think Peeta assigned himself first watch tonight.” Katniss nodded at her words and thought back to earlier.

When Finnick had spoken to Katniss, his voice seemed to awaken Peeta out of the stunned state the mockingjay’s arrival had left him in. While Katniss herself had been briefly mesmerized by the bird, its effect on Peeta had bewildered her, and she had briefly wondered if there were more to the birds than met the eye.

Katniss had always been taught that they were just pretty song birds though her father had told her they were altogether untamable. He had tried a few times in his youth to capture one as a pet, but all of them had died shortly after their capture. The need for freedom was something apparently inherent in their nature, and the little birds would even die to attain it. It was a feeling that Katniss understood all too well. She longed for freedom, for a different life than the one she was committed to, the one that bound her soul in thick black shackles. Katniss knew, however, she would never take that last final route the mockingjays chose when in captivity. She loved her sister too much to leave Prim to world’s cruelty.

But it was strange, Katniss remembered herself thinking, if they were untamable, why did the bird seem so familiar with Peeta? Why had it come so close to him, when most wild birds would stay hiding high in the trees? Why was it comfortable with Katniss too? Based on Finnick’s statement, this wasn’t even the first mockingjay to have done this, though it was at least the first to feel comfortable with another person in Peeta’s presence. Indeed, as soon as Finnick had spoken, the mockingjay had torn off for the top of a tree.

As for Peeta, he had given Finnick a mostly impassive look, something Katniss was coming to learn was his trademark when he wished his feelings to remain hidden. But Katniss saw the truth in his eyes.

During this day, Katniss had tried to observe the group’s interactions with one another, how they worked together; wanting desperately to figure out if they had any weaknesses that would afford her an escape. But always, her eyes had been drawn back to the boy with the fierce blue ones. And Katniss had discovered his secret.
No matter how impassive Peeta made his face, his eyes had a will of their own, and the life Katniss saw there never quite left them though his face could be cold as ice. And in their brilliance and beauty, he revealed at least some of his thoughts.

Therefore, the hint of warning and pain in Peeta’s eyes at Finnick’s words did not go without her notice. Katniss had realized there was story hidden there, though she sensed it wasn’t a happy one.

He had walked away from Katniss after that, speaking briefly to the bubbly blonde now sitting at her side. Katniss presumed he had asked Delly to find Katniss something to wear since she had immediately bounded up to Katniss and pulled her to the tent, telling her to wait while she searched for something “pretty.”

Though Katniss had looked out to the fire a hundred times before Delly returned from her search, she had not seen Peeta’s golden hair amongst the crowd since then. It was difficult for her to even admit she was looking for him, but Katniss told herself it was simply because she didn’t want to see him what he had done to her...that is so long as she ignored the small feeling of disappointment his absence brought every time she looked towards the center. She guessed Delly’s explanation that he was on guard detail explained his vacancy.

“Does Peeta always take the first watch Delly?” she asked in as even a tone as she could muster.

Delly looked at her curiously. “No, not normally. He usually takes a shift during the hours before dawn. I don’t know how he does it as he and the other boys usually stay up quite late on the nights we have bonfires, doing God knows what. Just wait and see. Some of the things they do for fun are ridiculous! II on the other hand, like sleeping in so my watches are always during the day,” she said with a wide smile.

Katniss almost smiled back. Delly was like Rue in a way, or Prim, with her kind heart, open face, and easy trusting nature. Katniss envied those traits. Trust was not something that Katniss gave readily.

“Why would Peeta take the first shift then? You said it ends soon?” The curious look on Delly’s face morphed into confusion, and Katniss clarified, “I just don’t want him to catch me unawares when he returns.”

Delly shook her head at that. “You misjudge him Katniss. He is...,” Delly paused, as though trying to find the proper words to describe the boy with the golden hair. “He is good. He’s, he is the very best of us.” Delly paused again and gave her a meaningful look. Katniss just raised an eyebrow at her, like she was supposed to take Delly’s word that he was good when the dampness of the dress she still wore and missing weight of her pendant on her neck were easy reminders that he wasn’t.

Delly threw up her hands in frustration. “I know you don’t understand now, but I think you’ll see it with time. Please give him a chance...Give us all a chance. We’re more than you what you think us to be.” Katniss didn’t know what to say to that and so fell back into her habit of silence, her mouth forming a grim thin line. Delly gave her a gentle smile, accepting that Katniss was likely not going to respond to her words.

“Well, anyways, here is the dress. Just leave your gown in the tent, and I’ll make sure it gets washed. You can sleep in my tent tonight, or if you prefer, I bet Rue would love it if you stayed with her too. She helped me find the dress for you. And I know you are probably so weary from the road and would like a good washing yourself. I’d show you where it is now, but Johanna claimed it.” Delly furrowed her brow in annoyance, confirming Katniss’ silent guess that Johanna had deliberately taken the bath to delay Katniss’ from even getting that small enjoyment without
delay. Cleaning the grime off her body after perhaps the most trying two days of her life sounded too lovely and she prayed Johanna wouldn’t dirty the water too much.

“When she comes back, I will tell you where it is. You can rest in my tent until then if you would like, though,” she gave Katniss a hopeful smile, “you are certainly welcome to come to the fire too. We don’t bite.” She set the dress down next to Katniss before walking away, and Katniss really did smile then because Delly’s last words reminded her of Darius’ first ones. Perhaps some in this group weren’t so bad after all.

XXXXX

“Oh Lady Everdeen, you look so beautiful tonight! I’m so glad you joined us. Delly wasn’t sure if you would come out. She said you looked tired,” Rue whispered to her as she sat down beside Katniss.

Katniss smiled, realizing Delly had been kind enough to give Katniss an excuse in case she had decided not to join the gathering. She almost hadn’t, in fact, but after changing into Johanna’s dress, Katniss realized she was wide awake and would be very bored if she stayed hidden in Delly’s tent. So with the thought of Peeta be damned in her head, Katniss had quietly made her way out to the center, sitting on the log farthest from the fire. She had been sitting here for ten minutes before Rue noticed her presence.

“You can call me Katniss, Rue. And haven’t bathed in two days! I don’t think that meets the criteria for beautiful.”

Rue shook her head. “You look more...natural? Yes, I think that’s it. More natural. More relaxed. That dress looks lovely on you by the way. You always looked so uncomfortable in that fancy dress you were wearing. Or at least I think I would be uncomfortable in that dress, though it certainly is pretty.” Katniss laughed a little. Her orange dress was more comfortable than it looked, thanks to Cinna, but Rue was right that the thin woolen dress she now wore was very light, and she moved more easily in it. She nodded at Rue in agreement, which caused the curly-haired girl to smile.

“And didn’t I tell you to just wait until you saw this place? Don’t you think it’s the most beautiful home a person could ask for? I can tell you like it here. It’s like you belong with us; I can just feel it.”

“It is a beautiful place Rue,” Katniss said truthfully, though she didn’t agree with the younger girl’s sentiment that this was where she belonged. Katniss would not be able to call any place home without Prim, but these woods admittedly did remind her of the Seam.

She always missed that place, those woods, and those happier times. If Katniss was to continue to be a hostage, she supposed there were worse places to be.

“I do like the woods. They remind me of where I am from.” Rue seemed appeased by her answer and wound her fingers through Katniss’ own, giving them a gentle squeeze and gave a sigh of contentment.

Katniss was relieved when she fell silent after that. As much as she liked Rue, Katniss wasn’t normally one for long conversations. Perhaps Rue sensed that, and they passed the minutes in peaceful meditation, allowing Katniss to observe the merry scene before her up close for the first time.

Off to her right, two of the ex-soldiers, Castor and Pollux, whom Katniss had learned today were also brothers, waged an intense game of Tables* against one another. They seemed to be ignoring
the rest of the group completely, even when a rather vigorously jigging Darius and Lyme came
within inches of them. Rory, meanwhile, seemed to be undergoing a dance lesson of sorts with the
red-headed woman Katniss had seen earlier, and Katniss felt Rue giggling at her side as they both
watched Rory nearly fall over while he tried to spin the woman around. Delly and Thom were
also gliding around the circle, though at a calmer speed, gazing deeply into their partner’s eyes,
and Katniss was a little envious at the clear love they demonstrated. She and Cato certainly had
never looked at each other that way, and she had to turn away from the pair.

The ones providing the music for the dancers were Paylor on tambourine, Finnick on the lute, and
to her very great surprise, Gale on the drum. She had not had much interaction with any of these
people, but Gale had not struck her as someone who would be musical, even with something as
basic as a drum. A wave of amusement swept through Katniss as she watched Finnick and Gale
give each other looks of unhappy solidarity. She guessed the two had only reluctantly agreed to
provide the music tonight as they kept casting envious glances towards the tight circle of bodies
directly across from Katniss, where most of the other men were playing Hazard.**

“I bet cleaning down the horses that you lose,” Katniss heard one of the men yell. She gathered
they were waging their assigned tasks against one another rather than money, which Katniss
found surprising. Had they really not kept any of the money stolen off the carriage yesterday that
they resorted to betting in chores? But then she thought about it further and decided that was
maybe just something Peeta wouldn’t allow after the “hard work” their thievery probably required.
“Bastard!” came a second voice, presumably the loser, and their raucous laughter now punctuated
the air.

It was only then that she noticed Peeta and Thresh walking into the circle, deep in conversation
with one another. Katniss stared at the blond haired boy, unsure of how she should react to his
presence. Part of her wanted to throw something at him, but the other part…the other part for
some reason wished she was dancing with him. And not the way Darius and Lyme are dancing
either, a small voice in Katniss’ head said that but she quickly silenced it, while deliberately
avoiding Delly and Thom, who were now swaying only a few feet away.

“Isn’t he so handsome?” Rue suddenly sighed next to her.

“Wha— what?” Katniss stuttered, quickly looking at Rue to see if the girl had been watching
where Katniss; own eyes were directed.

“Isn’t he so handsome?” she repeated in a dreamy voice. She turned to look at Katniss with an
expectant look on her face. Was Rue actually expecting an answer?! Katniss’ face began to burn
as she struggled to form an answer.

“I, I suppose. He isn’t, uh, half bad. Not. The worst I’ve seen. If, if, that is, if you like men
with…blonde hair?” Katniss’ whole face was now aflame with embarrassment at the lame end to
her sentence. Blonde hair?! Her own fiancé had blonde hair! Rue gave her a bewildered look.

“Blonde hair? I was talked about Thresh.”

She waved over to where Thresh had sat down next to Finnick. Peeta on the other hand, had
pulled a rather relieved looking Lyme away from Darius, and Katniss could hear him talking
about her soon-to-start watch. They were several feet away from each other now, and Katniss
mentally kicked herself for not realizing who Rue’s gaze had been following.

“Wait. Katniss! Who were you talking about?” She looked wildly around before her eyes started
to shine with excitement as Rue made the connection. “Were you talking about Peeta? Oh my
goodness. Oh my goodness. You were! Everyone else has darker hair!” Rue clapped her hands
together in delight. “You think he’s handsome Katniss? I think he thinks you’re pretty.”
“I...I don’t,” Katniss spluttered, thoroughly alarmed at how loud Rue’s voice was getting in her excitement. But she was mercifully saved from answering her question by a sudden voice calling out above her--

“Lady Everdeen! I didn’t notice you had joined us.” Darius looked down on Katniss happily as voice boomed in the clearing, causing several of the less focused Hazard players to look in their direction. “Would you care for a dance? I sadly lost my partner to the watch.”

Remembering Darius’ enthusiastic frolic from the minutes before, Katniss opened her mouth to decline, but then without thinking about why she was doing it, she looked across the circle at Peeta, who had just sat down next to Gale. She was startled to see his blue eyes looking directly at her, though when she met them with her own, his quickly flitted away. Katniss blushed and swiftly stood up. “Of course Sir Darius, I would be honored.”

“Still with the “Sir” sweet Lady? You flatter me too much.” He pulled Katniss to him but with a comfortable distance between them. “Finnick, Gale, Paylor! I think a faster tune would serve us well,” he shouted out, much to Katniss chagrin. But before she could protest, Darius pulled her out to begin the dance.

As they turned, Katniss heard Delly and Rue begin to clap, but all Katniss could think about was how uncomfortable she was.

Darius was silly and sweet, but his arms did not invoke any sense of safety or warmth the way his had. And even with all the practice she’d had dancing over the last many months; she was still having trouble keeping up with Darius’ feet. He seemed to have only one speed when it came to dancing. Fast.

In an effort to slow him down, Katniss asked, “Where did you learn this dance Darius? I’ve only ever seen it done at court.” Darius smiled down at her.

“Peeta taught us.”

Katniss’ mouth fell open. Where would Peeta have learned this? Who among the commoners would know the ways of the court so as to be able to teach him?

“Or well he taught Finnick anyways, at Annie’s request. It was one of the funniest things I’ve ever seen. I’ll never forget that. But we also all paid attention too, so that someday we wouldn’t look like complete barbarians if we got the chance to dance with a pretty girl.” He winked at Katniss and then gave a loud whoop as the band continued to speed up the beat to a near frenetic pace.

Round and round they whirled, and some of the others began to join in. She could see Rue out of the corner of her eye, laughing merrily in Thresh’s arms. Delly and Thom shot past her in another direction. Those that didn’t have partners were laughing and jumping around each other in nonsensical patterns. The red haired girl was clapping and laughing, standing next to Finnick again.

But there was one person who hadn’t joined in.

Katniss could see Peeta from over Darius’ shoulder. He was watching everyone from where he still sat by Gale. Or was he just watching her? His eyes seemed to be riveted on Darius and herself more than anyone else.

Katniss felt a sudden heat flash through her body under the burning intensity of his gaze. She could see his chest heaving again, almost as though he was angry or upset, but at what, Katniss did not know. He slowly rose to his feet; bow gripped in hand, eyes fixed on her. And Katniss did not look away. He took a step forward, but her eyes were torn from his abruptly as Darius picked
her up and began to twirl her around. His face was contorted in concentration in such a ridiculous way that she began to laugh joyfully. She hadn’t laughed like this in forever...

“PEETA! TRACKERJACKERS! IT WAS AN ACCIDENT!” The panicked yell pierced the night air, and the music came to a screeching halt. Katniss crashed down to the ground as Darius’ accidentally dropped her, startled as he was by the scream.

Lyme came running into the clearing, pointing at the canopy of trees above them in clear fear. She began to sob, collapsing to the ground, and terror ripped through Katniss as she squinted into the gloom above, memories of the day of her father’s death threatening to consume her. But she couldn’t see anything. Peeta, on the other hand, leaped to his feet.

He whipped his bow into position and began unleashed arrow after arrow into the darkness. Watching his arms flashing in the firelight, never letting up his steady onslaught, Katniss knew she had been right to think he was strong. His face was calm, even serene, as his clear desire to safeguard everyone was manifested by the iron determination reflected in his eyes. There certainly was no fear there.

He looked, he really looked…regal, she thought. She simply could think of no other word and judging by everyone’s awestruck expressions, she was not the only one who thought so.

Finnick’s words from yesterday, which Katniss hadn’t even realized she’d remembered, flitted through her head…

“Many of us would have been dead today without your arrows.”

And Katniss realized she believed it. Regardless of his other actions, she saw now that Peeta truly had not been lying when he said he would allow no harm to anyone, even to her. And her fear evaporated as quickly as the morning dew disappeared in the sun’s first light.

She watched in utter amazement as the arrows began to fall from wherever Peeta had shot them into the air. It looked like glittering golden rain was falling down upon them, but as one shaft landed next to where Katniss was still sprawled on the ground, the sinister nature of the drizzle was revealed.

The trackerjacker was clearly dying, pierced through its large black and yellow patterned abdomen with pinpoint accuracy by a black tipped arrowhead. But the insect still fluttered its wings angrily and its two inch long stinger raked the ground, leaving venom trails in its wake. Though she had never seen one this close, Katniss knew just a few doses of that venom was enough to kill a fully grown man. More of the insects fell out of the sky, landing around her with soft sickening thuds. The swarm must have been centered above her, Katniss realized.

The blood drained from her face as the specter of her father’s death rose up from the deep hole in her heart. Katniss felt ill. Very ill. And she squeezed her eyes tightly shut against the dark thoughts threatening to spill forth from the blackest corners of her mind.

“It’s all right Lyme. I got them all,” she heard Peeta tell the still sobbing Lyme.

“Oh Peeta. I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry. I was doing a perimeter walk, and I didn’t see the nest until I accidentally hit it. They followed me. I didn’t know what to do so I ran back here. I endangered everyone. I am so so sorry.”

“Lyme,” he said in a firm voice that clearly brooked no argument, “it wasn’t your fault. Just rest. Darius? Think you could get her something to drink? Finn, play something calming.”

Finnick struck up his lute again and a soothing melody filled the air. But still, Katniss did not open
her eyes. The trackerjacker was still next to her, and she couldn’t handle the sight.

“Are you alright, Katniss?”

She looked up at the sound of his soft voice, filled with concern, and met Peeta’s gaze, his face only a few inches from hers. He was kneeling next to her and twirling an arrow with a dead trackerjacker on its end in his hand, but his eyes were fixed on her. Katniss didn’t know what was more shocking, that he had noticed her distress or that he had called her by her first name. He had been so formal up until now, but in his concern, he seemed to have forgotten all propriety.

Katniss nodded but another wave of nausea overtook her at the site of the dead insect. Peeta followed to where she was looking and understanding blossomed in his face. He flung it into the fire before he turned back to her, a contemplative look on his face. Then to her astonishment, he gently picked her up.

Katniss stiffened briefly, wondering if she should protest, but she sighed and decided it was fine. She did want to get away from the trackerjackers after all. She shamefully admitted that she also didn’t want to lose the feeling of safety that his arms seemed to give her. And when he began to set her down again, she gripped her arms around his neck without thinking. Katniss looked up at him, and the burning intensity from the pool returned as she felt him tighten his arms around her briefly, but he gave her an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry Lady Everdeen, but I need to make sure everyone is ok. Gale will help you if you need anything.”

Katniss’ heart unexpectedly sunk when she heard him use her title, even though she knew she’d insisted on most everyone using it. No one had ever seen her as anything beyond a “Lady” except maybe Prim, and his return to formality reminded her of that. But Peeta didn’t seem to notice she was upset, as he set her down lightly next to where Gale was standing. They nodded at each other before Peeta strode off.

Katniss glanced at Gale, but his stony expression was unreadable so she decided to ask the question she had been wondering all day.

“You are from District 12, are you not?”

Gale looked down at her, his grey eyes going soft at the mention of her home, and Katniss knew she was right.

“From the Seam. Same as you, Lady Everdeen.”

Katniss’ mouth split into a genuine smile, and she eagerly asked-- “When was the last time you were home, Sir Hawthorne? It has been six months since I departed from there. I miss it”-- but she immediately knew she had asked the wrong this as Gale’s face darkened.

“Cut the crap on the sir thing. None of us are fucking sirs and none of us want to be. It’s been two years, nine months, and eleven days. That’s the last time I was in the Seam. If I returned home, I would be executed on the spot by your bloody fucking father.”

Katniss’ blood suddenly turned to ice. “I have no father. He is dead. If you mean, Cray… that man is not my father,” she whispered fiercely, her voice trembling with anger, and she shot daggers at him with her eyes. Gale looked at her, and Katniss saw a towering inferno in his eyes that must have been a mirror reflection of her own.

“Well your father or not, he still murdered mine.” Katniss’ draw dropped open at Gale’s statement. “My father was punished by Cray when we could not pay our debt. I suppose you weren’t even
aware that every year he raised the taxes on all the common folk?” Katniss shamefully shook her head. She hadn’t.

“He bled us dry. Said it was what the King commanded. He bled everyone dry, and then he took more. He sent my father to the mines and he died on only the third day in that hole. The shackles that bound his legs didn’t allow him to run fast enough when the cave-in started.” He flopped to the ground, bitterness filling his voice, and Katniss knew then that she didn’t want to hear anymore. But she quailed under Gale’s glare and sat down beside him.

“You know what he did then Lady Everdeen? Your Lord Cray came with his guards to our home during dad’s funeral to tell us that the debt still had to be paid.” Gale began to shake, clearly caught in the memory of that day. “I told him he could go fuck himself. Instead he dragged me out to the square, stripped me, and told his head man to whip me until he was sure my body was emptied of blood. He did a good job of it too, and then left me to die in the mud, in a ditch. Trash, he called me. And then he forced Rory into the mine’s instead. He was only thirteen.”

Katniss looked at him in horror. She would have been fourteen. She would have been home.

Her people tormented. Children suffering. A man dying. And she hadn’t stopped it, hadn’t even known about it.

Gale seemed to notice the look on her face. “I suppose you thought what you saw today in the fields was uncommon? It happens everywhere. Ask any one of us, and we all have similar stories to tell. But someday...someday my bow will be waiting for all of them.”

For the first time, Katniss noticed the crossbow Gale had in his hands. It had the same strange blue tipped arrow between its crosshairs as Peeta had given Thresh that day. Desperate to change the subject, Katniss asked--

“What is that arrow?”

Gale looked at her and gave a grim sort of smile. “A last resort.” Katniss glared at him. He had to know she was asking for a better explanation.

He cocked an eyebrow at her and sighed with exasperation, as if he expected better of her. It only annoyed Katniss more. “I helped invent them, but it’s difficult to explain what they do. You’d just have to see it. We use them for signaling occasionally since we don’t light them for that, but really, they’re supposed to be for emergency use only. We don’t have very many of them, and the ingredients to make them only exist in one place.”

“Aren’t you thieves? Couldn’t, you know, steal the ingredients,” Katniss questioned sarcastically. Gale gave her a fiery look.

“We’re the best. But the only one who has the skill to steal from the King’s Vault is Peet, and his life is worth far more than some blue arrows. I’d like my best friend to stay alive, thanks,” Gale said harshly, and then fell silent.

Katniss’ eyes widened. The King’s Vault was the nickname for the dungeons in Castle Snow. No one ever spoke of them except in fearful whispers… Torture. Mutilation. Darkness. Screaming. Pain. Death. It was said that no one who was ever imprisoned there came out alive again. But Gale seemed to be insinuating more than just prisoners was contained in that evil place, and more to the point, that Peeta had been there before. She looked across the fire and could see several people moving through the trees, picking up dead trackerjackers, though Katniss could not tell if Peeta was among them.
“You misjudge him, you know,” Gale said. Katniss eyed him in surprise. But he wasn’t even looking her way but rather seemed to be watching the others too.

“You are the second person to tell me that tonight.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.”

“Why should I believe anything you say?”

“I don’t care if you do.”

“Your tone would suggest otherwise. And I think I can form my own opinions.”

“You’ve already made your judgments on him, on all of us, and you don’t even know us. You should give him a chance. All of us deserve a chance.”

“He threw me in an icy pool of water. I will never give any of you ‘a chance.’ You’ve given me no reason to.”

“You deserved that soak, you know.”

Katniss stood up in fury at his words. “I most certainly did not.”

Gale stood up as well and puffed out his chest with new rage. “He is good,” Gale said, unintentionally echoing another of Delly’s phrases. “Who do you think found me when I was about to bleed out on the Seam road? Who do you think rescued Rory? Even after all that he’s gone through, he is still good. Still manages to give us hope that life could be good again someday. And all you do is call him a villain.”

“Or maybe you’ve just been deceived,” Katniss said with fake relish. Deep down, she knew she didn’t believe those words, or at least she thought she didn’t. But she had also never been one to back down from an argument and sensed Gale wasn’t either as she watched him bristle with indignation. He opened his mouth to speak when a third voice came from behind them--

“Well it appears Brainless can push your buttons about as well as Finnick and I can, Gale. Rather pathetic given she’s known you all of one day.”

Katniss was shocked to hear...Was that admiration?...in Johanna’s voice. She whipped around, only to come to a screeching halt in shock. Johanna was standing directly in the fire’s light, stark naked, except for the leather boots on her feet.

XXXXX

Katniss stood perplexed at the fork where the torch-lined pathway split into two, straining to remember which direction Delly had told her to take to the girl’s side of the bath. What had she said? The scene from a few minutes ago came to her head...

“Johanna!” Delly said in a scandalized voice as she rushed over to where Katniss and a rather flabbergasted Gale were standing. “Put on some clothes and act like a lady! What are you thinking?”

Johanna shrugged. “Just felt tonight was boring and needed something to mix it up.”

“We’ve had enough excitement for one night! If you hadn’t deliberating taken so long in the
spring, you’d have seen we didn’t need any of “this!” spectacle.” Delly flapped her hands in Johanna’s general direction, her voice becoming squeaky with anger. She threw the cloak that had been around her shoulders at Johanna. “Cover up with that.”

Johanna calmly wrapped the cloak around her body. “Isn’t this Thom’s?” she said with a wide grin. Delly flushed, but Johanna ignored her. She walked calmly up to Gale and tugged him in what Katniss assumed was the direction of one of their tents with a “C’mon pretty boy. It’s time I get you in bed. I need ya. The drought comes to end tonight. It’s been too long.”

Delly watched them go and gave a loud snort. “She just wanted to shock you Katniss. That was...extreme. Even for her. But at least the bath is free now.”

Delly continued to talk, but Katniss ignored her, watching after the retreating backs of Johanna and Gale with an open mouth. How did Johanna have the confidence stand there like that, with everyone probably watching her? To say it was time to go to...to demand…to say she needed… well to say what she clearly had been saying.

Katniss accepted the cloth towel Delly offered her with a blush and began to walk up the pathway Delly was pointing towards...

She was regretting not listening to Delly now though

She swiveled her head back and forth between the two paths leading deeper into the rocks, trying to decide which path was the correct one. Off in the distance, Katniss could hear the tempting sound of falling water and a soft mist swirled through the air. It had been too long since her last bath, and Katniss was desperate for a good soak after so many stressful days. Deciding it probably didn’t matter which bath she chose since no one besides her would be washing at this time of night, Katniss determinedly picked the left path and stomped down it.

When she came to the end of the pathway, Katniss almost cried out in delight at the beauty of the grotto that lay before her, lit by torches that ringed around the hollow. She took a few steps inside.

A semi-shallow pool lay in the center of it, bubbling slightly on the surface, and Katniss guessed it was fed by a natural hot-spring, based on the warmth of the air around her. Most of the pool was lined with rocks, once clearly rough, but now worn smooth by the water that continually lapped over them as it made its way to several drains cut into the crevices of an outer circle of rocks. An overhang sheltered most of place, but on one side, a tiny merrily tinkling waterfall ran off it.

A sudden movement in the waterfall caught her eye, and Katniss had to clapped a hand over her mouth to stay the yell of shock threatening to escape from her lungs.

She recognized the person standing beneath it. She would know those familiar yellow curls anywhere.

Peeta.

Peeta was here.

Peeta was washing under the falls.

Katniss felt herself blushing to the roots of her hair and quickly averted her eyes before she saw anything. Clearly, she had taken the wrong path. Oh this wasn’t good, she thought.

What if he caught her? What would he think she was doing in the men’s bath? Oh this wasn’t
good at all.

She began to edge herself backwards towards the pathway as silently as she could, believing the rocks at least partially concealed her and hoping she would be able to leave quickly without him noticing. But Katniss’ traitorous eyes seemed to have other ideas, and she suddenly found her gaze directed back across the pool to where she knew he stood.

A torch had been placed near the waterfall so that the small area was brightly illuminated. It also outlined every inch of Peeta’s body as he stood below the falling stream, and she gasped at the sight of him.

His blonde hair was plastered to his forehead, now a slightly darker shade from the damp, though as stubbornly wavy as ever. His tongue darted out to catch a stray droplet of water running over his lips, and Katniss had a brief crazy wish that he was running his tongue over her lips instead.

His eyes closed as he tipped his head back briefly to enjoy the water falling gently down on him. Katniss watched his arms ripple in the light as he leaned both hands against the rock wall next to the waterfall. He was staring at a point on the ground with a troubled, almost anguished look on his face. She wondered what he was thinking about for just a second before she found herself driven to distraction at the site of the water droplets flowing down over his broad, muscled chest, the light just catching the smattering of golden blonde hair that lay across it. A wild heat coursed through her. She continued her gaze downwards to the taut muscles of his abdomen and the perfect V-shape of his narrow hips.

And finally, altogether rejecting the nagging voice in her head asking Katniss what the hell she was doing, screaming at her that she was engaged, reminding her this was not what a Lady does, Katniss rather wickedly followed the thin trail of dark blonde hair that ran from his navel to his pelvis.

Down...

And down...

And farther down…

A rush of wetness seeped between Katniss’ thighs as she saw that, even soft, Peeta’s cock was much bigger than Cato’s was on that single night she had seen it. A throbbing sensation began to pulse in her core. She was taken back to early this morning, when she had felt Peeta hard against her back. She hadn’t thought much of it then, having experienced the same situation with Cato a time or two, but now…

“Damn it! Fucking damn it!”

Katniss jumped, jerking her head up to look at Peeta’s face, startled at his sudden outburst. She took a wobbly step backwards at the same time, scared he had seen her, knowing she had outstayed her welcome before she had even arrived.

She didn’t even understand why she was still her, but she was aware she had never felt anything like the sensations now coursing through her body. It was terrifying and electrifying all at once. And she knew she wouldn’t be able to move if she tried.

She swept his eyes over him again as he ran one of his hands over his face before he breathed out an exhausted, defeated sounding sigh, his fair face etched with despair. Her heart stuttered at his agony, and she realized it bothered her to see him looking so upset. He murmured something softly, and though his whisper was too soft to understand, Katniss guessed it was a name. But
But then Katniss couldn’t think at all anymore because Peeta ghosted his hand down his body, took himself in hand, and began to caress himself slowly.

She watched in wonder as he placed his unoccupied hand back against the wall to anchor himself and increased his pace. Katniss saw his cock quickly grow under his jerking hand until he was standing erect, thick and long, against his abdomen. He gave a sharp gasp, mumbling more words she could not hear, clearly lost in whatever world he had conjured for himself behind his now closed eyes. For a strange moment, she wanted to join him there.

He began to pump himself even faster then and let go of the wall, reaching under himself with his spare hand to fondle his sack. Soft moans of pleasure spilled from his mouth and with each one, Katniss felt that nerve at the apex of her thighs pulse with unmet need.

Automatically, Katniss brought a hand to her breasts, plucking hard at her nipples through the cloth of her dress, in an effort to relieve a little of the pulsing heat. She pressed her other hand between her legs, grinding the rough cloth against the soft bud at the center of her sex. It had been so long since she had done this. She was so rarely alone.

God, it felt so good.

She looked again at Peeta. His handsome face was screwed up in ecstasy from his self-ministrations, and Katniss wondered vaguely what it would be like to have his hands on her instead of just her own… Or his lips on her own… Or on her breasts… Or down lower… Katniss rubbed herself harder, picturing him with her, arching her back at the pleasure her fingers were giving her.

She began to pant, almost in unison with the boy standing across from her, who was still unaware of her presence. And as she watched Peeta cry out as he reached his release, a final startling image of him between her legs, finishing inside her rather than against his hand, came into Katniss’ head. Her knees buckled under the weight of that vivid picture, but even more so at the shock of deep longing the illustration created within her.

She ground her hand into herself one final time, and came hard, unable to contain a mewl of pleasure as her own release rocked her body.

Katniss looked up wildly, realizing how loud she had been, and saw Peeta turn in her direction. He had a rather blissful look on his face, but she could see he had heard the noise because his eyes darted back and forth scanning the semi-darkness.

Panicked, Katniss sprinted down the path, swift as the wind in a howling storm. Had he seen her? What had she been doing? What was she thinking?! What the fuck was wrong with her!!! The whole thing seemed like a dream.

Fear. Anger. Humiliation. Confusion. Sadness. They were all emotions Katniss had experienced since meeting Peeta and his group. But there had also been joy and freedom, safety and peace, try as she might to conceal them, even from herself. And now there was desire. Katniss couldn’t deny that anymore, not after what just happened. It was obvious to her now that Peeta, his group, even the beautiful place they called home, had somehow managed to drive a small chink into the armor of her guarded heart.

She wasn’t sure she liked that or wanted that. Yet, anyways.

But as she came to an unsteady breathless halt in front of Delly’s tent, Katniss decided maybe it
was time to give them, give him, that chance.

Chapter End Notes

*Tables is the medieval name for backgammon and also more generically covers any type of board game in which two rows of 12 vertical markings are used on the game board. Games such as this have been found in ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian settlements during archaeological digs...That’s a fancy way of saying backgammon is essentially 4000+ years old!

**Hazard is a dice game that dates back to at least the 13th Century. It was one of the most popular dice games in medieval Europe and was played for high stakes in English gambling rooms. (Gambling is a “sport” as old as humanity itself). It is the ancestor of the modern dice game, craps, which is played in casinos the world over. The name “craps” is actually derived from the world “crabs,” which was the nickname Hazard players used to describe the 1-1 and 1-2 throws in the game. The modern rules for craps also have their roots in this game.

The Sun Thief will return with a new chapter in Peeta’s POV in a few weeks!
Thanks for reading!
Author’s Note: Thanks to everyone for waiting so patiently for this update! I know it’s been 4 weeks rather than the 3 weeks I estimated, but I hope you find that it was worth the wait.

A deep thank you goes to Solas Violetta for her wonderful suggestions for this chapter and for catching all my idiotic grammar errors. She’s a rock-star.

Just a note, if you are ever wondering when an update on TST or any other story I write is coming, I regularly update my profile page on FFF with projected times. I am also going to start doing Six Sentence Sundays on my tumblr if you want some teases on what’s coming in stories. :)

Hope you enjoy the Chapter 7!

Peeta

God, this rain is fucking annoying.

Peeta shook his head vigorously, trying to rid his eyes of the water droplets the strong wind had sent showering down onto his head from the canopy of leaves above. He pulled his cloak closer around him before he re-cocked his arrow into his bow before kneeling down upon the high carefully concealed platform at his feet once more.

The small plank of wood that Peeta stood on couldn’t be seen from the ground and even the carved-out notches in the tree’s trunk that aided a person in climbing to the top were not apparent unless you were looking at exactly the right angle. And right now it was soaked with rain water, Peeta noticed, as he felt the dampness of the wood seep through the thin wool of his pants. But he did not move. He couldn’t risk startling the wild boar he could hear wandering the area, waiting for a time when it would cross his line of sight.

He had been up here for nearly four hours now, on this wooden hunting platform that he, Finnick, and Gale had built back when they were just three starving boys trying to survive. So much has changed now, Peeta thought a little wistfully.

After they had rescued Rory from the mines in District 12, they had hidden Gale’s mother and youngest siblings in District Three, where the Hawthornes had now been living for many years under the protection of their friend Beetee.

Rory had wanted to come with Peeta and Finnick when his older brother declared he would be coming with them instead of remaining with his family, but as Rory was just thirteen, Peeta had not allowed it. He knew all too well what it was like to be that terribly young and homeless, and he didn’t want Rory to join them until he could truly understand the choice he was making.

So Gale had left his family behind, assured of their safety in Beetee’s care, and the three of them had set off to roam across Panem. Peeta didn’t miss the starving part of those early days, but he sometimes missed the freedom and anonymity he’d had.
That was before he’d given up hope of finding his family or at least a place he could even call home. Before he’d had his heart smashed to pieces by Cashmere and hardened his heart against love. Before he’d become the leader of an ever growing rebel band, responsible for their needs and protection. Before he had become the Sun Thief.

“That was also before Katniss Everdeen entered your life,” an annoying voice in the back of his head whispered maliciously.

Katniss. Peeta conjured Katniss’ image easily. In his mind, her stormy grey eyes flashed out at him from her beautiful face, her lips pressed into a thin line to form the ever present scowl on her face. Peeta gritted his teeth in frustration, as he often did now, at the thought of her. He’d always prided himself on being a relatively good judge of character, with two exceptions, but finally he had to admit that Katniss utterly perplexed him.

He’d lost his temper around her more in the last week than with all the members of his band combined over the last several years. Her stubbornness was completely infuriating. Not even Johanna or Gale, the ones in the group most prone to recklessness, matched Katniss’ fire. For Christ’s sake, you gotten so pissed off at her that you dropped her in the pond! Peeta honestly had no idea what he’d do if she actually tried to escape again. No one else had ever dared ignore his commands more than once before.

She was just so damn haughty. It was like she was deliberately trying to challenge him.

“But what about the last few days?” the same annoying voice persisted.

Peeta sighed heavily and glared up at the down pouring sky. These last days were partially the reason he’d spent this entire day hunting, even though it had been raining like this off and on for nearly three of them. They had been...strange to say the least. And when Finnick noted that their meat supply was running very low, Peeta had jumped at the chance to get out of the valley and away from her.

He just felt so confused.
After he had thrown her in the pond, Peeta had expected Katniss to react just as angrily as she had when he’d first pinned her down in the forest, expected her to yell or scream or even try to hit him. Instead, they’d had that weird staring contest.

Peeta clenched his jaw. Don’t think about that, he reminded himself sternly, trying to ignore the twitch in his cock at the mere memory of her body inches from his own. But his mind betrayed him, as suddenly; a vision of Katniss was there, standing in front of him, just as she had that night.

Her eyes glittered with frustration. Her cheeks were flushed deeply red with anger or perhaps from the cold. Peeta didn’t know and couldn’t bring himself to care, distracted as he was by the way her sopping dress clung to her every curve and valley. Her nipples stood out erect against the damp wool of her gown. Droplets of water ran down from her wet hair to collect at the juncture of her breasts, which was just visible at the top of her bodice. Peeta longed to lick those droplets away.

Ugh.

Peeta shook the remembrance away, resolutely overlooking the now obvious tent in his pants.

He instead focused hard on what had occurred after that, on his surprise that she had amicably talked to Delly, worn Johanna’s unrefined old woolen dress, willingly joined the group for the evening, and danced with Darius with a carefree smile on her lovely face… Don’t think about that either, Peeta thought, clenching his jaws tighter. It only bothered you because Darius was dancing
with a woman who represented everything you fought against. And to make matters worse, Katniss’ behavior had had been even more confounding to him since then.

Though they hadn’t directly interacted at all over the past days, Peeta had been closely observing her, more so than he liked to admit to himself, and in that time, he’d noticed a definite change in her demeanor. She was still quiet overall, but he’d seen her talking to almost every member of the group at various times.

He’d watched Katniss’ laughing and teasing Rue, accepting the girl’s hugs and listening to her constant chatter without any sign of annoyance. He’d watched her and Delly fall into an easy friendship, not that that was surprising. Peeta had never met anyone yet who was immune to the charms of Delly’s sunny personality, though he was quite shocked when Katniss’ offered to help Delly with some of the mending all their clothes required from the wear and tear of being on the road for over two months straight. And he’d watched in astonishment as Finnick introduced Annie to Katniss, and Annie had actually talked with her.

Annie was painfully shy, and Finnick had spent much of the time since they’d been reunited trying to get her to open up to the world. But with all she had been through, it was hardly surprising that she still barely spoke to Peeta or Gale, the two she had known the longest, much less anyone who had joined the group later. So watching her open up to Katniss at first introduction was about as astonishing as an amiable comment from Johanna. It just simply didn’t happen.

Katniss had even gotten Gale to laugh. He’d observed them quietly talking at last night’s bonfire as he made his way to a log after coming off watch duty. “Just stuff about home. I might never see it again, so she was catching me up on what’s been happening there since I left,” Gale had said with a sad smile when Peeta had casually asked him what they were talking about. A pang of jealousy that he tried hard not to acknowledge shot through him as he remembered his friend’s words. It would be nice to have the bond of something as nice as a shared home with someone.

But you are no more than a wandering spirit, Peeta thought sadly. And you have lost all those who have ever come close to being your family, your home.

He scanned the ground, searching for signs of the boar and finding none. He decided he could spare a few minutes and carefully leaned his bow against the trunk of the tree. He then reached into the little pouch on his belt where he kept Katniss’ necklace and pulled out the only other item he kept there.

Peeta stared at the moonstone on a silver chain in his hand. It was something only Gale and Finnick had ever seen, and it was only to them that Peeta had revealed some of the story behind his ownership of it. Even under the darkness of the rain, it still reflected any spare light wildly. Purples and blues and greens. Oranges and yellows. Reds. Pinks. All of them whirled together in a tumbling mass of color. The jewel was truly beautiful.

Peeta closed his eyes, the images and sounds that always plagued him when he looked at the moonstone crashing down upon him like a wave crashes down upon a ship on a storm-tossed sea.

...Scorched trees and a house turned to ash...An old knight lying in a pool of blood, sword missing, eyes glassy and unseeing of the world around him...A dungeon filled with unending screams, an evil place where the fear was as thick as the darkness within it...An old woman shackled in chains, her body broken, her impending death unstoppable...An orange tabby cat sprinting up a dank corridor, leading a crying blonde-haired boy to a shining light...

Peeta took a deep shuddering breath and opened his eyes, blinking back the tears that had formed in them. He looked back down at her pendant.
The necklace was his penance. An object that acted as a painful reminder for Peeta of those whom he had failed to protect, the wrongs committed that he could not right, a past he wanted to forget but never could.

He slipped the necklace quietly back into its pouch and took back up his bow. He hoped the boar came soon if only to pull him out of the melancholy that had overtaken him.

“Katniss.”

Peeta whispered the epithet softly and a surprising feeling of warmth grew in his chest, as though the utterance of her name was a shield against the darkness in his soul.

What had made her change her mind?

For as much as he watched her, Peeta was sure he had caught her doing the same with him. It was true, they hadn’t spoken at all since that first night, but he’d had to jerk his eyes almost shyly away from her more than once when her gaze seemed to be turning towards him. He’d sworn he had even seen her blushing when she looked at him a time or two.

And she was visiting his dreams every night.

Sometimes they were riding through the woods together. Other times they were just talking. But most of the time, his dreams featured them embracing, kissing and so much more… Many times, he’d awoken to discover a sticky mess all over his night clothes, but if he didn’t, he’d immediately have to touch himself to relieve the tension, trying (and usually failing) not to think of her as he did so.

He hadn’t had dreams like this about anyone since after Cashmere rejected him the first time. Back when he was a lovelorn idiot, longing after her, convinced that it was not her fault for what happened with her parents. Not yet seeing her for what she truly was.

But before she took your heart and ground it into dust a second time, he thought bitterly. Though he had no one to blame for that but himself.

And now here Peeta was proving himself the fool all over again. He easily saw the danger he was in because of the cursed softness in his heart, that part of him that longed for love and family and a place to belong, to call home...

But life was not kind, and Peeta was not meant to be loved. The past twelve years had proven nothing if not that. He resolved to bury his feelings, to stay numb. It was better than the pain.

Peeta heard a loud grunt and watched the large boar walk through a pair of trees not twenty yards off.

Finally.

Peeta grabbed a second arrow from his pack and knocked it next to the one already in his bow. The boar was much bigger than he’d thought and would need two to take it down.

He shot it straight through the heart.

“Peeta, what the hell!? You lugged this thing back all by yourself? You could have gotten one of us to help you!” Darius practically yelled as he strolled back in from his watch and noticed Peeta resting against a log next to the fire. Peeta actually felt himself go a little red.
Peeta knew he was strong, always had been, and his year and a half spent in the bakery had only helped that. But just like with his other skills, he didn’t usually like drawing attention to it, only using his strength as necessary on missions, to protect people from harm, or to teach the others. But when he was teaching, he was focused on them, not himself.

Of course, everyone certainly tried to push him when they were training together, to beat him. Finnick and Thresh had come the closest, but no one had accomplished it yet. And Peeta simply didn’t have the heart to tell most of them that their “bests” weren’t a challenge for him at all, especially since virtually all of them would be formidable opponents for the majority of challengers.

He shrugged at Darius. “It was raining. I didn’t think anyone would want to come out in the rain, and it’s not like the platform is that far from here.”

“Seriously Peet, you can rely on us to help you once in a while,” Darius said with an uncommonly serious expression. “And not just with wild boars. With...with anything you need.”

Peeta’s eyes widened in surprise for a brief second. That was weird. He repressed his flash of annoyance at Darius’ words and morphed his face into the characteristic unreadable neutral expression he was known for. Peeta might care deeply for all of them, but he didn’t need to rely on anyone. For anything. He couldn’t.

“I’ll keep that in mind next time, D,” Peeta lied.

Darius made a face. “Sure, you will. Just like the last time you said you would, and the time before that, and the time before that and--”

“Darius. Give it a rest will you? Some of us are actually trying to make dinner here,” Gale said in an exasperated voice.

Peeta looked across the fire to where Gale was slowly turning the spit. Upon seeing the boar when Peeta had returned to the camp, he had declared he would take charge of roasting the meat. Gale took food very seriously.

“Just sayin’ is all,” Darius said with a shrug at Peeta, but Peeta could only grin at the thunderous expression on Gale’s face, clearly telling Darius to shut up. Darius knew not to say more, and he flopped down next to Peeta silently. He raised his eyebrows in silent thanks to Gale, but his friend just looked at him with a troubled expression, like he wanted to say something but couldn’t.

Why was everyone acting so strange?

“Ladies! Welcome back! And might I say, you all look even more lovely than when you first left us,” Finnick’s voice suddenly called out, echoing throughout the clearing. Gale, Darius, and Peeta looked to where Annie, Rue, Delly, Paylor, Lyme, and Katniss were emerging from the woods, baskets full of berries and wild vegetables in hand. The only girl missing was Johanna.

“Oh Finnick, you’re such a flirt,” Delly giggled. “Annie, how do you put up with it?”

Peeta watched as Annie turned bright red as she always did when any attention was directed on her. She mumbled something no one could hear, but Finnick wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Because she knows she has my heart for all eternity.”

“You are going to ruin all our appetites with that sappy crap, Finnick,” Johanna said, walking into the clearing with a large smirk on her face. She slapped him hard on the back, but Peeta knew better than to think she was actually being serious. Finnick and Jo were surprisingly great friends,
and Johanna was very gentle with Annie.

“Gotta let the world know how I feel Jo. Make sure everyone knows what’s mine,” he said, looking around the circle with such a comically severe glare that most everyone burst into peals of laughter. Peeta didn’t laugh though. He was watching Katniss.

From the time Finn had called all the girls lovely, Katniss had looked increasingly uncomfortable. A blush had crept into her cheeks at Finnick’s declaration of love for Annie. She had winced at Johanna’s mention of Finnick’s sappiness and had begun shuffling her feet nervously when Finnick spoke of letting the world know how he felt. At the final statement about him letting everyone know what belonged to him, Peeta suddenly found himself looking at her scowling lips. Then, he’d dared to look up and saw that her eyes were upon him.

Peeta felt an odd tightening sensation in his chest as their eyes remained locked on one another and for once, he didn’t feel compelled to look away. Her scowl stayed in place, but her grey eyes glowed with fire, two pinpricks of light in the darkness. Did she feel it too? he wondered. This strange connection between them?

“Oy! Peeta!”

He looked up, startled at the sound of his name being practically screamed in his ear. Johanna was staring down upon him with a rather incredulous look on her face. Delly was hovering behind her with a plate of food in her hands. Based on Delly’s distressed look, he suspected she had been trying to get his attention for a while but had required Jo’s help to do it.

Peeta glanced around them to Katniss, but she was no longer looking at him. Instead, she seemed to be in deep conversation with Gale. Disappointment roiled through him for reasons he refused to examine.

Johanna took the plate from Delly and shoved it into Peeta’s hands. “Here idiot. You better eat this. With the pig, we now have plenty of meat to go around so none of us goes without tonight.”

Peeta took the food without question. He really didn’t feel like having another argument with Jo and dampening the already sober mood the group seemed to have tonight. Peeta assumed it had to do with being cooped up for a few days because of the rain. Even now, a light drizzle was falling over the encampment.

“Hey, Peet. We missed you around here today.”

Peeta looked up in surprise and watched as Finnick sat down beside him heavily. He raised his eyebrows at Finn. His best friend wasn’t shallow the way most people assumed he was on first meeting, but that had been an especially sappy sentiment for him.

“Laying it on a little thick tonight aren’t you, Finn?” Peeta said teasingly. “Did Annie get so sick of your declarations of love that you had to use me as an outlet?”

Finnick elbowed Peeta roughly in the ribs. “Of course not, oh divine leader,” he said with a sarcastic laugh. “But you’ve been absent more than present since the first night you got back here and even when you are here, you haven’t really been here. What happened to the guy who was always the life of our little merry band?” Peeta felt his smile fade away under the now serious look that Finnick was giving him.

“What does that mean? First, Darius. Then, Gale. Now, you. Why is everyone acting so strange?” he asked in a rather harsh voice. “And I’ve never been the ‘life of this group.’ You’re the one who is always finding ways to entertain everybody.”
“Pee-ta,” Finnick said, emphasizing the last syllable of Peeta’s name in an agitated voice. “Good Lord, do you think I want to be talking about this with you? Trust me; I’d be saving it all for Annie if I had my way. But everyone misses you. When I said you’re the life of this group, I meant that you’re what holds us all together. We all want to know what’s going on in your head, but you’ve become impossible for even me to read!”

Peeta clenched his fists in anger. “What the hell, Finnick? Did you all have a meeting today? All go around in a circle and take turns sharing your feelings?” Finnick’s face flushed bright red at Peeta’s words, and Peeta knew he was on the verge of pushing Finn too far. But his temper just didn’t seem to care.

“No, we didn’t,” Finnick said in a deadly quiet voice. “But you’ve been pulling away since we started following that damn tour. Everyone’s noticed. And since we got back here, it’s only gotten worse. You barely smile. You hardly talk to anyone. You disappear for hours on end. You do way more work than necessary.”

Finnick slapped his hand to the ground. “I know you’re our leader, and you feel it’s your responsibility to take care of us all, but once in a while let us take care of you!”

Ignoring Finn’s angry protest, Peeta stood up abruptly and walked away from the fire. He could feel the eyes of everyone on him as he went, but right now he simply didn’t care. He just wanted to get away, even if he was doing exactly what Finn was accusing him of. The turmoil Finn’s words had created inside him was just too great to deal with in front of everyone. He reached the secluded area where his tent lay, viciously ripped back the flap, and stomped inside.

He stood in the middle of the tent, too restless to sit down, and took some deep breaths to calm himself, but Finn’s words still echoed persistently in his head.

“Once in a while let us take care of you!”

Peeta hadn’t needed anyone to take care of him since he was eleven years old. And that wasn’t about to end now, he thought furiously. But then a deep sense of shame washed over him.

Peeta sighed. No matter how misplaced he felt some of Finnick’s words were, storming away like a petulant child wasn’t exactly a becoming look on anyone. He glanced into the corner where his bow lay, wishing he could just go to the practice range to blow off some steam but sighed again, knowing that wasn’t going to happen.

He grabbed the small sack that contained the cheese buns he had baked today after his return from hunting and made his way out of the tent. As he neared the fire, he scanned the circle for Finnick, hoping he could at least apologize for walking away from him, but he and Annie were nowhere to be found.

For the third time in a few minutes, Peeta sighed. He and Finnick hardly ever fought, but when they did, making up wasn’t the easiest thing for either of them to do. He’d hoped to head that off with a quick apology, but Peeta sensed Finnick wasn’t going to let their argument go so easily, judging by his absence from the circle.

“Rue,” he said quietly as he came up to the edge of the circle. Rue turned him with a surprised face, clearly not expecting him to return to the group tonight, but her expression rapidly morphed into concern. Great, now you really have gotten everyone worried, Peeta thought. He gave her a bright smile in the hopes that it would allay her fears.

“Here are the cheese buns you ordered, m’lady.” He presented the bag to her with a deep dramatic bow.” I apologize that they are no longer warm, but I’m the best baker in the land, no matter what anyone else claims, so they should still be good. I do hope you will be willing to share them with
your poor subjects, my Queen.”

Rue giggled. “Of course I’ll share with everyone, Peeta. Though I don’t think I have the right training to be a queen. Plus, aren’t queens supposed to be beautiful? I think Katniss is the only one who meets both of those qualifications. She’s the one who should be your Queen.” She took the bag from him and pulled a few buns out before passing it along to Thresh, failing to notice the way Peeta stiffened at her words. He sat down next to Rue heavily, trying to ignore his suddenly pounding heart. Why does even the mention of Katniss affect you like this? You really are a pathetic fool.

He watched the bag travel around the circle, nodding whenever someone gave him a look of thanks at the rare treat, but saying nothing more to anyone. His words seemed to have failed him.

That was, until, he noticed that Katniss did not take any of the pastries for herself.

Peeta allowed the bag to come back to him and glanced in the bag, relief stealing over him when he saw that there were still a dozen left. He waited until the group was distracted by the music and dancing, which Delly insisted they have tonight, before he made his way over to Katniss. She did not notice him until he was standing directly above her and pretended that he wasn’t bothered by the wary look she gave him when she did.

“Here,” he said quietly and opened the bag to her, his heart beating wildly. “They’re supposed to be for everyone. I saw that you didn’t take any.”

He watched as a rosy blush crept into her cheeks, and Peeta couldn’t help but think how stunning the color was on her. A fleeting wish that he had the colors to recreate it suddenly struck him and sent his heart beating into an even more erratic rhythm at the thought of painting her.

“I thought they were only for members of your group,” she whispered.

Peeta shrugged. “I made enough for everyone. Take a few. Just leave some for Finnick and Annie, please, since they aren’t here.”

Katniss gave him a skeptical look, but he shook the bag in front of her hand until she reached inside to pull out three cheese buns. “Thank you,” she said, obviously expecting him to leave.

“You have to try one.” Katniss looked up at him in confusion. Peeta folded his arms over his chest and gave her a teasing grin. “How else am I going to know how I match up with the bakers at the palace?”

Katniss’ mouth fell open in surprise, but then she gave a small sweet laugh that washed over Peeta like a warm spring rain. It was the most beautiful sound he’d ever heard. And he couldn’t help but smile at her as she bit into one of the cheese buns, a smile which only grew when her eyes went wide, and she promptly popped the rest of it into her mouth.

“These are really good,” she said. She shoved the other two into her mouth in quick succession, much to Peeta’s amusement. Clearly, Katniss wasn’t afraid to show she liked food, unlike so many of the other girls he’d met. He liked that.

“Then I beat the palace chefs?” he said with a smirk.

Katniss nodded her head vigorously. “They never baked anything like this nor did any of the chefs on the tour, at least not that I noticed. And I think I would have because all those banquets and balls were so terrible that I mainly stuck near the food tables,” she said with a grim smile.

Peeta felt his eyes widen, astonished at her admission that she hadn’t enjoyed all those stupid
feasts like he had assumed. “Well, here then,” he said, pulling out three more rolls. “You can take my share since Panem’s bakers failed you so badly.”

“You don’t want them?” Katniss narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously.

Peeta shrugged again. “I had them so many times when I was small that their luster is kind of lost on me now. Don’t worry about it.”

“But you didn’t eat earlier,” she said. She met Peeta’s eyes briefly but quickly looked away at the shocked expression that Peeta knew was on his face. “I, I noticed you talking to earlier, right when Johanna gave you that plate of f-f-food,” she stuttered out. “But you left before you ate any.”

“You noticed that?”

“I, I think, I think, everyone did,” Katniss said hurriedly, and Peeta felt his heart sink. Of course everyone had noticed the argument. She wasn’t looking at you for pleasure.

“Right,” he said flatly, running his hand over his face. “You can still have them.” He turned away from her, wondering if anyone would notice if he left, when he heard her whisper--

“We could share them.”

Peeta whipped back around. “What?” he asked startled. He watched her rosy cheeks turn crimson.

“I said we could share them.” She held out the cheese buns in offering to him.

Peeta stared at them silently for a second, unsure if this was real or if he was just hallucinating Katniss Everdeen actually asking him to join her in a meal. But the timid smile she gave him when he looked up at her was his reassurance. “Okay,” he said, sitting down beside her.

Katniss ripped a cheese bun in half and offered one piece to Peeta. He placed it in his mouth and chewed slowly, wondering what she would say if he told her that he had been lying about his indifference to the treats, that they were still his favorite no matter how many times he ate them.

They sat in comfortable silence for several minutes, sharing the rest of the cheese buns, watching everyone else dance around the fire, their movements casting strange shadows in the dying light. Peeta could not feel its warmth from where they sat, but the heat of Katniss’ body next to him was more than enough to keep the night chill at bay. He looked at her out the side of his eyes and was struck by a sudden urge to brush a lock of hair that had fallen onto her cheek behind her ear.

She is so fucking beautiful.

He was so entranced by her that when she turned to look at him, he forgot to look away before Katniss noticed him looking at her. Her eyes widened slightly, and Peeta felt his neck flush with embarrassment. He stared hard at the ground.

“Where...where did you learn to make the cheese buns?” Katniss asked, a nervous lilt in her voice.

Peeta was still so mortified at himself that he answered her without thinking. “The woman who took care of me when I was very young liked to make them. She taught me. Her name was Mags.” He inhaled sharply. Peeta never said Mag’s name aloud.

“Oh,” Katniss said. She was quiet for a second, and a sense of dread stole over him. He didn’t want to talk about Mags. He’d already thought about her enough today so that he knew the nightmares would be particularly bad tonight. He didn’t even know why he’d mentioned her name
“Was she the one who taught you to draw, too?”

Peeta finally looked up at her, taken aback by her question. It was one of the last ones he’d have expected from her. “Ah, no. Though I guess she encouraged me to continue doing it. But no, I’ve just, I’ve been drawing for as long as I can remember.” Katniss looked at him with curiosity, so he added, “Painting too. But I don’t get to do that very often. Too hard to find the materials.”

Katniss bit her lip, her eyes shining with an emotion that Peeta couldn’t place. “My sister likes to draw, but she gets so frustrated because she can never get body proportions right. I tease her about it, but then she reminds me of all the times I got called a dunce by our instructors when they tried to teach me. I would have been fine with drawing lessons if it was apparent that I had any talent in that area, but it was obvious, at least to me, that I wasn’t blessed with that gift. So I was...fairly resistant to them.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” Peeta said laughing. He noticed a few heads flick in their direction from beyond the fire, but he ignored them. “I’m sure you were their favorite pupil.” Katniss smiled widely at him, and he felt a swooping sensation roll over his body. His heart leaped into his throat.

“They hated me,” she said proudly. “But I didn’t care. I thought most of what they taught me was worthless. I always wanted to go with my father out into the woods, have him teach me how to hunt or how to manage the fields. Anything I wasn’t allowed to do is exactly what I wanted to learn.”

Peeta laughed again. “And did he teach you?” he asked. But his smile faltered when her face fell.

“A little of it,” she whispers. “He promised he would, but then he...” She paused, and Peeta heard her voice catch with pain. “He died when I was eleven. I tried to ask one of my father’s men to teach me some of the things father promised, but Haymitch was never sober enough to pay much attention to me or my education,” she continued in a rush.

“You must miss him,” Peeta murmured softly. “I’m so sorry you lost him.” He reached out to take her hand, but then pulled back suddenly, doubting she would want his touch.

As if to confirm this, Katniss looked away from him back towards the fire. “The necklace you took was the last gift he gave me. The mockingjay is the symbol of my house, and the Seam as a whole. He told me he always wanted me to remember where I came from, no matter where I was,” she said quietly, and Peeta was surprised that he did not detect any anger in her tone at talk of the necklace, only sad acceptance that it was gone.

He felt appalled with himself, finally understanding why she reacted the way she had their first night here. It hadn’t been about the value of the jewel, at least not monetarily. He was beginning to realize that he may have badly misjudged her. He clutched at the pouch where her pendant and his moonstone lay, fumbling hastily with the tiny drawstrings in his now powerful desire to return the necklace to her.

“Katniss, I--”

“Lady Everdeen!” Darius’ voice boomed out, causing them both to jump. They watched him stride confidently around the fire, coming to a halt before them, holding out his hand to Katniss. “I believe, sweet lady, that you promised me a dance tonight,” he said with a wide smile.

Peeta looked at Katniss. Her face was crimson once again. “Oh, I, well--” She looked at Peeta a
little helplessly, but Peeta said nothing, letting himself fall back into numb indifference at the reveal she had promised Darius to dance.

“I promise I’ll go slower tonight now that you’ve taught me that most women do not like dancing at a speed where they can’t breathe. Somehow I missed that lesson when Peet taught us.” He winked at Peeta, like he thought Peeta was supposed to find it funny.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Peeta said impassively, glancing away from the pair of grey eyes he sensed were upon him. “I need to talk to Gale, but you two enjoy the dance.” He stood up, nodding in Katniss’ general direction and made his way slowly over to where Gale was sitting. You don’t care. It doesn’t matter.

“Hey,” he said to Gale, sitting down rather heavily. Gale bobbed his head at Peeta but said nothing more. Peeta almost sighed in relief. That was one of the best things about Gale. He didn’t say all that much and didn’t expect you to say much in return.

The minutes passed by, and Peeta concentrated on not allowing his gaze to follow the dancing figures off to his right, but it was hard to ignore the laughter coming from the rest. He even heard Katniss’ laughter occasionally punctuating the air. Every time it happened, Peeta felt his heart dropping further and further into his stomach.

“What’s up, Sunshine?” Johanna’s blunt voice sounded suddenly from above him. Peeta looked up warily as she asked, “Care to join me for a dance?” Peeta raised his eyebrows at her. Johanna didn’t dance and honestly, rarely did he. Johanna seemed to notice his skepticism. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Just get up and dance with me. Unless you want to argue with someone else tonight the way you did with Finnick.” Peeta scowled at her. She knew how much he hated to fight.

“Fine, Jo.” He took her hand and allowed her to lead him to the center of the dancing figures, ignoring the looks of bewilderment everyone was giving them. This was a rare sight indeed.

Johanna glared around at everyone fiercely, daring anyone to say anything, but not even Delly made a sound. He took one of Johanna’s hands in one of his and placed the other lightly at her waist. They began to turn slowly in time with the music.

Peeta gave Jo a few minutes before he squeezed her hand, indicating he knew there was more to this invitation than that she just wanted to dance. He looked down at her with an expectant look. Johanna rolled her eyes at him.

“All right. Fine. I wanted to make Gale jealous. He’s being an asshole, and you’re the only one he sees as a threat.”

Peeta barked out a short laugh. “What are you two fighting about now, Jo? And if you wanted to make Gale jealous, I hardly think I’d be the one to do it. Try Finnick next time.”

Johanna punched him lightly in the arm. “What we are fighting about doesn’t matter. Point is, I’m right, and he’s wrong. End of story.” She then gave him a wicked looking smirk. “And you’re the only one who can do it, Blondie. Gale may love you like a brother, but that doesn’t mean he’s not terrified you’ll finally notice all this,” she said, waving her free hand over her body.

Peeta snorted. He and Jo had been easy friends from the first day they met, but the idea of him looking at her that way was ludicrous. It had always been clear that Johanna felt the same. “If Gale thinks that, I’d say he’s had one too many blows to the head during training. Too bad it’s impossible to examine his brain to see what’s wrong with him.”

“That’s what I tell Gale, but you’re so...well, you.” Peeta stared at her, unsure of what she meant.
Jo shook at her head at him in exasperation. “You know, idiot. The whole ‘rebel with a cause, stupidly good looking, can make a girl wet with one charming smile’ thing you have going on.”

Peeta went bright red at Johanna’s words. “Have I ever once given the impression that I’ve been interested in you?” he sputtered. Johanna punched him again, and he realized how that sounded. “I mean, not that you aren’t, uh, pretty, but I mean, really.”

“Well, I guess it’s just hard for all the men when every girl that comes across our paths stops paying attention the second they catch sight of you.”

“I think you’re talking about Finnick there, Jo.”

“Finnick’s astoundingly good looking, but you’re much more of a challenge. So tormented and noble and all that tripe. Most girls like that type of crap,” she said with a wink. “I just need more fire.”

“Well then you and Gale really are perfect for each other. God help us all,” Peeta said, rolling his eyes.

Johanna grinned. “That’s right, Sunshine.” She then gave him a surprisingly thoughtful look. “Gale may not have to worry, but I think Darius is in for some disappointment at least.”

“Darius?”

“Yeah. Poor boy doesn’t realize our ‘noble’ lady is already lost to you. He never stood a chance really. And judging by the way you’ve been this week, the hard-on you have for her must be pretty big too,” Johanna said with a slight look of disgust. Peeta went rigid with shock.

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“Can’t believe Miss High and Mighty is the one you, of all people, would fall for. I thought you had better judgment.”

Peeta stopped dancing abruptly and stared at her. “Johanna, I don’t...I’m not falling for her. That’s, I’m not stupid enough to care for someone like her.”

“Sure, you’re not, Lover Boy. But something tells me I shouldn’t believe you. Unlike most of the morons around here, I pay attention, and you’ve been acting weird ever since she got here. Ever since we started that tour actually.”

Peeta shook his head at her, protests hammering to escape his mouth. But his heart was pounding a thundering rhythm in his chest. Johanna gave him an imperious look.

“Then let’s see you prove it.” She spun abruptly.

“Darius!” she shouted, and Peeta saw him look up in alarm at Jo, Katniss still in his arms. His stomach clenched hard. “Stop stepping on our fair lady’s toes,” she said sarcastically. “And let Peeta and Lady Everdeen show you how a real court dance is done.”

Peeta gaped at Johanna. “See if you can remain indifferent, Peeta, but I don’t think you can,” she whispered, eyes glittering with...Curiosity? Mischief? Challenge? Peeta wasn’t even sure. He didn’t understand what Jo was trying to do at all. If she hated Katniss so much, why would she even want you to dance with her? His eyes darted to where Katniss stood. She was staring back at him with wide eyes.

“Yeah, Peeta, I’d like to see that. Annie is always saying I need more practice. I figure watching a proper dance would help me,” Finnick’s hard voice said as he emerged out of the darkness. Peeta felt a spike of anger as he watched Johanna and Finnick exchange a brief look filled with hidden
meaning. Had they planned this?! Well, fuck them.

He spun on his heels and stalked his way over to Katniss but was pulled up short when he saw the trepidation on her face. “You don’t have to dance,” he said quietly to ensure that only she could hear. “Evidently, Finnick and Johanna thought tonight was a good time to mess with me but now they’ve dragged you into it. I’m sorry.” Katniss looked at him before taking a deep breath.

“No, I’d...I would love to,” she said, much to Peeta’s amazement. The rosy color crept back into her cheeks.

“I’m...glad,” he whispered.

Peeta brought his hand around her waist and pressed his palm gently against the small of her back to bring her closer to him. He pretended not to hear the small gasp Katniss exhaled at his touch but then had to hold back one of his own when he felt her small hand ghost across his chest before gripping the arm that held her waist. He nodded at the people on instruments tonight to start playing. And at the first strains of the lute, they began to dance.

Katniss did not say anything as they twirled their way around the circle, but rather seemed determined to keep her eyes focused on a point somewhere over his shoulder. Just as well, Peeta thought. If this didn’t affect her, then Johanna’s challenge to him would be more than easy to meet. He let out the deep breath he hadn’t even known he was holding and tried to relax a little.

“You dance really well, Peeta,” she suddenly said. Peeta looked down at her in surprise, not the least of which was due to Katniss calling him by his given name for the first time. Warmth flooded through his body, and his heart began to pound so loudly, he wondered if she could hear it. He gripped her waist more tightly, and she stepped closer to him without protest.

“You...you called me my name,” he said wonderingly.

At that, Katniss finally looked up at him, her eyes reflecting the starlight above them. So beautiful, he thought for the second time that day.

“I figured that since you started calling me by mine, I should start calling you, yours.” She gave him a tentative smile.

It took Peeta a second to register her words, struck as he was by her cupid’s bow of a mouth, but then he remembered how he’d called her by her name right before Darius had come up to them.

“I’m sorry if you were offended that I didn’t call you by your title. I didn’t realize I did that,” he said softly.

“Don’t be,” she hastened to whispered in response. “I’m...I’m sorry too.”

“For what?” he asked, breathing heavily. He knew it wasn’t from the exertion of the dance.

“I’ve misjudged you,” she said, causing Peeta’s eyes to fly wide, not sure whether the apology itself or what she was apologizing for shocked him more. He cast about in his head for a proper reply, but the words died in his throat as he felt her slide both her hands up around his shoulders to grasp the back of his neck, pressing herself against him.

A jolt of pleasure shot through him, his entire body tingling at the nearness of her body, as he clutched her tighter involuntarily. Katniss gave him another small smile and leaned her head against his chest. And when her breasts brushed lightly against him, he felt a familiar electric current run through his body to settle between his legs. Peeta almost groaned aloud, his pants becoming uncomfortable from the growing tightness he felt there, praying no more blood would
rush into his cock. He tried angling his body away from her slightly, hoping Katniss wouldn’t notice the small tent he knew was there.

By the time the song ended, Peeta felt as charged as a bolt of lightning. Every touch of her fingers, every soft sigh, every shy smile, set his member throbbing all the more and with each new pulse, he realized how terribly right Johanna had been.

“Katniss,” he whispered, his breath coming in short gasps, as they came to a halt. He flicked his eyes briefly over the glowing embers of the fire, grateful it had burned so low that his still present erection would not likely be noticed.

He felt her run her hands lightly through the hairs at the nape of his neck. His cock pulsed so hard, Peeta had to bury his face in her hair to keep from moaning. He inhaled deeply, and the scent of the woods and rain and wind filled his nostrils. The fragrance was so intoxicating that when Peeta pulled back from her, he felt like he was drunk.

“Thank you for the dance,” he murmured roughly next to her ear. Katniss stiffened slightly and looked up at him with round eyes. He thought he saw a hint of disappointment in them, but she was so hard to read, he couldn’t be sure. It made him nervous and unsettled, something he hated feeling.

“I mean, I think it was a good demonstration for all of them, don’t you?” he said, wincing at the falsely hearty tone he used, positive he’d never made that sound in his life before that moment.

“I suppose,” Katniss replied coldly, and Peeta’s heart sank as he watched her typical scowl return. She pulled away, and then curtsied exaggeratedly to him. She looked elegant enough, like the lady she was, but Peeta thought he saw her bobble slightly, giving him the impression she didn’t bow often. It didn’t surprise him.

“Yeah,” Peeta said, unable to muster any other response, feeling at a complete loss for words. Katniss walked away from him and went to sit by Rue. Peeta let her go without another word, misery welling within his soul. His friends always said he was an eloquent speaker, but his words appeared to have failed him again tonight. Peeta suddenly felt very tired.

He glanced over to where Finnick, Johanna, and now Gale stood, the anger he’d felt earlier returning as he watched Gale whisper something to Johanna. He’d only been half serious earlier when he’d thought that maybe they had planned this, but their guilty expressions certainly didn’t allay Peeta’s suspicions.

Finnick, on the other hand, just stared at Peeta, anger clearly written into his crossed arms, rigid stance, and brightly glinting green eyes. He looked like he was itching for a fight, and Peeta decided he would give it to him.

“Training tomorrow morning!” Peeta called out loudly. A chorus of grumbles met him in reply, but Peeta’s foul mood prevented him from caring. “Holmes, Mitchell, you take the beginners and moderates tomorrow. I’ll take the advanced.”

Peeta heard the group members begin to whisper furiously amongst themselves at Peeta’s proclamation. It had been quite a while since Peeta had worked with anyone who wasn’t a beginner, partially because they had been on the road so long and partially because so many of the newer group members needed so much help. But if Peeta was taking the advanced group, practiced as they were, they all knew the intense fights in store for tomorrow.

“Get some sleep everyone,” Peeta commanded, not bothering to look around to see if he was going to be obeyed.
He walked away from the circle in the direction of his tent, longing desperately for sleep, and the escape it would bring from his conflicted heart, though somehow he doubted his slumbers would be peaceful. Visions of a lithe body moving in time with his were already pushing insistently at the edges of his exhausted brain, visions he didn’t have the energy to fight.

He cast one last look over his shoulder at Katniss, his groin lurching exquisitely when he found her stormy eyes staring after his own retreating form.

Peeta sighed. Perhaps he’d just take care of himself before bed tonight.
A New Group Member

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Two big thank yous go to my betas... ct522 and Solas Violetta. This was a bit of a struggle for me to write, and they gave me some wonderful suggestions for the chapter, not to mention assuring me people would still be willing to read 11000+ words. :) They are amazing, and I can't commend them enough for their help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katniss

Katniss turned from side to side, attempting to find a comfortable position on her bedding, but failed miserably. She kicked off her blanket in a fit of frustration, feeling grateful that Delly had decided to spend the night with Thom, scandalous as it was, because she was certain her restless movements would have awoken the girl. She rolled over again, and a rock jabbed at her thigh. She huffed out a frustrated sigh.

Katniss had come to not mind being in the woods this past week, but if there was one thing she missed, it was having a proper bed and mattress. Finally giving up, she opened her eyes and squinted up at the soft canvas of the tent. Katniss could tell dawn was near. A soft grey light was filtering through the slit in the tent’s entrance. She could hear the mockingjays chirping to one another in the trees while the distant crunching of boots over gravel echoed in the stillness. Probably someone coming in from night watch, Katniss thought. Or the person who always wakes up the earliest. She sighed quietly.

Peeta. Katniss found him so frustrating. She wasn’t good at making friends or even acquaintances really, but Katniss thought she had done a reasonable job of demonstrating her willingness to get to know the group, to show them she was starting to think she had been wrong about them. She had at least finally gotten most of them to stop calling her Lady Everdeen. And with the exception of Johanna, she felt like everyone was getting used to her presence.

But then her mind turned back to Peeta. She sighed again, more loudly this time and changed into her dress, absentmindedly lacing up the front of her bodice. Katniss felt like she had hit a stone wall with him.

It wasn’t that Peeta was cold to her. As far as she could tell, he treated her the same as he treated everyone else. Though, even there, it was hard to tell because he had barely been around during the week, and when he was, he didn’t talk much to anybody. His thoughts remained hidden behind a carefully constructed mask. Katniss didn’t know if his relative silence was typical for him or not, but she was too uncomfortable with asking about it. She’d decided to give them all a chance, yes, but that didn’t mean she wanted everyone to know her feelings, especially when it came to him.

But the way he looked at her, especially if he didn’t think she was aware of his gaze… Katniss shivered slightly. She’d felt his look upon her many times over the last several days, although when she met his stare, his eyes usually quickly flitted away. However, that wasn’t before she’d catch the almost hungry look in his blue orbs. Every time she saw that glance, the same sultry heat from the night she’d seen him in the waterfall washed over her.
And then last night, when they danced, the way he had held her tightly to him, his gasp when she
leaned her head against his chest, his muffled groan as she ran her hands through the hair at the
nape of his neck...It had electrified her in a way she didn’t think was possible, and yet had still left
her wanting more. Though more of what, Katniss wasn’t exactly sure, but she had at least thought
Peeta had felt it too.

But then he just thanked you politely for the dance and said it was a good demonstration for the
others, let you go without a word, Katniss thought, her mouth down turning into a deep frown.
She glanced down at her bodice and cursed softly, noticing that the she had laced up one side
completely wrong in her distracted state. She began to undo the knots while her heart sank into her
stomach. Maybe she had just imagined his responses to her.

And what had that business with Johanna, Gale, and Finnick been about? she thought,
remembering the way those three had been whispering to each other after the dance. Or well,
Johanna and Gale had. Finnick had just seemed angry, glaring at Peeta like he’d committed a
grave crime, seemingly still upset about whatever they had bickered about earlier in evening.
She’d seen them at it, everyone had, but their low voices had been impossible to hear above the
merrymaking around the fire.

And now today there was going to be actual physical fighting. She would see what this Merry
Band truly was capable of. Her stomach jumped in slight trepidation...Or was it anticipation?

She doubted Peeta would allow her to work with a weapon, but she’d be lying to herself if she
said her fingers didn’t itch to touch the bow and arrows he always had with him. Looking at the
bow reminded her of her father and his long ago promise to teach her to hunt.
At least seeing what
more Peeta could do might stay some of her longing.

Katniss smoothed her hands over her dress, making doubly sure everything was in its proper
place, and quickly braided her hair.

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But much to her disappointment, when Katniss walked up to the large sparring field with Delly a
short time later, there were no targets set up for bow practice. There were only a large assortment
of roughly hewn wooden swords in various shapes and sizes tossed haphazardly into a large pile.

Delly giggled as she picked up one of the smaller ones and gave Katniss a sheepish smile. “I’m
not very good with swords, or really any of the weapons, even though I joined everyone a year
ago. Just not made for combat, I guess,” she said with a large smile that suggested that fact didn’t
trouble her at all. She pointed over to where Mitchell was working with Annie and Rue. “Most
everyone is at least at a ‘moderate’ level of skill. I’m guessing Holmes is around here somewhere
working with them. But I’m a beginner like those two. Peeta has been working with us a lot, but
he must have needed a break from teaching us to block and parry.” She giggled again, pointing up
the field to where a larger group of people moved about, Gale’s tall frame and Finnick’s bronze
hair among them. But a certain blonde head seemed to be missing. “The soldiers and a few of the
others are in the advanced group,’ Delly continued. “Hopefully Mitchell won’t work us too long,
and we can go watch them work. They’re amazing.”

They made their way over to the two girls and Mitchell, arriving just in time to see Rue dart under
his outstretched arm and poke him in the stomach with her needle-like sword, shouting “Got you!”
as she did so. She beamed with pride as he gasped and started laughing.

“Alright Rue, you’ve proved your point. I’ll talk to Peeta about moving you to the moderate
group. You’ve killed me enough to today.” Rue flashed a mischievous grin at him before rushing to greet Katniss with a wide embrace.

“Did you see that, Katniss?” she asked eagerly.

Katniss smiled down at her. “Yes, Rue. That was great. You’ll be taking down all the King’s Guard in no time at all.” Rue squeezed her tightly in appreciation before running back to Annie.

Katniss blinked in surprise at her own words, at her implication that the King’s Guard should be taken down at all. It was the first even mildly treasonous thing she’d said aloud. It appeared the talk every night of the various atrocities Snow and his followers had or were committing was affecting her more than she thought. It scared her a little, and she tried to remind herself that Prim was still in the Capitol, that her mother was still with Cray.

“I’m sorry, Katniss,” Mitchell said quietly, breaking her from her inner thoughts. She stared at him blankly, clearly having missed whatever he was apologizing for.

“Sorry?”

The man smiled gently at her and waved towards where Delly was animatedly talking to Annie, their swords forgotten on the ground. “I asked Peeta if I should be including you in the group today, but he said no. I’m sorry,” he said with an apologetic nod.

Katniss shrugged, struggling to hide the wave of disappointment moving through her. “It’s alright. I’m not part of your group; it’s to be expected,” she said with feigned indifference. She sat down on the ground and tucked her legs underneath her. “I’ll just watch.” Mitchell looked at her gratefully and turned back his charges.

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“Alright ladies, I think that’s enough for the morning. Let’s go see what the others are up to, shall we?” Mitchell said, panting as he dodged another of Rue’s blows. Delly gasped loudly with relief and swiped her sweaty blonde hair from her pink face while Rue whooped in happiness. Annie didn’t say anything, but the slight look of disgust at the wooden sword in her hand told Katniss all she needed to know.

Annie was a very gentle soul, and she had made it plain that she abhorred fighting when Katniss and she had first started talking. She only did this to humor Finnick, who had insisted she learn to defend herself in some capacity. The lives they had chosen to lead simply did not allow for anything else. Katniss stood up to join the other three girls, and they began to make their way across the field.

“I wish Mitchell hadn’t worked us so hard,” Delly said with an uncharacteristically grumpy look.

Katniss stifled a laugh. “Why, Delly? Mitchell said you were doing so much better today.”

“I wanted to see Thom spar. He just moved up to the advanced group, and I’m guessing he’ll have been eliminated already.” Catching Katniss’ confused look, Delly explained, “They work on drills for most of the morning and then do single round elimination fights judged by Peeta at the end for fun. Winner gets to take on whoever they choose in a final duel, but I don’t think anyone has ever not chosen Peeta. But still, Thom used to be a miner so the fact that he’s made it into the advanced group after a few months shows just how hard he works,” Delly finished, the pride she felt for Thom evident in her voice. A twinge of jealousy ran through Katniss once again at the obvious love Delly and Thom shared. She turned to Annie.

“Does Finnick participate in the duels?” she asked curiously.
Annie gave her a soft smile. “Sometimes, but not always. Today, he was planning to though. He wants to fight Peeta.” Katniss’ raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Why?” Katniss asked, blushing slightly.

Katniss was, of course, curious why the two had fought last night, but she didn’t want to be thought of as nosy. Typically, she wasn’t, but that question wasn’t exactly suggestive otherwise. Everything to do with Peeta just seemed to interest her.

“Finnick is stubborn, but Peeta is worse,” Annie said calmly, a faraway look on her face. Katniss stared at her. She didn’t understand what Annie meant and by the expressions on Delly’s and Rue’s faces, they didn’t either. But Katniss had come to recognize the times when Annie checked-out of reality and knew not to question her. It would be pointless. She often wondered what had happened to her to make her that way, but Annie never said.

They walked in silence for a few minutes before the sound of someone shouting finally reached their ears.

“Concentrate, Johanna!” Gale yelled.

“Shut the fuck up, Gale!” Johanna yelled back as she dodged the swing of the scythe-like wooden sword that Thresh held in his hand, drawing a roar of laughter from the watching crowd. Katniss gasped as Johanna whipped her axe back at Thresh, but the giant of a boy leaped out of the way with a grace that Katniss wouldn’t have thought possible of such a large person.

Rue noticed Katniss’ reaction, giving her a sad look. “Thresh is really good,” she whispered. “He used to be the slave of a nobleman. The man made him fight for entertainment, both animals and people. He never wanted to though. He always wanted to be a healer.” Katniss gasped at Rue’s words, at what had happened to Thresh, cognizant of her own sister’s desire to learn healing too.

“When we first came here, Thresh didn’t tell anyone; he doesn’t like to talk much. But he finally told Peeta that’s what he wished to learn, and Peeta had him go to our friend Beetee for a little while. Now he’s our healer, though he’s still in training,” Rue said with smile while Katniss’ heart skipped a beat, touched more than she cared to admit at hearing about Peeta’s act of kindness.

She looked around for him, finally noticing him leaned up against a tree, his arms folded across his chest, separated from the rest of the group, who had gathered around the fighters. She watched his eyes carefully follow Johanna’s and Thresh’s movements as they whirled against one another.

Katniss had to fight off the urge to go stand beside him so he was not alone.

“Thresh wins,” Gale suddenly called out, and Katniss tore her gaze away from Peeta just in time to see Johanna give Gale a murderous look. Everyone burst out laughing again. “Sorry, Jo,” Gale said sheepishly. “But your dye has gone red, and Thresh’s mark is still blue.” Katniss scanned over Johanna’s body and noticed a small red mark over her heart. She looked at Delly for an explanation.

“We use nightlock berries on the blades. For whatever reason, their juice starts out blue and then turns red after a while.” Katniss looked at her in confusion, still unsure of what Delly meant. “So they can tell if someone has been hit ‘fatally,’ you see?” Delly said. “Have to get hit over the heart or abdomen. Sometimes it’s hard to tell who hit who first though, so you know the winner by whomever’s dye turns red first.”

“Oh,” Katniss said quietly, suddenly feeling a little queasy. It seemed a little barbaric. But then they’ve probably faced that in real life many times, she thought, memories of the first day she had met them all flitting through her head. It had only been a week since then, but somehow, it seemed...
“Alright,” Gale said. “Finnick and Thresh for last match of the day.” He tossed a berry at Thresh, who promptly crushed one over his scythe, while Finnick sauntered into the circle, twirling his wooden trident in his hands, clearly already prepared for the duel. Gale backed away from the two as they took up positions across from one another before yelling “Begin!” But as Finnick and Gale crashed together, Katniss found her eyes drawn back to Peeta once again.

He was still following the fight carefully, his eyes darting back and forth as he followed the scene, but Katniss detected a new tension in his stance. The sides of his mouth turned down into a grimace, and his face looked openly sad. Katniss heart clenched painfully within her chest, and before she even registered what she was doing, she had walked over to where he stood. He looked at her, surprise written on his face.

“Do you need something, Katniss?” he asked with concern.

“I…” Katniss faltered, at a complete loss of what to say. How could she explain how drawn she was to him? How she’d noticed him drop his guard for once, albeit when he thought no one was looking? And now with his blue eyes upon her, how terrified and elated she felt?

“Katniss?” he asked gently, running his hand lightly over her arm. Katniss jumped at his unexpected touch, and he withdrew his hand so quickly, it was like her skin had burned him. She cursed herself internally.

“Do you always stand by yourself brooding? Or is it just when you fight with Finnick?” she blurted out, wincing at her awkward words. That wasn’t how she’d meant that sentence to come out. Peeta’s eyebrows lifted so high that they disappeared into his hairline. His concerned look morphed into one of mild looked irritation.

“This is my usual place,” he said shortly and fell silent. Katniss scowled, feeling like she was a little girl who’d been dismissed. She didn’t like it.

“You should talk to him… Finnick, I mean. When I fight with my sister, which happens a lot, I find that airing our differences goes a long way,” she said, trying to keep the irritation out of her own voice.

Peeta looked at her again, a look of disbelief on his face.

“I'll keep that in mind,” he snapped.

Katniss bit her lip. Part of her was sorry for asking the questions she had, but another part of her wanted to deck him. She followed Peeta’s gaze, watching Finnick spin rapidly towards Thresh.

“Sorry,” she suddenly heard him say in a shockingly unsure voice.

Katniss’ eyes shot back to him in surprise and found him still staring determinedly at the fight. Uncertainty that he had actually spoken washed over her. She didn’t want to answer him if her overactive imagination was just playing tricks on her in an attempt to fulfill her desire for Peeta to talk to her.

But after a few moments, he glanced at her sideways and gave her a surprisingly sweet smile. Katniss bobbed her head up and down to acknowledge his apology, her legs feeling all at once like jelly. A small smile that she could not contain played on her lips. She took a bold step closer to him and felt the comforting warmth of his body, now scant inches from hers.

“Finnick wins!” Gale called out, startling Katniss. Finnick was helping Thresh up from the ground while everyone else clapped appreciatively. The fight had only lasted a few minutes at most. She
heard Peeta let out a long sigh and looked at him questioningly, but he only grimaced at her in response.

“Alright, Finn. You’re overall winner. Who are you choosing for last battle of the day?” Johanna’s voice called out, but the way she suddenly turned towards where Peeta were standing suggested she already knew the answer. It didn’t escape Katniss’ notice that the small woman’s eyes narrowed when she saw Katniss standing next to him, her eyes darting back and forth between Katniss and blonde boy at her side.

“Peeta,” came Finnick’s loud call to Johanna’s inquiry. A few of the soldiers smiled when they heard Finnick’s choice, but Katniss detected an almost palpable tension in the air. She scowled at the look of angry determination on Finnick’s face as he turned in their direction as well. She heard Peeta sigh again and glanced at him anxiously, an inexplicable desire to protect him arising within her.

“Are you alright?” she whispered so only he could hear, her voice trembling slightly. And then, before she could stop herself, “Please don’t get hurt.”

Peeta didn’t look at her, instead slipping his bow, arrows from his back and his lethal-looking sword from his narrow hips, placing them against the tree. He leaned down to pick up a long wooden sword Katniss hadn’t noticed at his feet.

But as he came up, his palm brushed lightly against the back of her hand and gave it a quick reassuring squeeze. Katniss looked up at him, having to suppress a laugh when she saw the subtle wink he gave her. Somehow his actions were better than if he’d actually answered her question. She exhaled a shaky breath and walked back over to Delly and Rue while Peeta made his way to where Finnick stood waiting.

“Today is the day I finally beat you,” Finnick said confidently, raising his trident into a ready position. Peeta merely shrugged at Finnick’s words, a look of complete calm his face, and lifted his own sword into the air. He nodded at Gale.

“Begin!”

Katniss couldn’t suppress her sharp intake of breath as she watched Peeta and Finnick whirl into each other, weapons clashing against with a sharp crack, the loud thwacks of wood on wood reverberating loudly in the air. She was astounded at how fast Finnick was able to move his trident, sending Peeta’s thrusts glancing off his weapon with ease.

But Peeta was equally good, blocking any of Finnick’s blows with an almost lazy flick of his sword. It was like they could anticipate each other’s actions before either had even begun to move. The two had skill such as Katniss had never seen from anyone, not even Cato, and he was most definitely the best swordsman Snow’s army had to offer.

“They’re the best, aren’t they?” Rue’s voice whispered beside her, clearly having noticed the look of awe on Katniss’ face. “This is the hardest I’ve ever seen them fight.” Katniss could barely tear her eyes away from the battling men to look down into Rue’s soft brown eyes.

“Where...where did they learn it?” she finally managed to say, her voice hoarse with wonder.

“Finnick was once the head of a nobleman’s household guard. Annie’s family actually,” Rue said, a sad expression on her face. “His father, his grandfather, his great grandfather, and so on...They were all guardians of the Cresta family. Finnick was raised from the time he was a toddler to be a warrior, a protector.”
“Oh,” Katniss replied quietly. She studied Finnick, his green eyes scrunched together in concentration as he jumped away from Peeta’s sword with easy grace. There was apparently much more to Finnick than met the eye, but Rue did not offer any more explanation. Instead, Katniss watched her frown in Peeta’s direction. Katniss turned back to watch him, her stomach flipping over as she noticed his tongue dart over his lips and the look of deep intensity on his face.

“I don’t know where Peeta learned to fight like he does. He’s never said.”

Katniss looked at Rue in surprise. “Never?” she asked, curiosity growing within her as Rue shook her head slowly.

“I think Gale and Finnick know. Maybe Johanna. Peeta rarely talks about his past; he doesn’t seem to like to.” Rue’s frown deepened. “But I don’t think he’s had a very happy life, even by our miserable standards. No one wants to cause him more pain by talking about things he doesn’t want to remember so no one asks him about it.” Katniss didn’t know what to say to that, so she remained silent, even as the desire to know Peeta better flamed to life more than ever before.

Maybe Rue didn’t realize it, but Katniss recognized that Peeta was using techniques few in Panem were capable of teaching. She gasped, watching him grip his sword in one hand, reminding Katniss of how strong Peeta was, as he darted under the trident toward Finnick. The bronze haired man just barely managed to get out of the way, exhaling a loud bark of laughter as he did.

Peeta, she realized, fought like the old Royal Guard of House Mellark that her father had told her stories about when she was a child. They had all been killed when Snow took over, at least what her father had told her. With the exception of Haymitch, of course, she reminded herself.

But Haymitch lived in disgrace. He had abandoned his post when Snow had invaded the old castle. He’d fled that night, leaving the princes to be killed and the king to be captured. King Richard, along with anyone loyal to him, was executed the next day. And that included the last members of his Guard. Haymitch’s cowardice was the only reason Snow had allowed him to live, and Katniss had never seen him lift a sword in all the years he had been a part of the Everdeen household.

So who had taught Peeta to use the sword and bow?

She looked at Finnick and Peeta, sweat now dripping from their brows, shocked that even after so many minutes of dueling, they still seemed to have not tired in the slightest. In fact, Peeta was now smiling, and Finnick was laughing. It seemed whatever anger they had been feeling towards each other had been excised during the fight. After listening to Cato and Marvel’s petty squabbling for so many months on the tour, Katniss was amazed that Peeta and Finnick could resolve their differences without speaking a word.

The group gasped collectively as Finnick suddenly managed to swipe Peeta’s legs out from under him, and Peeta fell with a hard thump to the ground, leading Katniss to let out an involuntary cry of fear. She slapped her hand to her mouth, reminding herself that they wouldn’t really hurt one another. Katniss’ fervent hope that no one had noticed her outcry were dashed when Peeta’s blue eyes briefly meet her own widened grey ones; she guessed at least he had. She watched Finnick place the tip of his trident over Peeta’s heart to leave a small blue mark on his heaving chest.

“Turns out you’re human after all, Peet. Looks like I finally got you beat,” Finnick said with a cocky grin.

Peeta stared up at Finnick, a surprisingly untroubled look on his face. He took a few more deep breaths before he answered Finnick’s smile with one of his own. “Almost,” he said simply, pointing at Finnick’s abdomen. They all looked at Finnick’s tunic and let out as a collective gasp as they noticed a small blue mark on his shirt no one had noticed before suddenly turn red.
Finnick stared down at it before watching Peeta sit up and dust himself off in slack-jawed amazement. “Sorry. Next time,” Peeta said with a shrug. Finnick turned bright red, and Katniss tensed, preparing for another fight. But to her surprise, Finnick started laughing wildly. He reached his hand down and pulled Peeta to his feet.

“You bet I will.”

Katniss exhaled in relief while everyone else started laughing again.

“Alright,” Gale’s deep voice boomed out, quieting everyone down. “Peeta remains undefeated.” He shook his head at the slight smirk Peeta gave him. “Yeah, yeah, no surprise there. We’ll take a break and come back for more in the afternoon.”

The group began to talk amongst themselves and some began to wander back towards the cool woods. But Katniss stayed frozen in place, watching Gale, Peeta, and Finnick talk, reflecting on what she had seen from just two friendly duels.

The skill Peeta had demonstrated was of an astonishing quality, but it was clear that everyone else was highly skilled as well. Even the beginners like Delly and Rue were quite good, and Katniss was hard pressed to stop envy boiling within her. No one had ever given her the chance to learn like they had, and it was something she could not deny she longed for. And it wasn’t only that, she realized.

Katniss was beginning to believe that Peeta and his band really could defeat Snow, if enough people joined them. Their cleverness, intelligence, and finesse gave her the confidence that they would succeed, and their service to the poor gave her hope that Panem would, without a doubt, be a better place if Snow was overthrown.

And perhaps, even before all that, if what everyone claimed was true about how he’d helped them, maybe Peeta could help you too.

She flicked her eyes towards Peeta and caught him once again looking at her, before his eyes moved away quickly. But Katniss’ heart swelled and an unfamiliar sensation of hope bubbled within her. There was no way he didn’t feel this connection between them, no matter how hard he tried to conceal his heart.

Katniss turned away with a half-hidden smile and began walking back towards the encampment. She knew what she had to do.

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“I wish to join the group,” Katniss said in voice that sounded more confident than she actually felt. She shifted her feet back and forth, trying to hide her nerves.

“What?” Finnick asked, the wide grin that he had greeted her approach with fading off his face. He looked at her skeptically. Katniss wondered if this had really been a good idea.

She had declined to observe the group in their afternoon training session when Delly had said it was time. Instead, she had spent most of the time in the tent, debating how best to request what she wanted, and then had spent the night waiting for a moment when Finnick was alone.

Between Peeta and his two seconds-in-command, Katniss had ultimately decided Finnick would be the easiest to talk to about her wishes first. He had been friendly to her these past few days, seemingly pleased with how she and Annie had been getting along while Gale was still fairly formal with her. Gale was also too close with Johanna for her to believe she would have no
influence on what he thought. And Katniss was too afraid to ask Peeta directly. The thought of him rejecting her was too much to bear.

“I want to join P-- Ah, the group. You.” She waved her hand over Finnick and the rest of the band as they chattered around the nightly bonfire.

Finnick looked at her with a serious expression, but Katniss was relieved he didn’t immediately say no. He gestured to the log he was sitting on. “Please sit down, Katniss.” She acquiesced to his request and wrapped her arms around her knees, waiting for him to say something. After several minutes of silence, he gave her a curious glance.

“So you want to join us, Katniss Everdeen.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “Why?”

Katniss sucked in a breath. She’d thought about how to answer that all day, what would be most proper. “I’ve come to admire and respect you, your leader, and the group as a whole. Your courage against Snow’s forces is admirable, as is your work with Panem’s less fortunate citizens. I wish--”

She was suddenly cut off by a skeptical snort of laughter from Finnick. He looked at her and gave an exasperated sigh. “Katniss, I’m not one of the people you came out to see you on your tour. I’m not going to fall for a load of bull that sounds like something your chaperone would write. And neither are they,” he said with a wide gesture to the camp. Katniss’ heart sunk to her feet, and she bowed her head in shame. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about you this week, it’s that you are a terrible actress. It’s easy to tell when you’re being sincere and when you aren’t. You’re kind of an open book.” He nudged her gently, and Katniss looked up at him through her eyelashes, surprised to see the gentle smile on his face. “So tell me the real reasons why.” Katniss pressed her mouth together in a thin line, embarrassed and a little scared too. This was going to require a lot of trust and only the thought of her sister finally got her to open her mouth.

“I want to save my sister,” she said in a barely audible voice. Finnick’s eyebrows contracted, but he said nothing, encouraging her to go on. She took a deep breath. “When I agreed to Cato’s proposal, I was doing it for her. I don’t love him. I just, my...my stepfather is not an honorable man, you see, and I needed to get her away from him. Becoming a princess seemed like the best way. I mean, you should get the power to protect those you love when you’re one of the highest ranking people in the land, right?” Katniss looked at the crackling sparks floating up from the fire, willing her voice to stay calm as she explained what she had kept hidden from everyone until now.

“But after I said yes, King Snow asked for a private audience with me. Or well, demanded it rather.” Finnick’s mouth formed a grim line at the mention of the King, and Katniss nodded at him, acknowledging that his reaction was completely warranted. “He basically informed me that he owns me, that I would be expected to behave as he directed, do exactly what he asks, and be the bearer of Cato’s children. And if I didn’t, Prim, my mother, my district...Everyone would suffer. My sister is a prisoner, and she doesn’t even know it,” Katniss choked out, her heart in her throat. Finnick stared at her, sadness evident on his face, but he gave her arm a comforting squeeze.

“Has anyone told you how I came to be a part of this group?” he asked suddenly. Katniss watched him pull out a piece of rope from a pouch on his belt and begin to fiddle with it, knotting and unknotting quickly. Katniss shook her head, and he gave a great sigh.

“Hmm. Well, I’m sure someone mentioned today that I was once the head guard of the Cresta household, correct?” he said with a slight nod in Rue’s direction. Katniss looked at him with a guilty smile and was relieved when he smiled back. “It’s alright. I know Rue didn’t mean any harm. She just doesn’t remember some people aren’t comfortable with sharing their stories.”
Katniss noticed his gaze was no longer directed at Rue, and her heart skipped a beat as she realized he was staring at Peeta, who had just sat down next to Gale on the far side of the fire. She looked at Finnick again.

“Well, anyway, yes, I was the head guard of the Cresta household. And being head guard, I was placed in charge of protecting their most precious commodity,” he said with a nod towards where Annie was giving Rory another dancing lesson. He gave Katniss a sardonic smile. “But what Lord Cresta didn’t count on was the two of us falling in love. I didn’t even expect it, but she crept up on me.” Finnick took a shuddering breath. “Her father found us together. Had the other guards seize me and sold me to a slave ship that night. I think he gave them specific instructions to work me to death, but I never stopped trying, refused to let them do it,” Finnick said, his voice breaking with pain. “I couldn’t leave Annie.”

“How did you get off that ship?” Katniss whispered, already suspecting the answer.

Finnick smiled at her. “Peeta. Who else?” Katniss couldn’t help but smile back. “I can’t tell you how strange it was to watch this blonde-haired kid sneak onto our ship one day while we were in port and cut everyone’s binds, not to mention rob the captain’s quarters of all his gold.” Finnick shook his head. “Most everyone just fled, but I followed Peeta. Wanted to know how a 14 year-old boy had more skills than I did. Took a while to persuade Peet that I wasn’t trying to trick him and actually wanted to be his friend, the stubborn ass,” he said with a smile that did not hide the underlying sadness Finnick was feeling.

Katniss remained silent, not knowing what to say, but Finnick didn’t seem to expect an answer.

“We went back to the Cresta’s lands after I regained my strength, but Lord Cresta seemed to expect that I’d eventually come back. He’d married her off to a baron who would have probably made your stepfather look like a saint.” Katniss felt her eyes widen in horror, her mind racing with the scenarios Annie had most likely been forced to endure. Finnick bowed his head, and she saw tears shining in Finnick’s eyes. “I didn’t know that at the time though. They, her family, made sure the populace knew Annie was very happy in her new life. And I, I gave up.” Finnick said shamefully. “I did a lot of things I regretted in that time when I thought she was lost to me, but after Peeta helped me rescue her once we found out what was happening, she forgave me. Though I didn’t deserve it, she still did.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Annie is very sweet. I wish I were more like her,” Katniss said, surprising herself. Finnick looked at her with an amused smile.

“Sweet is not the first word that comes to my mind with you, Katniss, but you are kind. I have seen that. And strong. I’d be afraid to be the person who comes between you and your loved ones.” Katniss furrowed her brow, feeling like Finnick was not just referring to Prim with his statement. But Finnick didn’t seem to notice her confusion and continued to talk. “I don’t have a problem with you joining us Katniss, and he…” He nodded at Peeta “…I think he would help you.”

Katniss began to smile and opened her mouth to thank Finnick, but he raised a hand to stop her. She looked at him in bewilderment. “Just a warning before you thank me, Lady Everdeen.” She raised her eyebrows at his use of her title, frowning a little, but Finnick looked at her soberly.

“We are good, and I am glad you have seen that. But that does not mean we are not dangerous, and we do not take betrayal lightly. If that happens, the best you can hope for is that we’d let you choose your manner of death.” Katniss felt a chill run down her spine, unsure of what she should say. But again, Finnick seemed to expect no answer. “I’m not saying this to frighten you, and it’s not something I expect you to do, but it is something you should know.”

“I understand,” Katniss said, her voice struggling to contain the emotion she was feeling.
Finnick stood up slowly, and Katniss rose with him. “You’re going to have to tell Peeta what you told me,” he said, looking down at her. He smiled at the look of worry Katniss knew was on her face. “Don’t worry. I can guarantee you he’s not going to say no.”

Katniss gave him a dubious look. “You guarantee he’s not going to say no?” Finnick snorted with laughter again at her inquiry.

“Yeah, I guarantee it. The idiot knows exactly how he feels but just apparently likes to live in denial,” he said, rolling his eyes. “But I don’t enjoy when he actually acts like a moody, hormonal 17 year-old. He’s never done it before, and I’m sure as heck not going to put up with it now.” He puffed out a long-suffering sigh. “Hopefully, we won’t have to keep prompting him to figure it out forever.”

“Wha-What?” Katniss sputtered. She hadn’t followed any of what Finnick said, other than getting that he had confidence Peeta wouldn’t reject her. Finnick gave her a strange look, but then he just shook his head.

“Sorry. Went off on a tangent there. Nothing important,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Peeta will probably have you make a formal request to the rest of the group tomorrow night if you ask him tomorrow.”

Katniss’ worry only grew more pronounced, as Finnick continued to explain “We all vote on the important things. Peeta still has the final say, of course, but he’s never gone against group decisions. You’re brave, Katniss. You’re going to do just fine.” He patted her gently on her head. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I promised Annie a dance,” he said with a slightly chagrined look.

Katniss tugged on her braid anxiously as Finnick walked away from her, knowing she was going to spend the rest of the night agonizing over how she was going to approach Peeta. But then, Finnick was suddenly standing in front of her again, a deeply pleading look on his face.

“Sorry, Katniss. I wouldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t say it. He’s my best friend, and I’ve seen the way you look at him. And the way he looks at you.” Katniss’ eyes widened, her heart beat inexplicably accelerating. What did Finnick mean by the way Peeta looked at her?

But Finnick’s eyes were no longer even directed towards her but across the fire. “Just don’t hurt him, please. Peeta has been through more than you know.” He barked out a tiny laugh that didn’t really sound like laughter at all. “More than even I know really. None of us knows exactly what he’s experienced; he’s never trusted anyone enough to share it all.” He took a deep breath and refocused on her.

“He doesn’t need his heart crushed a third time,” Finnick said, as if he expected Katniss to understand what he was talking about. But before she could ask, he walked away from her again, leaving her feeling like there was so much she still didn’t know. She just hoped she would be given the chance to find out.

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Katniss took a deep breath, staring at the opening of Peeta’s tent, willing him to come out before the rest of the camp woke. The sun hadn’t even risen yet, but she knew he would likely be up. The latest she had seen him ever emerge from the wood was an hour past dawn.

Finnick had kindly pointed out the direction of Peeta’s tent last night, and since then, Katniss had been a bundle of nerves. She hadn’t slept at all, tossing and turning so much that Delly had asked her multiple times if she was alright. But after Katniss had offered no explanation with every inquiry, Delly had finally given up and gone to sleep with Thom. Katniss hadn’t complained.
And now here she was, waiting to find out if she could change her life and perhaps the lives of countless others, most especially her sister’s.

She glared at the unmoving tent flaps before her impulsiveness got the best of her, and she strode forward to stand before the slit. Patience had never exactly been her strongest suit.

“Peeta?” she said softly against the canvas. But she did not receive an answer. “Peeta, are you there?” she asked again. Katniss bit her lip when she still didn’t hear his warm voice. Worry started to gnaw at her. Was he ok? She rapidly undid the binders on the tent. “Peeta?” she said, alarm coloring her tone. She stepped through the tent flaps and gasped sharply at the sight before her.

Peeta wasn’t there, but his bed was. And it wasn’t just a pallet with some rough woolen blankets thrown over the top like Delly had. It was a real bed with a wooden frame and headboard, two pillows lying at its base.

Katniss looked around nervously before she took a tentative step forward to finger the delicately embroidered cover of his bedspread. It depicted a beautiful sun setting over rolling hills and fields. A small bird, which Katniss thought looked like a mockingjay, could be seen rising out of one of the trees in the corner of the quilt. Katniss ran her hand underneath the coverlet and another blanket, gasping again as she felt the soft down of a real goose-feather mattress. Were the rest of them aware of these? she wondered. For a group that robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, they were not items she would have expected their leader to have.

She cast a glance around at the rest of the space, taking note of a wooden chest in the corner of the room where she assumed Peeta must keep his clothes and razor, having noticed he was usually clean-shaven. A sword in its sheath leaned against the chest, and several books lay on top. Katniss’ eyes grew wide at the realization that Peeta could read.

She supposed it shouldn’t have shocked her. He, along with the rest, were very well spoken, but very few of Panem’s poor were taught to read and write, that much Katniss knew. Snow made sure of it. Education of the masses of any sort was a dangerous thing in his eyes. Katniss let out a breath she hadn’t even known she was holding.

It was clear Peeta had awoken even earlier than she thought, and though she liked the feel of his space more than she cared to admit, she had to leave it to find him. Or before he finds you and wonders what you’re doing inside his tent without his permission, she reasoned, wincing slightly at the mortifying thought.

She hastily made her exit and began walking to the training field, the only other place she thought he could be at this hour. A new twinge of nervousness shot through her as she trotted along noiselessly, dew soaking her shoes and the hem of her dress. Birds twittered to each other in the trees, but otherwise, the world still lay in silence. Katniss glanced up at the lightening sky. While the moon was still visible, the stars had faded away to herald of the approaching dawn.

But as she reached the edge of the wood, Katniss heard a soft thumping echoing repeatedly in the stillness. She looked out over the ground.

Peeta was standing at the end nearest to where she stood, while several targets she could barely see were set up across the field. Like he had on the night of the trackerjacker invasion, Peeta moved with a fluid grace, knocking the arrows and letting them fly in one swift undisturbed motion. Katniss was unsure how he ever had the time to pick out his target.

Beautiful.
She leaned against the nearest tree trunk, unwilling to interrupt him. She couldn’t help but hope that he would be willing to teach her how to use the bow. She didn’t want to be a burden, but even more so, Katniss had always felt that she was meant to be more than a pretty, little, noble lady, captive like a bird in a cage. It was something she thought Peeta would understand.

Her breath caught as she watched Peeta pull the last arrow from his quiver and position himself carefully. He stood perfectly still, his chest barely rising with each breath. Katniss was just beginning to wonder what he was waiting for when he let the arrow finally fly.

She gasped as it hit the dead center of a tree even farther down the field than the targets had been set up. Peeta whipped around, his eyes widening slightly when he saw her standing there.

“Katniss? What are you doing here?” he asked, an unfathomable look on his face.

Katniss blushed. “I, was looking for you. I wanted to ask you something, but I didn’t want to disturb you.” She looked towards the far side of the field. “That...that was amazing. I’ve never seen anyone shoot the way you do.”

Peeta walked towards her with a somewhat embarrassed expression on his face, his neck flushing at her praise. “It isn’t that impressive. You should see Gale with the cross--” He paused when he saw Katniss’ stern expression and gave her a sheepish look. “Uh, ok, not one for bullshit, I see. I guess I’m not good with compliments.” He ran a hand through his already messy hair.

Katniss shook her head and looked at him with a mocking expression. “I find that hard to believe. All I’ve heard since I got here was praise about you.” She watched with amusement as the redness around his neck crept into his cheeks, darkening his skin so much that it hid the freckles across his nose that his light complexion usually failed to conceal.

“Everyone is too kind,” he mumbled, clearly flustered. He then gave her a rather shy look that made Katniss’ heart flutter. Peeta wasn’t as unflappable as he looked. She found it sweet.

“Would you like some help retrieving your arrows?” Katniss asked.

“Sure. I’ll take the right side, you take the left. Meet in the middle?” he said with an appreciative smile. Katniss nodded her head and set off across the field without another word.

She made her way along the line of marks quickly, not failing to notice that there wasn’t a single arrow outside the smallest ring on each target. Whatever Peeta thought of his talent, it was evident for all to see. Katniss felt the small hope that had sparked to life within her yesterday flame slightly higher, and she looked towards Peeta with a smile on her face.

“One more,” he said lightly as he approached her, sliding the last arrow he had pulled out into his quiver. He held it out to her, and Katniss slid the shafts inside with slight regret. They had felt good in her hands.

They walked in silence towards the last tree Peeta had shot at, which was nearly 100 yards from where the targets had been. Katniss struggled to contain her amazement, sensing Peeta did not want praise, but she could not contain a soft cry when she noticed the many other marks in the tree from where it had been hit previously. She reached for the arrow and pulled it out, fingerling the delicate feathers, which she recognized as those belonging to a mockingjay. Katniss looked at him questioningly.

“The ones made with mockingjay feathers fly farther,” Peeta said with a shrug. “Usually, I don’t like to practice with them. Too hard to replace.” He ran his hand along the trunk of the tree and leaned against it slightly, before he looked at her again. “But sometimes, the temptation is just too
much to see how far they’ll go,” Peeta said with a deprecating laugh.

Katniss gazed at him for a moment, watching Peeta’s smile fall from his face only to give rise to a look of confusion at her silent stare. He quirked his head slightly at her, patiently waiting for her to say something. Katniss decided it was now or never.

“Peeta…” she started off quietly, steeling her courage, and trying to take comfort in Finnick’s words from the night before that he was sure Peeta wouldn’t reject her.

“Yes?” he said with a slightly teasing grin.

“I want to be with you!” Katniss blurted out louder than she intended, sending several small birds fluttering out of the tree. She watched Peeta’s eyes fly wide, and his mouth formed a perfect ‘o.’ Several moments of silence passed, before he finally choked out--

“You want...to be...with me?” he said slowly, eyeing her with stunned expression.

Katniss blushed furiously. “I...I mean I want to join you. The group, that is. To help the people, fight against Snow. All that,” she stammered out, waving her hands around wildly.

“Oh,” Peeta said quietly, his eyes falling to the ground for just a second, and Katniss thought she saw his face darken with disappointment. But when Peeta looked at her again a moment later, she was greeted with a kind smile, though Katniss didn’t think it quite reached his eyes. “Why do you want to join the group?” he asked coolly.

“I...because I...I just...” Katniss stopped. It had been so easy when she had practiced what she would say to him in her head, but now that the moment had arrived, her words didn’t come as usual. She looked around aimlessly, like she hoped someone would spring from the trees to talk for her.

“Come with me,” Peeta said. She looked up at him with startled eyes, but he just gestured for her to follow him. He turned on his heel abruptly and walked around the tree, out of sight.

Katniss ran after him and found he had started on a carefully concealed pathway. She followed after him, easily keeping up his pace, but uncertainty that he had not yet given his answer wracked her body.

They passed the minutes again in silence, their harsh breath sounds punctuating the stillness, with even the birds seeming to have fallen quiet. The trees, while still abundant, seemed to be gradual thinning out, and she noticed rocky outcroppings and large boulders like the ones around the baths dotting the landscape. It was only then that Katniss realized they were going up an incline. Where was Peeta taking her?

“Peeta?” she asked warily.

“We’re almost there,” came his short reply. Finally, after a few more minutes, they finally emerged onto a flat rocky ledge, and Katniss felt a wave of awe crash over her.

The entire valley was spread out before them, the practice field stretching out a hundred feet below. Trees covered most of the landscape, but Katniss could see the stream wending its way through the wood. Here and there, tendrils of smoke rose through the canopy, suggesting that the rest were starting to awaken. And at the far end of the valley, the roaring waterfall reflected the red sun as it peaked over the horizon.

She turned to Peeta in wonderment, and he smiled down at her. “This is my favorite view of the valley. Sunrise is amazing here. I thought this would be a better place to talk. More calming,” he
said, nodding at the great red orb slowly making its way into the sky. “Though I like watching the sunset more. Sunset orange is my favorite color. I'll show it to you sometime.” Katniss felt her heart skip a beat at his offer.

“I would like that,” she whispered, her heart racing at the wide smile Peeta affected at her words. She noticed that his eyes shone in the light, the red of the sun meshing with the blue so that his eye’s almost looked violet, more stunning than ever.

“Mine’s green,” Katniss admitted in a shaky voice, her hand trembling slightly as she cast her hand over the trees. The way the light hit the dew soaked leaves made them shine like a thousand twinkling green stars.

“Well, then I guess the valley is perfect for us,” Peeta said. Katniss looked up at him, her heart racing rapidly at his use of us in reference to the two of them.

She impulsively grabbed his hand and squeezed it, trying to convey her gratefulness for his kindness. Katniss heard Peeta’s small intake of breath at her touch, and she quickly looked up at him, worried she had done something wrong. But Peeta was staring down at their joined hands with a rapt look on his face. She felt him tentatively squeeze her hand back, and pleasure ran through her when she realized he was not letting go. It finally gave her the courage to speak.

“My sister is Snow’s prisoner,” she said quietly, staring at the sunrise. “I wanted to get her away from our stepfather. That’s why I originally went to the Capitol. He, Lord Cray...He came to my room one night. I heard him saying...he said he wanted me, to bed me.” Katniss paused abruptly, trying to calm herself even as the memory of Cray’s odious words threatened to drown her.

“Katniss? Katniss?! Did he...what did he do??!” She felt Peeta’s hand tighten around hers, his rage obvious in his tone. She looked up at him and found he had a look of absolute horror on his face.

“N-nothing,” she stuttered out. “The door was bolted, thankfully, but I feared he would do the same to Prim.” She looked up at him, lip trembling. “We left for the Capitol within the week. I thought, if I could find someone of high rank who would marry me, I would be able to protect her.”

Peeta blinked. “You mean, when you agreed to marry Cato…” Katniss shook her head violently.

“I thought marrying the prince would allow me to save Prim. Becoming a royal seemed like the best way. I thought Cray wouldn’t dare touch a relative, however distantly connected, of King Snow’s.” She sighed, knowing how wrong she had been.

“You don’t love him then?” Peeta said, almost so quietly that Katniss did not hear him. He was no longer looking at her.

“No. I don’t,” she answered slowly, watching him carefully as she did so. He kept his eyes facing forward, perhaps deliberately she realized, but he could not conceal the way his jaw flexed. He swallowed heavily before speaking--

“You agreed to a loveless marriage for the sake of your sister?” he said with a look of awe on his face.

Katniss shrugged. “Loveless marriages are common. If I hadn’t chosen Cato, Cray would have undoubtedly arranged something for me. Even my parent’s marriage was arranged, though they were the exception in that they fell in love afterwards,” she said bluntly, failing to mention the way love had destroyed her mother.

“But committing to them for the sake of someone you love, isn’t,” Peeta said pointedly. “You are
different from anyone else I’ve ever met.” He smiled at her shyly, but Katniss only shrugged again. She was just as bad at taking compliments as he was.

“Prim is special. She’s the kindest, sweetest person I know. Always manages to find the good in everything. Snow threatened to kill her, to kill anyone that I care about, if I didn’t do everything he asked. The tour was his idea,” Katniss choked out, tears pricking at the corner of her eyes. She gave Peeta a desperate look. “Prim is the only person I’m sure that I love. I...I can’t lose her. Not to him.” Katniss turned away as her tears spilled onto her cheeks, feeling incredibly vulnerable. It wasn’t something she wanted him to see.

“Katniss,” she heard him say, but she couldn’t bring herself to turn around. And that was why she didn’t notice his strong arms coming surrounding her until they were already there. “It’s ok, Katniss. It’s going to be ok,” he whispered, his lips suddenly close to her ear. He gathered her to him and began to rock her gently while Katniss clutched at his shirt like it was the only thing keeping her tethered to this world.

“I’m so afraid of what he might do to her, what he could do to anyone. I want to fight him, to stop him, I do, but I need to save Prim too,” she sobbed, burying her face in his chest.

“Shhh. Katniss...” He began to rub her back, trying to calm her down. “I’ll help you get her, I promise.”

She stopped crying abruptly at his words and looked up at him. “Y-y-you will?” she stammered between gasps of breath. Peeta smiled at her and gave her a gentle squeeze.

“But then he pulled back so abruptly that Katniss nearly fell over.

“Sorry, sorry,” Peeta said, sounding exasperated, pointing down to the field below. “Uh...looks like everyone else is up. Think they are probably looking for us,” he said with a laugh.

Katniss peered over the edge. She could just make out some figures moving across the field, but she couldn’t even tell which group members they were. Katniss highly doubted they could see her and Peeta, and she looked at him in confusion.

Peeta chuckled again at her expression, obviously thinking her bewilderment had to do with whoever was down below. But Katniss thought it didn’t really sound like his normal laugh. “And
you can ask the group to join us tonight,” he said in a hearty voice. “I’m sure they’ll let you in… You’ve been amazing this week…I know they like you…I, mean, you’re wonderful…Like the kindness you show Rue…You’re…” But he trailed off after that, leaving Katniss at a loss for words in regards to his rapid change in demeanor.

He wasn’t directly looking at her, but he was shifting from foot to foot, eyes darting around but looking at nothing in particular. And Katniss realized he looked almost exactly like her when she was nervous…Or afraid. Finnick’s words suddenly echoed through her head.

“He doesn’t need his heart crushed a third time.”

She felt sick.

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“You’ll be fine, Katniss. I’m right here,” Peeta said, smiling at her. He placed a hand on her knee to stop her nervously dancing feet,

Katniss felt her stomach lurch at his touch but didn’t have the courage to explain that even a short tap from him sent a wave of molten heat licking through her belly. And while at this point, it was something she would normally welcome, the minute right before she was going to request a camp vote was not one of those times. She sighed.

After they had descended from the rocky ledge in awkward silence following...that moment, Peeta had not come anywhere near her for the rest of day. Instead, he had disappeared with Gale into the outside woods for many hours. They had returned an hour ago with deer, which was now being smoked over the fire. He had just come over a few minutes ago to tell her now would be a good time to address the group.

“I know,” she whispered back, wishing he would just speak for her. He was better with words, and this was his group. But Peeta had been adamant that she must speak for herself. She cleared her throat and stood up.

“Shut up, you lot,” Finnick’s booming voice suddenly echoed out over the clearing. Katniss rolled her eyes at him as he gave her a subtle thumbs up, clearly having been watching her. She chanced a nervous look at Peeta, who nodded his encouragement. She took a deep breath and began to speak.

“I’ve been given…” Katniss paused. She was not going to say she had been given permission to do this like she was a child. Peeta hadn’t even told her that. He’d just told her to ask them. She took another breath. “I want to join all of you in your fight against Snow. I don’t want to be his pawn anymore, and I think I could be helpful to you.” Katniss heard Johanna’s familiar snort, but she ignored it. “I already feel like I’ve learned so much; I know all of you still have so much to teach me. I’m willing to learn. I am willing to try.” She exhaled slowly, calming herself. Her part was almost over, then she just had to wait. “I request that you allow me to join.”

Katniss nodded at them all and abruptly sat down next to Peeta again, hoping no one noticed the way she was trembling.

“See. I told you that you’d be ok,” she heard him murmur quietly. He squeezed her hand lightly before he stood up to address the crowd.

“All in favor?” he asked in a neutral voice, his face impassive.

Katniss willed herself to look up, praying that she had done enough this week to show them that she wasn’t just a royal puppet, that she wasn’t just Capitol. She stared around the circle and
watched in astonishment as one by one, everyone except Johanna and a few of the soldiers raised their hands, the majority conspicuously in her favor. She smiled as Finnick gave her a subtle wink, Rue and Delly clapped their hands in delight, and Darius let out a loud whoop.

“Alright. The victor wears the crown,” Peeta said mildly, making it obvious that he would not be going against the group’s decision. “Katniss, welcome to the gr--”

“Hold it!” Johanna’s loud voice suddenly rang out. Katniss scowled as she watched the black-haired bitch get to her feet.

“Yes, Jo?” Peeta asked politely, but Katniss thought she heard a faint edge to his tone.

“Our Lady has barely been with us a week, and we’re going to let her into the group? Peeta, you wouldn’t even let me in that fast,’ she said with a glare. Katniss watched Peeta’s face grow red, but he didn’t say anything. “Had to go through a fucking trial period, didn’t I? We all did.” Johanna rounded on Katniss, pointing at her rigidly. Katniss felt a curious sense of rage flame inside her. She balled her hands into tight fists, willing herself to stay silent while Johanna still had the floor.

“So what in the hell makes her so different?” Johanna continued. “She’s engaged to the guy second in line for the fucking throne. If that doesn’t make her Capitol, I don’t know what does.”

“I AM NOT,” Katniss yelled out, leaping to her feet, chest heaving in anger. She strode over to where Johanna was standing, barely noting the shock on the others’ faces. All she could think about was how much Johanna pissed her off. She looked the girl directly in the eyes and began to speak--

“I am not Capitol, Joh-an-na,” Katniss repeated quickly, hammering out the syllables of wiry girl’s name. “I am from The Seam, from District 12. That is my home. The only reason I even went to court was to save my sister from our stepfather’s depravity.” She watched Johanna’s eyes widen in surprise, but Katniss did not feel like wasting a breath addressing it. “So yes, I went to the Capitol. I agreed to marry Cato out of a desire to protect Prim, nothing more. But I don’t wish to marry him anymore.” Her eyes briefly shifted to Peeta when she said that, but he seemed to be in the same state of amazement as everyone else. She looked back to Johanna.

“I know what Snow has done to some of you, and I saw what he is doing to the people of Panem on tour. And don’t lump me in with Glimmer or Marvel, Cato,” she said, trembling now with emotion. “I’m not blind. I saw the people starving. I saw how it was that day in the fields. You were there, Johanna. Remember?” She took a last deep breath, looking around at everyone, before returning for a last time to look into Johanna’s wide brown eyes.

“I want to fight. I want to save my sister. You aren’t going to stop me.”

A deafening silence filled the clearing as Katniss spun on her heels and stalked back to her seat. She sat down and glared at the fire, stunned by her outburst. She knew that hadn’t been the correct way to address Johanna’s concerns; Effie would have certainly been yelling at her about her terrible manners at the very least. But Katniss couldn’t help but savor finally putting Johanna in her place.

“Aww, hell, it looks like we’ve got a girl on fire. Careful that you don’t get burned. Johanna’s face is as red as a tomato,” Darius said in an impish voice, breaking the silence without warning. “I think Lady Everdeen deserves a trial run after that display, don’t you?” Everyone burst out laughing.

“Aye!”
“Aye.”

“Yes!”

One after another, Katniss watched in amazement as each group member, even those who had voted no before, gave their assent, until only Johanna was left, still standing where Katniss had left her.

“Ok, Jo. What do you say?,” Peeta asked dispassionately. Katniss frowned at his indifferent tone, but as Johanna glared at him, she realized he might just be trying to keep Jo from boiling over.

“Fine. A trial,” Johanna snarled out. She gave Katniss a hard stare. “But one fuck up, and I’ll make sure you’ll regret it.” She walked out of the circle then, Gale following silently behind.

Katniss tried hard not to smile, feeling that even though Jo was no longer there, she shouldn’t be rubbing her triumph in the angry girl’s face. But it proved impossible when she saw the brief but absolute look of happiness on Peeta’s face. Her heart leapt with gratitude and anticipation of what the coming days might bring.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Katniss finally joined the group! I hope you’re as excited about it as I am. :) Thank you so much for being patient, dear readers; I know this has been a sloooooow burn. But I promise that Katniss and Peeta are almost there
A Declaration

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: So I know there has been a very long wait for this chapter, and I want to thank everyone for waiting so patiently for it. I am nearing the end of a very busy period in my ‘real life’ and am hopeful I will be able to get out updates more quickly from now on. I am really excited for the next few chapters, starting with this one.

As always, I need to thank my two lovely betas, titania522/ct522 and Solas Violetta, for their wonderful work, and peetabreadgirl for agreeing to be my third! They put so much effort into helping me present the best products I possibly can and deserve all the praise in the world. And even though I’ve said it before, I’d also like to thank nightlockinthecave for the wonderful banner she made for this story. Creating those isn’t easy and she has an awesome talent for it.

Please review! I would love to know your thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peeta

Peeta walked wearily back into the glade, the echoes from his heavy tread over the rough ground reverberating through the trees. He winced a little. Moving quietly was the one thing Peeta hadn’t quite mastered, though his agility usually made up for it…that was unless he was coming back from night watch into a still sleeping encampment. He stopped when he accidentally stepped on a piece of charred wood from last night’s now burnt-out campfire, the loud crunching sound roaring in Peeta’s ears as it crumbled under his feet.

“You know, for a notorious thief, you’re surprisingly loud, Peeta,” a playfully husky voice said, interrupting the silence. Peeta turned, unable to contain the smile from erupting on his face at the sound of the now familiar voice. But then his breath stole away as Katniss came into his view and his eyes traveled down her body before he was able to stop himself.

She had dispensed with a dress today, having opted instead for the tailored tunic and short breeches that many of the women commonly wore. The pants hugged the slight curve of her hips and her muscular thighs, while the shirt clung to her torso, outlining the swell of her breasts. Peeta felt his cock twitch when one sleeve slipped down her arm, and he suppressed the desire to sweep his lips across the now exposed juncture of her neck and shoulder. He supposed Katniss must have borrowed it from Rue, or that Delly had stolen another of Johanna’s outfits.

“And you move with stealthy silence, Lady Everdeen,” he teased back breathlessly, forcing his eyes up to meet her own. He didn’t want Katniss thinking he only admired her body. But then, Peeta watched Katniss’ eyebrows raise, annoyance evident on her face, and quickly realized his error. “I mean, Katniss,” Peeta corrected. She rewarded him with a smile, and her face brightened, radiating a light that the moon would have been jealous of.

“I’m not a Lady anymore. I’m...one of your Merry Band, remember?” she asked. Peeta’s heart skipped a beat, and he nodded his agreement. Since her speech and subsequent induction into the group two days ago, Peeta had hardly been able to think of anything else. It still seemed almost a dream that Katniss would want to join him…them…at all.
“You’re up early, aren’t you?” he asked. “I think you’re the first person I’ve ever seen awake at this hour besides those on watch. Unless I woke you?” He gave her a worried look.

Katniss shook her head. “Between the mockingjays, Delly’s snoring, and my excitement for today, I couldn’t sleep.”

Peeta laughed as one of the aforementioned birds landed between them, chirping happily in imitation of his chuckles. “I don’t know why they are so comfortable with you, but it pleases me that they are,” he said, smiling in Katniss’ direction, watching as the mockingjay hopped towards her.

Katniss whistled a soft four note melody, which the mockingjay immediately took up as it alighted towards the trees. They both stood still and listened as more birds took up the call. “Do they really not come near unless you are somewhere alone?” Katniss asked wonderingly. “I remember Finnick saying that they usually don’t.” Peeta nodded again.

“They aren’t...normal birds. Far more intelligent. It’s said that if you are taught correctly, you can understand their songs and even enlist their aid to cast enchantments.” Katniss gave him a questioning glance, to which Peeta shrugged. “The mockingjays are some of the last remaining remnants of ‘Old Panem,’ when magic was still prevalent in the world. Jabberjays, Trackerjackers, any other type of Mutt, and a few other animals still have their special abilities. Or at least that’s what I was told once,” he finished, wondering if Katniss would now think him insane. He looked at Katniss warily, but she only bit her lip, seemingly lost in thought.

The truth was Peeta did sometimes understand the birds, thanks to Mag’s long-ago tutelage. It was something he had never shared with anyone, partially because the thought of explaining the word he heard coming from their beaks most often made Peeta uncomfortable. King wasn’t exactly something that made sense to call a poor homeless boy without any family honor.

What was even more striking was to Peeta, though, was that he had heard the mockingjays cry Queen when Katniss was near. That, at least, made sense to Peeta, for she was more fair, brave, and strong than any woman he had ever met. There was no doubt in his mind that she deserved the title.

“Do people...have any abilities?” Katniss hedged, her voice hesitant, obviously fearing she sounded like a fool. Peeta met her gaze with a serious expression, not failing to notice the faraway look in her eyes, as though she was lost in a memory. He wondered what she was thinking about.

“I think a few may,” he said, thinking of Mags, and her mysterious sayings and hints of things to come...or at least events she believed would come. Peeta was never sure what to make of her words when Mags had made her odd foretellings. Katniss bobbed her head, a contemplative look still on her face.

...He will remember when the moon joins the sun. They will need each other to survive…

Peeta startled as a man’s voice echoed through his head. It was one that Peeta was certain he’d never heard before in his life, and yet, it sounded familiar somehow...almost like a memory. Where had that come from? And what the hell did that mean?! He looked at Katniss in panic, hoping she hadn’t noticed his sudden discomfort, but judging by her concerned expression, Peeta hadn’t been so lucky.

“Are you unwell, Peeta?”

“Yeah,” he responded with a laugh, running a hand nervously through his hair. Katniss arched her eyebrow, skepticism and disappointment marring her features. Peeta almost believed he could trust
Katniss with what he’d just experienced, but his fear over the vision was too great. He grinned at her widely. “So, you’re looking forward to your first lessons in weapons today, then?”

Katniss narrowed her eyes at him, leaving Peeta with the feeling that he hadn’t fooled her by his deflection at all. But she answered, “Yes. I did have some lessons when I was young, but I’d like to improve my skills.” Peeta frowned at her somewhat blunt reply.

“Well then, I’ll go easy on you,” he said jokingly, but the deepening of her scowl told Peeta immediately that he had said the wrong thing.

“I don’t want you to go easy on me,” she said angrily. “I’m not some fragile flower that you need to take care of. I will master everything the others can do.”

Peeta held up his hands, wanting so badly to tell her that he thought no such thing, that he had just been joking. “Katniss, I…” he started, reaching for her hand, but she turned away from him. Katniss’ braid, whether accidentally or on purpose, struck him across the face as she went. He watched her, feeling abruptly bereft, as she stalked back across the glen in the direction of Delly’s tent. Peeta felt as though they had taken two steps back in their…Did he even dare call it a friendship?…in a matter of seconds.

As she reached the edge of the clearing, she swiveled around to address him once more, “Don’t go easy on me, Sun Thief,” she spat. Peeta’s face hardened over Katniss’ returned use of the disliked moniker.

“Don’t worry. I won’t,” he replied shortly.

“Good,” she returned coldly before marching into the trees, leaving Peeta to look on broodingly.

When he was sure she was gone, Peeta exhaled a long sigh, the memory of when he had almost kissed her on the cliff all at once at the forefront of his mind. That moment suddenly felt like it had happened long ago rather than just a few days before, and the gap between Katniss and himself seemed to have grown from a small stream to a wide ocean.

Peeta quietly made his way back to his tent and collapsed on his bed, determined to get a few hours of sleep before the rest of the group awoke for training, though he resigned himself to the fact that it would likely not be restful. The deep dissatisfaction welling within him over the state of his relationship with Katniss, highlighted once again by their most recent conversation, only forced Peeta to further acknowledge the futility of his denials about his feelings for her.

XXXXXXXX

“That’s great, Katniss!” Peeta heard Mitchell call out as he approached the training ground. He smiled at the praise his friend was doling out to her. Given Katniss’ obvious determination from earlier, it didn’t surprise him in the least. But once he neared the opening in the trees that led out onto the field, he repressed his grin and took on a serious expression.

No matter how often Katniss’ actions confounded him, particularly during their conversation earlier, Peeta knew he had to set his own frustrations aside. Today, he would be her teacher, and while in a way, he had admired her claim that she could do everything, it was one notion he had to rid her of. The nature of the band’s work required teamwork of utmost precision, where they entrusted one another with their very lives. They depended on each member’s ability to recognize their strengths but also their limitations. It was something Katniss needed to understand. He stepped out into the bright sunlight with determined resolve.

Peeta’s eyebrows shot up into his hair as he caught sight of the various training groups. Rather
than spreading out across the field as usual, it appeared they had all curiously elected to practice
closer to one another today. Or rather to one specific group, Peeta realized, observing how all the
band member’s eyes kept flitting in the direction of Annie, Delly, and Katniss as they practiced
with Mitchell. Their curiosity at how a woman of Katniss’ social rank would fare in their training
ground appeared to have overruled their desire to better themselves.

Peeta noticed Johanna standing a few yards away, swinging her axe in hand with a surprisingly
contemplative look on her face. He made his way over to her and quietly asked, “So, how has she
done so far, Jo?”

“Well, she’s not half-bad, but she still has a ways to go in technique. Although…” Johanna said
thoughtfully “…She’s adapted easily enough to suggestions for improvement that Mitchell’s given,
yet she clearly thinks too highly of herself for it.” Johanna grimaced. “Still, surprising how fast
she’s picked it up, for a Capitol brat. And she’s obviously determined, I’ll give her—” Johanna
stopped talking abruptly and whirled so that she was facing Peeta. He looked at Johanna slyly.

“Very clever, Blondie,” she cracked angrily, annoyance that Peeta had gotten her to reveal her
true assessment of Katniss’ abilities stealing over her face. “So you going to give her the first real
combat lesson then? Because Mitchell has been way too nice, and she’s not that good.”

“Johanna, I did just hear you tell me she wasn’t half-bad, and I didn’t go deaf when you praised
her determination,” Peeta replied, amused.

Jo rolled her eyes at him. “I also said she has a ways to go and that she thinks too highly of
herself. Or did you miss that part while you were admiring her technique?” Jo raised an eyebrow
suggestively.

Peeta wrenched his eyes away from Katniss’ backside, completely nonplussed over Johanna’s
statement. “N-no, I didn’t,” he stammered, lying through his teeth. “But she’ll learn...quickly, if
you’re to be believed.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just don’t go easy on her.” She gave him a candid look. “I know you’re totally
crushing on the girl.”

Peeta snorted, but his face went bright red with embarrassment. “You know I’m serious when I
teach people about defense and knowing their own limitations. Of all people, you are the one who
should remember that the most. Remember your first lesson?” he added, trying his hardest to
distract Johanna from her current focus on his feelings for Katniss. “And she’s already requested
that I not go soft on her.”

“What a shock…” Johanna said sarcastically, disregarding his other comments with a wave of her
hand.

A surprising flare of anger sprung up within Peeta at Johanna’s words. “She’s part of this group
now, Johanna. You don’t have to like her, but I expect you both to work together, when the time
comes,” he said sharply. And then he added, “You could try to get to know her. If my memory is
correct, you wanted me to dance with her a few nights ago? So why push me if you dislike her
that much?”

Johanna rolled her eyes again. “Because I’m one of the people that has known you the longest,
and I’ve never seen you actually happy. And I don’t want to see you dead. Neither do Gale or
Finnick or any of the other people who love you.” Peeta’s eyes widened, his brow furrowing as
he tried to make sense of Johanna’s words.

“Jo, what do you--” he began, but she walked away from him before he could finish his sentence.
Peeta shook his head. Sometimes Johanna made the least sense of anyone, and right now, he wasn’t going to bother trying to do it. He strode towards Katniss, Mitchell, and the other two girls.

“Hey, Peeta,” Mitchell said with a grin as he noticed Peeta walking towards him. Peeta bowed his head towards the soldier, but his eyes darted almost involuntarily towards Katniss. Her grey eyes shone darkly at him within her tanned face, and she scowled, letting him know she had not forgotten the morning’s conversation before she went back to blocking Delly’s sword thrusts. Peeta could see Katniss was much better than the other two beginners already.

“How is our newest recruit doing?” he asked Mitchell quietly.

“Better than I expected, Peet. She’s retained whatever lessons she had when she was young and then some. I told her I wouldn’t be surprised if we moved her up to the middle group within a few days.” Peeta gave him a stern look, and Mitchell had the decency to look a little guilty. “I know you’re not too keen to let people get big heads when it comes to their abilities, but it’s the truth. I’d liken her to raw fire. Reminds me a bit of Gale, honestly. You know how he sometimes gets.” Peeta cringed internally. Even the idea of Gale and Katniss being linked together in some way somehow made him a little nauseous.

“Alright,” Peeta acknowledged shortly. He moved forward and said, “You’re coming along well, Delly,” just as Katniss knocked the blonde girl’s sword out of her hand. Peeta ignored her look of frustration deliberately.

“Oh, Peeta,” Delly giggled. “You know I’m no good. Katniss is already world’s better than me.” Peeta shrugged. “Her technique is a bit sloppy, but then it is only the first day. You’d win against more than a few people, Dell. Soon, you’ll be able to take me on.” He almost smiled when he heard Katniss snort of disbelief, but he still refused to look at her. Delly’s pale blue eyes went wide for a second, before a decidedly curious expression crossed her face.

“Maybe…” Delly said “...but I bet Katniss could do that now. Right, Katniss?” She turned towards Katniss with a wide happy smile, seemingly unperturbed by Katniss’ snort. It was one of the things Peeta appreciated about Delly the most. She accepted things as they were but saw the good in everything. Her bubbly personality was often a necessity for the group on bad days. He smiled at Delly briefly and turned towards Katniss with eyebrows raised, goading her to answer the question.

Katniss bit her lip before she drew herself up to her full height, which albeit, wasn’t very much. But the pride she exuded reminded Peeta of how Katniss had looked on the beach the first day he had seen her, and it caused an undeniable thrill to run through Peeta’s body.

“I think so,” she said confidently, her eyes flashing at Peeta in challenge.

“Those are bold words, Girl on Fire,” Peeta calmly asserted. He was beginning to realize his usual gentle approach when it came to the beginner sword lessons might not be the approach Katniss needed. It excited him in a way he hadn’t felt in a long while.

Katniss quirked her head to the side, her cheeks flushing in recall of Darius’ words on the night she joined the group. “My name is Katniss,” she said in an irritated tone.

“And mine is Peeta,” he shot back. “Though you seem to have forgotten that this morning. I just thought you’d like a taste of your own medicine,” he finished with a smirk. Katniss’ mouth fell open in shock for a second before she swiftly shut it again, her mouth forming into a grim determined line, and color flooded her face. “Ready to learn something about fighting?” he asked cheekily, tugging a wooden sword from his belt, having left his real one back in his tent.
Katniss’ scrunched her nose and lifted her sword in front of her with both hands. “Ready,” she said curtly.

“Then come at me, if you dare,” Peeta demanded, gesturing her towards him with one finger. But he let his hand that was holding his sword drop to his side. He watched Katniss eyes dart to it with a confused expression, which quickly morphed into anger.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t go easy on me,” she said with an enraged tone.

Peeta answered her lazily, “This is me going easy on you.” He knew he was probably enjoying this too much but inciting her fury was far more fun than he’d anticipated, and the way her now overly flushed cheeks accented the dark waves of her hair set Peeta’s whole body to tingling. He felt as though he was standing at a precipice, ready to leap into some great beyond, even if it was unclear exactly what it was.

He watched Katniss mouth open, and Peeta expected her to say something more, but instead she darted forward towards him. He spun out of the way just in time, working hard to keep his face in a neutral position rather than revealing the surprise he was feeling. Katniss stumbled past him, and he hit the flat of his sword relatively gently against her thighs to send her tumbling to the dirt.

“Peeta, what the hell?!” Katniss cried as she struggled back to her feet, staring daggers at him.

Peeta gazed back at her calmly. “First rule of combat. Never attack in anger,” he said. “It ruins your concentration, makes you less cognizant of your surroundings, and clouds your judgment. Tell me, were you even aware of where my sword was when you charged me or were you just intent on hacking at me because you were angry because of what I was doing?” Katniss gave him a startled look, biting her lip in that way Peeta had come to love.

“I...I didn’t know where your sword was,” she said, her eyes widening in surprise of that revelation.

Peeta bobbed his head once. “Anger. It’ll get you killed, and it’s something that a few other members would do well to remember.” His eyes flashed briefly in Johanna and Gale’s direction, and even though they were talking animatedly to each other, Peeta felt they had been watching him and Katniss a few moments ago. In fact, he felt the eyes and ears of everyone on them.

Peeta lifted his sword in front of him this time. “Alright. Come at me again.” Katniss took a deep breath, her eyes flicking once to meet his before she settled them onto his sword. She moved swiftly toward him again, but her expression was serene. She raised her sword above her head to cut down upon him...

...And Peeta nonchalantly stepped to the side, whacking his sword against the back of one of her hands. Katniss let her weapon go with a small yelp of pain, holding her hand against her body. The cry lanced Peeta’s heart as painfully as if a real knife were stabbing it, but outwardly, he showed no sympathy. He picked up Katniss’ sword and handed it back to her.

“What lesson am I supposed to have learned there?” Katniss gasped, and Peeta was pleased to see that there were no tears in her eyes. Even Peeta hadn’t managed that, when Boggs had given him this first combat lesson, those many years ago, but then, he’d also only been five.

“You’re not very big,” Peeta said simply. “And if we are facing Thread’s men or the Royal Guard or Cato’s army, you’re likely going to be fighting men much taller than yourself. Hacking down at them will do you no good. Look, raise your sword to the level you were at before.” He walked towards her as she lifted the weapon upwards, Peeta raising his own simultaneously so that by the time she had hers at an angle where she could possibly strike him, the point of his sword was
already pushing lightly into her navel. She jumped away, breathing more heavily than Peeta would have expected. The heat had returned to her cheeks.

Peeta remained silent for a second, a little unsure what to make of her reaction. “Do you see what happens?” he finally said.

“By the time I can get into a good position, you’re already t-there,” Katniss stumbled. Peeta nodded. He stepped around to Katniss’ side and wrapped his arms around hers, trying to tell himself that this was no different than when he’d shown the other women these maneuvers, but his traitorous body tingled at the contact with Katniss’ body. She felt so small, but so strong, and the scent of wildflowers wafting from her hair nearly overwhelmed him.

Peeta felt Katniss stiffen a little, but he willed all his focus into guiding her movements, showing her how to cut at someone via their side, demonstrating that if she kept her elbows tucked in, she would have enough power to jab upwards into her opponent’s belly. He wondered if she thought this was barbaric to learn, to have to accept there might be a time when she would have to end someone’s life, even if it was in self-defense.

But then, the more they practiced, the less and less Peeta thought about those things…And the more and more, he became distracted by the tendrils of hair that were falling loose from her braid, by the little droplets of sweat that clung to the back of her neck, and by the way her head and back fell against his chest, her ass occasionally brushing his groin. The world shrunk away from Peeta, reducing upon itself until all he could see was Katniss.

His heart thudded painfully in his chest as he angled her hips to demonstrate how to complete a particularly tricky movement. To anyone else, it probably just looked like he was correcting her stance, but they weren’t close enough to hear the barely audible moan that dropped from Katniss’ mouth at his touch. Peeta felt his heart fling itself off that imagined precipice into the void, shedding the last vestiges of his denial of her as it did so. In truth, Peeta had been lost from the first moment he had laid eyes on Katniss.

Peeta stepped away from her, struggling to control his shuddering breath. Katniss looked back at him, her breathing equally harsh. He had to remind himself that there was still one more lesson to teach her. “That...was really good, Katniss,” he panted. “Show me those maneuvers without help this time.” Peeta watched her go through her paces with a pleased smile on his lips that only grew wider when Katniss rewarded him with a rare one of her own after she had finished.

He raised his sword once more against her, saying in challenge, “Come at me.” Katniss straightened, and she adjusted herself confidently into the attack position that he had taught her. She quirked her head as though to say Now I won’t go easy on you.

She does everything perfectly, Peeta thought, as Katniss bounded towards him. She held her sword precisely in the way he had taught her as she moved sinuously over the ground. Peeta swung his sword, and she dodged it in the way she had been instructed, bringing her own sword around to jab at his side. Peeta spun away, parrying her blow, the clack of their swords echoing in the air. Katniss ducked under his arm and slid away before thrusting at him again, her grey eyes shining with exhilaration, but as she stretched to get to him, Peeta saw a small area of her body that she’d left exposed.

He let go of his sword with one of his hands, reaching in to deliver a soft blow to her ribcage that he knew wouldn’t harm her but would drive the air from her lungs. She let out a huff of air and pulled back, too stunned to prevent Peeta from hitting her sword out of her hands. “That wasn’t fair,” she said, but it wasn’t in the petulant way people usually reacted when Peeta made a move others did not expect. Peeta realized Katniss sounded almost...awed.
“Last lesson for the morning,” he said seriously. “The only thing that matters is what someone can do. Just because you fight fair, doesn’t mean your enemy will. Snow in particular.” Peeta’s mind immediately went to Primrose, locked away in Snow’s castle. By the stricken look on Katniss’ face, he could tell her mind was there as well.

He stooped to pick up Katniss’ sword once again and placed it back in her hand, whispering, “It’ll be ok, Katniss. We’ll get her.” Katniss looked up at him, her eyes wide, but for the first time, Peeta thought he detected trust in her grey pools.

“I know,” she murmured. They stared at one another for a few seconds, until Peeta’s eyes drifted down, seemingly of their own accord, to Katniss’ lips. They looked so soft…

A sudden sting of pain lit across the back of Peeta’s thighs, and he buckled to the ground. “Ouch!” he cried out, mouth falling open when he saw Katniss holding her sword, a triumphant expression on her face. “Katniss, what the hell?!” he asked in echo of her earlier words.

She shrugged, but her eyes glinted with laughter, even as the scowl remained on her face. “I was just practicing.”

Peeta snorted and propped himself up on his elbows, intrigued by the way Katniss’ eyes raked over his body. She seemed to be paying special attention to where his shirt had ridden up his torso, exposing his abdomen to the outside world. “Our battle was over long before you got me,” he said with amusement. “I think it’s fair to say you cheated.”

“Well, you said yourself that the only thing that matters is what a person can do. I’m just trying to figure it out,” she said teasingly. She stepped over him daintily and cast one last look back at him. “And I’m still wondering what you can do, too.” Peeta’s mouth fell open as Katniss sauntered away. Somehow, he understood that she wasn’t talking about sword training.

“Fucking hell,” Gale grumbled roughly, staring down the target range in disbelief. Peeta ducked his head to hide his smile, but he knew his shoulders were still quaking in silent laughter.

“I told you,” Katniss said. She glanced sideways at Peeta, and he winked at her, inducing a small but warm smile to form on her face.

“Yes…” Gale answered. Peeta could almost see the displeasure radiating from his friend’s body. Gale wasn’t used to being beaten, especially be someone who had only held a bow and arrow for the first time today.

After the morning break and lunch, everyone had again gathered at the training field for some target training. There were few only a few in the group who were really adept enough to hit a moving target, but he still required them to practice. The situations they found themselves were too varied in their dangers for Peeta not to prepare them as best he could. Everyone got the choice whether to practice with a bow or an axe but most preferred the bow.

When they had arrived at the field, Katniss had walked over to the pile of bows before anyone else and snatched one up immediately. Peeta had watched her from the back of the group as she ran her fingers over the weapon with an expression that he could only describe as wonder. Peeta recognized in her face the same feelings he had felt when Boggs had put a bow into his hands for the first time.

Peeta had shown her the proper grip and basic stance to shoot, and then, much to his and everyone’s complete shock, she had managed to land her arrow at the edge of her target on the
first try. She had been sending arrow after arrow into her target since then, and while Peeta still saw a lot of room for improvement in her technique, her natural skill was obvious.

Katniss’ talent had only been accentuated further in the past few minutes when she had soundly beaten Gale in a shooting contest. She had boldly challenged him to a shooting contest after he had carelessly remarked that targets weren’t difficult to hit when they weren’t moving. Peeta had almost punched him, but much to his surprise, Johanna got there first. Her first had been shortly followed by a sharp reminder from Jo about how imperfectly Gale used to shoot. Peeta had noticed Katniss’ eyes widen at the usually hostile girl’s sudden defense of her. But then Katniss had proudly announced she would win, a promise she had fulfilled by beating him 10 to 8. Gale had been reduced to silent shock up until the point he’d uttered that curse.

“Looks like you’re better with traps and your crossbow, Gale,” Peeta said, when he’d composed himself. “And it looks like we have a new archer in the group,” he added, not even trying to hide his pleasure at Katniss’ skill. Katniss’ eyes shone with happiness.

“Alright, everyone. That’s it for the afternoon!” he called out loudly, breaking out in another smile at the tired but grateful grins the rest of the group cast back at him. It was rare that he let them conclude a day’s training this early, but Peeta was feeling generous today. Everyone trudged back towards the woods while Peeta picked up the weaponry that needed to be put back into the small hutch they kept for them just inside the tree line.

“Peeta?” Katniss’ tentative voice suddenly broke the silence. Peeta looked up, startled. He hadn’t noticed that Katniss hadn’t left with the others.

“Is something wrong?” he asked confusedly.

Katniss shifted from one foot to the other with a mildly nervous expression on her face. “Rue suggested that I ask...I mean, I was just wondering...Could I practice a little longer today?” Katniss blushed when she saw Peeta’s eyes go wide with surprise. “I, I know Rue said the rules are that no one gets to be out here alone, just in case of an accident, so I know I’m asking you to stay out longer, and I understand if you want to break for the day like everyone else, but I...the bow…” She waved down at her weapon “…It feels like I was made for it, like it’s freedom, like it’s--”

“Katniss stop,” Peeta laughed, holding up his hands to stay her nervous rambling. “I get it. Of course, I’ll stay out here with you.” His heart jumped in his chest at the warm smile she gave him.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. She turned around and began to send more arrows down the range while he continued to pick up the weaponry. Peeta observed her for a moment before he crossed the field to store the weapons he had gathered.

When Peeta returned, he found Katniss in much the same way he had left her, but her bearing had changed from one of joy to one of frustration. She stood rigid, her body tense and movements jerky, as she sent arrow after arrow towards the targets in rapid succession. Each one struck farther and farther from the targets’ centers, until finally Katniss’ missed entirely.

“Damn it!” she cried out, her shoulders slumping in defeat. Peeta watched her silently as she brushed an angry tear from her eye and threw the bow onto the ground.

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“It’s your first day, Katniss. You’re not going to hit every one right on target.” Katniss jumped at his voice. She turned away from him to hastily brush more tears from her eyes. Peeta walked to stand in front of her and lightly ran his hand along her cheek, coaxing her to look at him. Katniss seemed to shudder at his touch, prompting him to drop his hand quickly, but he was still grateful that she did not look away. “That’s what I’ve been trying to teach you today,” he said gently. “No
Katniss sighed. “You don’t miss. Rue told me that too. She’s never seen you miss. She said no one has ever seen you miss a shot.” She stared up at Peeta, as if daring him to contradict what she had been told. Peeta sighed back at her.

“I’ve also had years upon years of practice, Katniss. Like I said before, it’s your first day.” He nudged her playfully. “And besides, I do miss.” Katniss gave him a skeptical glare, to which Peeta responded with a smile. “It happens, I promise. Not often, I’ll admit that, but it happens.” Katniss nodded slowly and turned her head towards the target line.

“But what was I doing wrong?” she exhaled, tugging on her braid with an irritated look. “I was shooting so well earlier, and then I just started shooting them wider, until finally…” she gestured towards where her last arrow had landed in the grass.

“You were shooting them too fast and missed. And then you let your anger about it get the best of you and tensed up. Remember lesson number 1?” Peeta asked, his eyes twinkling.

Katniss scowled at him. “Shouldn’t I be able to shoot them rapidly? I don’t think the Royal Guard is going to wait for me to find my proper stance.”

Peeta threw up his hands. “First day, Katniss. It’s the first day. Stop being so hard on yourself,” he laughed. “Yes, shooting them at a fast rate is important, but first, you have to be able to shoot each one with the proper technique. It doesn’t matter what rate you shoot them at if you can’t hit your target. Here…” He swiped her bow off the ground and pulled out an arrow from his own quiver, knocking it into place. Peeta handed the weapon back to her. “Now, take your time, focus on what you were taught today, and shoot.”

Katniss looked at him closely for a moment before she set her legs and adjusted her grip, aiming down the field. Peeta knew he should be looking for flaws in her stance but in the seconds before she let go, he was caught up yet again in her beauty, mesmerized by the way her lithe body tensed with anticipation of the arrow’s coming release. She discharged the bowstring, and they both watched the arrow fly. It landed in one of target’s legs with a loud thwack, the sound reverberating loudly in the surrounding silent wood.

“Damn it!” Katniss cried again. She made to throw the bow on the ground again, but this time, Peeta was there to stop her.

“Don’t do that,” he said quietly, wrapping his hands around hers to prevent her from dropping it.

“It’s no good. I’m no good,” Katniss said. She struggled against his strong grip, trying to yank her hands from his grasp, but Peeta only tightened his hold on her, refusing to let go. Eventually, Katniss gave up and leaned her back against his chest, panting for air.

Peeta stood there frozen for a second, his heart pounding as it always did when Katniss was close to him. It felt so...right...to have Katniss in his arms, almost as though she had always been meant to be there. Finally, Peeta realized what he had to do, even though he was terrified this would not be what Katniss wanted to hear. But Peeta was tired of fighting his heart.

He leaned down so that his lips were only millimeters from her ear. Resisting the urge to suck on the soft, tender skin behind her earlobe with great effort, Peeta instead said, “You, Katniss Everdeen, are remarkable.” He heard Katniss’ sharp intake of breath, spurring him on. “I thought...well, originally, we all thought you were just some spoiled, entitled, Capitol puppet.” He felt Katniss tense and try to pull away, but he wouldn’t let her go.
“Please let me finish this,” he begged. “You see, I did think those things...but...very quickly, Katniss, I began to see how wrong I’d been. You were so kind to Rue, and then Delly and Annie, and then to everyone else. You stopped fighting us, opened up to us, and showed how brave you are by choosing to join us and go against Snow. I...I honestly can’t explain how happy I was when you asked to join us...to join me. You love so fiercely; it slays me. But it’s so evident in the way you talk about your sister and in what you did for her. And the way you’ve thrown yourself wholeheartedly into working, into training...” he laughed.

Peeta brought the bow up, making sure her hands stayed beneath his own, guiding her body to move in time with his. She fit so perfectly next to him, and the way she followed his movements so fluidly made Peeta almost sure that Katniss felt the same. “You’re demanding and willful, hard-headed and exacting, and you’re just so damn stubborn...” he whispered, before they released the arrow together.

It hit the bullseye.

“...But I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Peeta finished. He finally loosened his grip on Katniss and let his hands drop to his sides, waiting for her response. Katniss slowly turned around until Peeta was looking deep into her shining grey eyes.

“You...you really feel that way? About me?” she asked, her voice raw with emotion in a way that Peeta had never heard before.

He nodded and took a step towards her, not stopping until their torsos were only inches apart. “I don’t think there’s been a day since we’ve met that you haven’t surprised me in some way, Katniss. And from the moment you stepped out of that carriage, I’ve wanted you.” Peeta paused to take a deep breath, knowing he’d just crossed a line that he would never be able to return from. “For...for a long time, I didn’t want to accept that, but I’m through with denying that you aren’t the most beautiful woman I’ve ever encountered, in so, so many ways.” Peeta looked down at her, embarrassed at the fact that his entire body trembled over his declaration.

Katniss stared up at him with a shocked expression on her face, her breaths coming in short gasps until Peeta felt compelled to heave out a miserable sounding “I’ve offended you. I beg your pardon.” He turned to go, reminding himself that this wasn’t the first time he’d misread someone’s feelings for him.

“Peeta! Wait!” Katniss nearly shouted. Peeta felt her catch one of his hands in both of hers, pulling him back around. He barely had time to register what was happening before Katniss’ mouth was crashing onto his own.

Peeta stood there stunned, his mind barely able to process the way Katniss’ soft warm lips felt against his. Her breasts were pressed against his chest, and she wrapped her hands around his neck, only to tug gently on the curls at the back of his neck. But his paralysis lasted only a moment, for Peeta found himself dropping the bow in his hands to wrap his arms around her, pulling Katniss tightly into him to deepen the kiss.

Peeta ran one hand up and down her back before he settled it into her hair, the other remaining at Katniss’ waist to keep her against him. Their mouths moved with one another seamlessly in a dance that Peeta knew he would never tire of. His whole body flooded with warmth, such was his joy at her reciprocated affection. Finally, they pulled back from one another, gasping for air, but they did not let go of one another.

“I feel the same, Peeta,” Katniss panted, running her hands along his chest, eyes wide in a silent plea for him to believe her. “Please don’t go.”
Peeta’s face split into a wide grin, and he tugged her up for another kiss.

Peeta couldn’t stop smiling. He had arrived at the bonfire over a half an hour ago, but the second he had caught sight of Katniss, he hadn’t been able to control his smile nor had he been able to check himself from shooting Katniss secret glances. Based on the way her eyes kept meeting his, it appeared Katniss was unable to stop herself from doing the same.

They had returned to the camp shortly after their second kiss, not by choice, but because Delly had come looking for them. They had jumped apart when they’d heard her loud call, barely parting before the blond girl had come into their view. Delly had announced that the horses had somehow gotten out of the makeshift paddock they had for them, and Peeta was needed to assist with their capture. Peeta had run off but not before bestowing Katniss with a look of regret that he hoped conveyed how much he would have rather stayed there with her. And when he’d finally returned to the fire, having recaptured all the horses with the aide of the other men, Katniss had drawn his gaze like a moth to a flame.

Peeta surreptitiously raked his eyes over Katniss and sighed. The longing to have her in his arms again was growing with each passing second.

“You seem to be in an awfully good mood tonight, Peet,” Finnick’s laughing voice echoed from over his head. “I don’t think I’ve seen you smile this much since that time we left that baron with naught but a woman’s undergarments to wear. Poor chap.”

Peeta laughed in response. “That was your idea, if I remember correctly. Gale was pissed off we had to take clothes that we didn’t need. I think my favorite part was when he made you wear said clothes until we could pawn them off.”

Finnick wrinkled his nose at the memory. “I’d forgotten that. Why he didn’t just let me dump them like I wanted to, I don’t know. Something about punishing me about wasting time…or good money…or something…” Finnick shrugged and sat down next to Peeta. “But it’s Gale, and who listens to him anyway?” he called out loudly. Gale glared at him from across the circle as the whole group burst out laughing.

“Can’t you leave him alone for once, Finn?” Peeta asked, though he couldn’t suppress his grin.

“Nah. It’s too much fun to bate Mr. Serious.” He laughed again, and then nudged Peeta. “But back to you, dear leader. What’s put you in a good mood tonight?”

Peeta gazed at his friend, deliberately keeping his face neutral. “Just pleased with the work the group did today. It’s obvious how much the others are improving, don’t you think?”

“Uh huh…But they’ve always been doing that. You make them practice enough.” He looked suspiciously at Peeta, but Peeta continued to wear his indifferent mask. Finnick then waved his hand across the circle. “Our newest member looks particular happy tonight, too. I’m so used to seeing a scowl on her face that it’s a bit of a shock to see her smile. Kind of like the feeling I get when Gale graces us with one every eon or so. You wouldn’t know why she’s so pleased tonight, would you?”

“Perhaps it’s because she beat Gale? Or just enjoyed her lessons as a whole?” Peeta calmly suggested. Then, because he knew Finnick would probably comment on Katniss’ private bow lesson after the rest had finished, he added, “I’m sure she’d appreciate a session on the use of the trident sometime.” Finnick raised his eyebrows at him, like he suspected that Peeta wasn’t telling the truth, but said no more, recognizing the firm tone Peeta used when he was done talking.
Peeta turned his attention back across the fire, but his stomach lurched wildly when he saw that Darius was again talking to Katniss. “You shouldn’t be jealous. She kissed you for fifteen minutes straight, not him,” a small voice in Peeta’s head reminded him, but the pain that Cashmere had wrought upon his heart still held sway over him. It was all too obvious that Darius, his kind, always laughing friend, also had feelings for Katniss, and a fear that Peeta could lose her even as he’d just attained her welled within his soul. He balled his hands into fists, struggling to resist the urge to walk over to Katniss and kiss her, to claim what was his before everyone else.

“I’m going to bed, Finnick,” he announced abruptly. “Let everyone know they can rest tomorrow. Day after, we start preparing supplies again and up the training regimen. A week and a half from now we’re back on the road. It feels like we’ve been here too long already.” Finnick frowned at Peeta and his sudden shift in mood but said he would inform the group of the plan.

Peeta picked up his bow from where it lay beside him and walked away in the direction of his quarters, but just when he caught sight of his tent, a sharp crack rent the air. Peeta whipped out an arrow from his quiver and spun around swiftly, ready to confront whatever foe had come upon him. Instead, his blue eyes met ones of silver, ones that were full of alarm...and fear.

“Katniss!” Peeta yelped, dropping his bow to the ground. He rushed forward to take her into his arms for an apology, but she pushed against his chest with both hands to stop him.

“Were you going to shoot me?” she asked angrily.

“I...I...” Peeta stammered, finally managing to utter a soft “No.”

Katniss narrowed her eyes at him. “Because what would you have to shoot? There aren’t any animals wilder than the goats, nothing that would harm you. There aren’t any enemies here.”

Peeta sighed heavily. “I know, Katniss. I know. I just...you don’t understand...sometimes I just...” Peeta stopped talking, running a hand through his hair. His past was suddenly looming large before him, and he was not willing to confront it, not with this moonless night bearing down upon him, ready to swallow him whole. There had been too many nights like this when he was young, too many nights when he was alone.

“Peeta?” Katniss’ voice managed to break through his dark thoughts, a reminder that for once, he was not actually alone. He stared at her with wide eyes while her silver ones examined his face. He could see her struggling to discern what was going on inside his tumultuous head.

“I’m sorry,” Peeta sighed.

Katniss reached up and placed a chaste but warm kiss on his lips, touching his face gently as she did so. “What happened to you, Peeta?” she whispered. She continued to touch him, her fingers feathering lightly over his hair, his cheeks, his jaw, before she continued down his neck and arms, finally intertwining her fingers with his. Peeta understood that she was trying to reassure him...to let him know that he was safe here. “Who hurt you?” Katniss whispered so quietly that Peeta almost didn’t hear her. He gripped her to himself.

“I can’t, Katniss. Not like this,” he choked out, his voice breaking with sorrow as a thousand nightmares pressed for his attention. Katniss looked up at him in confusion, but Peeta met her gaze mutely. To his great surprise, her expression changed into one of understanding.

“I get them, too. The nightmares don’t stop, even when I’m awake. It’s hard not to think of the bad things,” she said.

Peeta jerked his head in agreement, still ashamed of his reaction. “I promise, Katniss. I’ll tell you my story. Just, not tonight.”
“Okay,” Katniss accepted.

Peeta looked around confusedly. “Won’t they notice you’re missing back at the campfire?” They had not spoken of it directly, but he had gotten the impression that Katniss wished to keep whatever was happening between them a secret for the time being. Peeta suspected it had to do with Katniss wanting to prove herself to the rest on her own strength rather than through having a relationship with their leader, which he understood that and was willing to accept it...for now.

Katniss shook her head at him. “They actually knew I was coming to see you.” Peeta’s brow furrowed with more confusion. “You see, Finnick announced that you were giving everyone the day off tomorrow, and then Rue reminded me that it would be a good time to make my request of you.”

“Request?”

Katniss tugged on his hair playfully. “I saw the mockingjay first on the day we got here, didn’t I? Delly explained to me how the first person to spot a mockingjay near you whenever you arrive in a new place gets to ask you do anything they want.”

“Within reason,” Peeta said, starting to grin. “And what does m’lady ask of me?”

“I want you to teach me to hunt tomorrow.” Katniss smiled widely as Peeta’s face lit up at the prospect of a whole day with her.

“I suppose I could endure a whole day with you,” Peeta replied. He pulled her up, smiling when she let out a startled squeak, but her surprise was quickly forgotten as Peeta brought his mouth down to hers.

Their lips easily took up the sinuous dance from earlier, as though this was not just their third kiss, but the thousandth. Peeta ran his hands up into Katniss’ hair, releasing the braid that held it in place, and relished the feel of her dark waves loosening under his fingers. He clutched both of her cheeks in his hands and deepened the kiss, with Katniss’ ensuing moan sending all the blood in Peeta’s body rushing towards his groin.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured while he paused to catch his breath. He looked at her flushed cheeks and bright eyes hungrily before drawing her back to him.

“Peeta,” Katniss whimpered.

Peeta thought the sound of his name on her lips was one of the most intoxicating things he’d ever heard. He sucked her top lip between his and ran his tongue along it, his need to taste her too much to bear any longer. Katniss gasped but gripped his shoulders tightly, encouraging Peeta to continue his ministrations. He tenderly repeated the action, and then began to probe her mouth, running his tongue along her bottom lip and palate, before he finally started to massage her tongue with his.

Katniss pressed into him more firmly, and Peeta groaned in pleasure as she brushed along his now rock hard member. Peeta thrust against her to induce more of the exquisite feeling without a thought to what Katniss might think. She pulled back from him, a mildly amused look on her face, but before Peeta could utter an apology, Katniss ran her hand over the front of his pants and grasped him through them. Peeta gasped at the sensation; it felt so good. Meanwhile, Katniss smirked at what he knew was a look of utter shock on his face.

“To be continued,” Katniss murmured. She placed one last quick kiss on his lips before she sauntered off into the darkness. Peeta stood where she’d left him, feeling completely dazed. He
wasn’t sure he’d be able to focus entirely on hunting tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Thank you again for waiting. As always, I hope you found it worth the wait. And remember to please review! Special last shout out to peetabreadgirl...She requested that Katniss get ‘one good shot in’ on Peeta during the sword scene. I only hope I did it justice ;)}
A Past Revealed (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Thanks everyone for your patience. This is a chapter that I’m really excited to share as Peeta finally starts to reveal his backstory! As you can see by the title, this is actually a two parter, because it’s a long story to tell. That was not my original plan, and thus, after Chapter 10, I was going to be writing on some of my other WIPs before returning to TST. However, since I did split Peeta’s story, I’ve decided to complete Chapter 11 before I work on those other projects. I didn’t want to be cruel and make you wait that long :)

Thank you to my awesome betas, titania522/ct522, solas violetta, and peetabreadgirl. Not only do they correct my grammar, but they also provide lots of laughs and fun to keep me motivated. Hope you enjoy and please review!

Katniss

“Oh, fie!” Katniss yelled, as another one of her arrows missed her target by a mile. She watched the rabbit scamper away into the brush and let out a frustrated huff. Hitting a moving object was a lot harder than the stationary practice targets Katniss had been working with the past few days, and though they had been at this for hours now, Katniss had yet to hit anything.

“Such language, Lady Everdeen. What would that ridiculously done-up woman have to say?” Peeta teased from behind her. Katniss whipped around to find him staring at her with an amused expression, his blue eyes twinkling with mirth.

“You mean my escort on the tour? Her name is Effie,” Katniss said.

Peeta’s grin widened, and he nodded, drawing near to Katniss so that their chests were separated by mere inches. “What do you think she’d have to say about your language?” he asked again.

“She’d probably tell me that I have bad manners and try to find me a tutor to rid me of my barbarism,” Katniss said with a smile.

Peeta laughed, pulling her tightly into him, and leaned down to give her a brief kiss. “Hmm,” he murmured against her lips. “If you are a barbarian, you’re the prettiest one I’ve ever seen.” Katniss sighed with contentment and re-captured his mouth in hers. They had been like this all morning.

Katniss had awoken an hour before dawn, her excitement at the prospect of learning to hunt and most importantly, of getting to spend the entire day with Peeta, too much for her sleeping mind to handle. She’d wandered out to the burnt-out campfire under the expectation that she would have to wait awhile for Peeta awake, but had instead found him pacing back and forth across the clearing already. For a brief second, Katniss had stood frozen, a blush staining her cheeks as she thought about how she’d boldly touched him the night before, and unsure what had come over her. But the next second, Peeta had hurtled towards her, gathering her in his arms for a deep kiss. It was a pattern that had since repeated itself several times; so much so, that it wasn’t really surprising that Katniss still couldn’t hit anything. She pulled away and gave Peeta a teasing glare.

“You know, if you keep this up, I’m never going to be able to shoot something that’s moving,”
she gasped through swollen lips. Peeta ran his finger along Katniss’ braid with another smile.

“You’re distracting,” he said simply.

“You’re one to talk,” she retorted.

“Well, I don’t have much competition here.”

Katniss rolled her eyes. “You don’t have much competition anywhere.”

Peeta ran a hand through his hair self-consciously, blushing, before issuing a small smile. He looked off in the direction the rabbit had taken. “When you’re shooting right now, it’s reactionary. You’re shooting where your target is at that moment,” he said. “You need to anticipate where the object is going to be moving next and shoot at that space instead.” He turned back to her. “Does that make sense?”

Katniss nodded her head, looking around in hopes she would spot another animal, but she was met with silence. “I think we scared everything off with our conversation,” she told Peeta.

Peeta opened his mouth, perhaps to agree with her, when a sudden gust of strong wind whipped through the trees, their branches cracking like the wood in the nightly campfire. A thunderclap roared in the distance, sending the birds into flight, twittering out their alarm.

“Sounds like a storm,” Katniss stated nervously.

Peeta studied the sky with intensity, which was fast becoming a dark, threatening grey. “Yeah. I don’t think we’d make it back to camp before it comes, but there’s a cave near here we can wait it out in.” Peeta gripped Katniss’ hand tightly in his own. “Come on,” he said. They started to run swiftly through the trees as the first drops of rain began to fall.

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“It’s right up there!” Peeta yelled out above the howling wind, but Katniss could still barely hear him above the tempest. The trees groaned with each gust of air, sending rain droplets pelting down towards them. Lightning flashed repeatedly in the sky, followed quickly by crashes of thunder that shook the ground beneath their feet. With a violent crack, Katniss saw one strike hit a nearby tree. The wood burst into flames, illuminating their surroundings in a sinister light. Katniss gasped with fear.

“Here!” Peeta called, pulling her down suddenly into a rocky outcropping low to the ground. She looked around confusedly until she saw a hole, barely wide enough for a person to fit though, among the rocks. She stepped inside and slid down the slick rock into the cave, Peeta following after her.

They stood in silence for a few seconds, staring at one another, the only sound coming from the water dripping off their clothes. Peeta’s eyes searched Katniss’ face before traveling quickly over the rest of her, as though wanting to assure himself she was ok. Katniss, however, became acutely aware of how her soaked clothing was clinging to her wet frame. She began to shiver from cold and embarrassment.

Peeta sighed, dropping his bow, quiver, and bag to the ground. “I’ll be right back,” he said.

“What?! Peeta! No!” Katniss cried out, as another boom rattled the cave. She reached out to stop him from leaving the safety of the cave, but he slipped out before she could reach him.

The minutes passed by in terrifying solitude. Katniss felt she could barely breathe, much less
move. She didn’t understand where Peeta could possibly have gone when it felt like the world had gone mad, the din threatening to rent the earth so as to swallow Katniss whole. Just when she could bear it no longer, a clattering of wood rolled down the embankment, followed shortly by Peeta.

“Dammit,” he swore, a frustrated look on his face. “Didn’t mean to drop those. Fire is going to be harder to get started now. Least there’s not a lot of water on-- Ooof!” He abruptly stopped talking, as Katniss threw herself at him and pulled him into a tight embrace, cutting off his air.

“Don’t do that again,” she demanded, angry tears welling in her eyes. Peeta looked at her in alarm.

“Katniss, I--” he started to speak, but Katniss cut him off again with a shake of her head.

“I could have helped you with that.”

Peeta gave her a dismissive wave, shaking his wet curls of water. “It was nothing. Just a little wet.”

Katniss scowled and studied him a moment. “You do that a lot, you know,” she said.

“Do what?” Peeta said with confusion.

“Do it all, Peeta!” Katniss waved her hands over the fire. “Hunting, scouting, even fighting! You never let anyone help, and yet you have all these people who look up to you, who have sworn their loyalty to you. I don’t understand why you still behave like a lone wolf.”

Peeta’s mouth fell open in surprise, clearly unsure of what to say.

“Habit, I suppose,” he finally said.

Katniss glared at him. “But you could do things…we could do things…together.”

Peeta fell quiet for a moment, his blue eyes widening in seeming surprise. “Together?” he questioned, the word seemingly foreign on his tongue. Katniss realized then, for the first time, that even though he worked so closely with his men, even with whatever was going on between them, the concept that he was not alone was not one Peeta had considered before. Katniss reached up and gently swept his damp curls back from his forehead before cupping his face in her hands to ensure that he met her eyes.

“Yes. You and I. Together.”

Peeta ran his hand along her braid, as he had done earlier that day, and placed a chaste kiss on Katniss’ lips. “I’ll make the fire,” he murmured softly, hastening to gather up the twigs scattered over the floor. Katniss bit her lip. That hadn’t exactly been the reaction she was hoping for.

She watched him gather the branches and twigs into a pile, lining it with rocks from around the cave. He drew some pieces of flint out of his pack and began striking them together hard, sending sparks showering towards the wood. After several frustrated minutes, small flickers of light finally started to shine, casting strange, shifting shadows along the walls. Peeta stripped his cloak, laying it down next to the fire to dry, and sat down. He looked at her expectantly, and Katniss did the same.

They passed the next several minutes without speaking, allowing the fire to slowly warm their wet bodies. Katniss felt she couldn’t look at Peeta, troubled as she was by their most recent exchange, so she chose to ignore her feelings, concentrating instead on her surroundings.
The cave was small, no bigger than Katniss’ childhood room in her father’s manor. The walls and floor consisted of some black rock, worn smooth with age, which reflected the firelight as glass would. Rivulets of water streamed down the inclined entrance they had slid down, collecting at the bottom to form an onyx-colored pool, dark and mysterious. Katniss heard a soft plinking echoing from behind her, suggesting that there was a hole somewhere in the ceiling. She could not decide if the cave was warm and inviting or cold and unwelcoming. Katniss glanced over at Peeta to find him staring at her, but his eyes quickly flitted away, much as they had done the first few nights she’d been with the group.

“How did you know about this place?” she wondered. “And where exactly are we?” Peeta shifted uncomfortably, still avoiding her eyes.

“We’re near the boundary between District 3 and District 4,” he said slowly, but Katniss sensed there was more he was not telling her. She scowled at him.

“You didn’t answer my first question,” she challenged. Peeta finally looked at her then, his eyes dark and full of conflict.

“I’ve stayed here before,” he finally said. “A long time ago.”

“How long ago?” she asked bluntly, without real regard for what she was asking. Her curiosity was too strong. Peeta turned away from her to look at the fire.

“I was eleven,” he said in a soft voice.

Katniss bit her lip. Questions were rising to the surface of her mind as fast as the bubbles rose to the surface of a hot spring, but Peeta’s reluctance was more than evident by the strained expression on his face. Katniss reached over to place a hand over one of his hands, cupping his face once again to direct his eyes to look upon her.

“Trust me.”

Katniss felt Peeta clench his hand into a fist, his mouth forming a grim line on his face. She waited, unsure of what he would say, or if he would say anything at all. Finally, he exhaled a shaky breath.

“I’ve never trusted anyone... with this.”

Katniss did not know exactly what Peeta meant by that, but she squeezed his hand in what she hoped was a reassuring manner. Peeta took a deep breath.

“If you traveled about twenty miles east of here, you would find the remains of a small village,” he started. “There isn’t much there now. Just a bunch of crumbling trade shops and burnt-out homes, but that’s where I grew up.”

Katniss blinked. “Why is it...” She stopped, thinking better of her question after noticing the pain in his eyes. Perhaps explaining why his village was burned to the ground was too much for him at this moment. “You said a woman named Mags raised you? Right?” she said tentatively. Peeta nodded.

“Yes, from the time I was five,” he said. “Mags...And then a retired knight also took care of us. His name was Boggs.”

“Boggs,” Katniss said slowly, testing the name. It sounded vaguely familiar to her. Peeta didn’t seem surprised by the confused recognition on her face.
“He was quite famous back when King Richard’s father ruled Panem. He was head of the Royal Guard,” he said. “Boggs never really spoke about it, but I found out that Boggs was dismissed from the service once King Richard took over for his father… Or rather, Queen Helen, who thought he was too old.” Peeta fingered his bow. “Boggs gave this to me shortly before he died. I’m not sure where he got it, but my earliest memory of him was teaching me to shoot.” He glanced at Katniss, the smile Katniss had come to love on his face. “Boggs taught me everything he knew: how to ride a horse, the use of disguises, archery, how to use the sword, the strategy of battle. The art of survival. He’s the reason I’m alive today. We practiced every single day.”

“And Mags?” Katniss asked.

Peeta’s face sobered immediately at the question. “Mags was wonderful, too,” he said in a pained voice. “She taught me how to read and write and any subject you can imagine really. Politics, science, diplomacy…Magic.” He quirked his eyebrows at her, eyes twinkling.


“Well… Not exactly, but there was a rumor in all the villages that she was a witch.” His face became clouded again. “She did claim to have the gift of foresight, and the ability to talk to some of the animals. You remember what I told you the other day about the Mockingjays?” Katniss nodded her head, recalling what Peeta had said about the birds being some of the last remnants of Old Panem, when magic still ruled the land.

“Did you believe Mags?” Katniss questioned.

Peeta was silent for a moment, his face searching hers as though he was looking for confirmation of something. “Sometimes,” he admitted finally. Katniss narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but Peeta offered no more explanation. Katniss decided to let it go for now.

“They sound like they were wonderful people,” she offered.

Peeta nodded his head again. “They were. Though...” He paused again, taking so long that Katniss finally nudged.

“Though...what?”

Peeta sighed. “I wasn’t their son,” he said rather bluntly. “I didn’t expect them to love me like one…and they didn’t.” Katniss looked at him with confusion.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I think…They did care for me, but they were my teachers, and I was their student. That was the role they took on, and that was always their first priority. I don’t even know why,” Peeta mused. “What is the point of educating a poor orphaned boy with no hope of rising above his peasant status how to fight like a knight? Or debate with a council? Or speak like a prince? I never understood it!” he said, throwing his hands up in the air. Katniss did not know how to respond, but Peeta did not seem to expect an answer. He gave her a sad smile. “All I ever really wanted was a family. You’re lucky, Katniss.”

Katniss choked back a sudden sob, swallowing hard to rid herself of the lump in her throat. “You...you don’t remember your family at all?” she asked thickly. Peeta looked at her, the sadness on his face deepening.

“No,” he said. “I can’t remember the time before I was with Mags and Boggs. I’ve tried and tried, but there’s just nothing there. It’s like someone pulled a shade over my memory.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Or maybe people just don’t remember what happened to them before they were
Katniss bit her lip again, thinking hard about his words. While she did not remember very specific events from that age, such as when she had gone to the palace with her father and sung for the princes, Katniss did have some vaguely defined recollections. The touch of her mother’s hands on her hair, her father singing her to sleep, Haymitch grumbling as he shuffled through the yard... All lost to the past, but still sweet in her memory. It was strange that Peeta would not even have these remembrances left to him. She looked over at Peeta, only to find him grinning strangely at her.

“Odd, isn’t it?” he said in a pained voice. “I’m sure you’ve reached the same conclusion I did. There aren’t many scenarios where someone can’t remember anything about their earliest childhood days. I can only assume my family didn’t want me,” he said edgily.

Katniss let out an unexpected gasp of shock. The concept that someone wouldn’t want the fair, golden-haired, smiling boy she pictured Peeta to have been in his earliest youth was something she could barely fathom. “Peeta, no!” she said with a violent shake of her head. She clutched at his arm. “That can’t have been it. There could... anything could have happened. Perhaps, they had to give you up for some reason, or maybe something tragic happened where they couldn’t come to you…” What in the world was she saying? How was that any better than abandonment?

Peeta seemed to agree with her internal thoughts because he started laughing, but there was no mirth in it. “It’s alright, Katniss. Believe me when I say that I accepted long ago that no one could want me.” Katniss looked at him sharply, understanding his words appeared to encompass more than just an immediate family he had never met, and a pang of hurt shot through her heart. What they had was new, to be sure, but surely he thought she wanted him? Katniss floundered for a response.

“I’m sure there’s an explanation, Peeta. I can’t imagine that your parents didn’t love you,” she finally stumbled out. But she could immediately tell it was the wrong thing to say, as Peeta’s face darkened further on hearing her utter the word love.

“I haven’t been loved,” he said, and though she heard no self-pity in his voice, his assumption still made Katniss angry.

“Of course you have!” she spat out, earning a startled look from Peeta. But Katniss did not want him to speak any more, for the moment. “Your men love you. All of them. I think they’d all lay down their lives for you in an instant, if it was required.” Katniss waved her hands about in a haphazard, frustrated manner, gesturing over him. “You’re good, and kind, and funny. And you aren’t afraid to stand up for what you believe. You don’t waver in your convictions. It’s a rare trait. Everyone loves you,” she finished, chest heaving from her outburst. Peeta’s eyes grew wide, and Katniss felt her entire body flood with heat when she realized the possible implication of her words. They were as much a shock to her as they were to Peeta.

“…I…” Katniss stuttered, quickly ducking her head away from him, hoping he would not question her, unsure if she was ready to confront the growing depth of her feelings for him. What happened?" she stupidly asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“What happened?” Peeta echoed, confusion and some other emotion filling his voice... Something like hope, Katniss decided. Sudden warmth filled her belly, spreading out to the farthest recesses of her body, far different from the embarrassment of the moments before. She tried to think of something to say.

“Uh, what happened to Mags and B-Boggs?” Katniss mumbled awkwardly.
Peeta was silent for so long that Katniss was finally compelled to look at him again, just catching the look of disappointment on his face before he rearranged his expression into one that was carefully neutral, and the warmth inside Katniss fled as quickly as it had come. She couldn’t help feeling like she had missed an opportunity of some kind.

“Peeta?”

“They died.”

Katniss’ heart stuttered in her chest. She supposed she shouldn’t be startled by this blunt statement. Finnick and some of the others had hinted as much, but the emptiness she now saw in Peeta’s face alarmed her.

“I was eleven,” Peeta continued. “It… I feel like I still don’t really know what happened. One day, Mags just told me I should go play for the day, to search for some berries and roots to replenish her supplies. She rarely let me out of her sight, so I should have known something was wrong… I felt something was wrong,” Peeta said woodenly. “But I ignored it. I just, wanted to have some fun. We were always working,” Peeta reasoned, but Katniss heard the anguish creeping into his tone. Katniss wasn’t even sure he was aware of her presence anymore.

“Mags… I said earlier, she claimed the gift of foresight. I don’t really know if that was true but there were some days where… it seemed like she knew what was going to happen. And that day… that day, the way she kissed me on my head before I went out, almost like she really was my mother… Well, she’d never done that before.” Peeta finally looked at her brokenly.

“I found the berries. The herbs. Even picked Mags some flowers,” Peeta breathed. “I stayed out longer than I meant to, but when you’re eleven, I don’t know… I was worried they’d be upset that I was covered in mud,” he choked out. Katniss slipped her hand into his.

“Peeta, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” she whispered.

Peeta shook his head slightly, a small pained smile on his face. “I promised I would tell you my story, Katniss. I meant that.”

“I...I know. But…” Katniss stopped speaking. She didn’t know how to tell him that she hadn’t expected his story to be this painful. Peeta squeezed her hand back, seeming to understand.

“It’s alright.” He took a steadying breath. “I found Boggs outside our cottage. His body was barely recognizable, but I knew it was him.” Peeta nodded towards his sword. “This is his. I found it hidden in the reeds next to the pond we had. I don’t know if Boggs threw it there deliberately or if it just ended up there. I couldn’t find Mags anywhere.” Peeta’s hand tightened around Katniss’ palm. “The mark of Snow’s secret guard was on the door… They’d wrenched it away from the rest of the house and burnt it. They set fire to everything in the village. Slaughtered the animals.” Peeta stared at her with deep sorrow. “Executed everyone. Man, woman, and child.” Katniss brought her hand to her mouth in horror.

“Oh, Peeta. Oh, Peeta! What...why? What were they looking for?” Katniss gasped, images of children screaming in front of a wall of flames forming in her mind.

Peeta shook his head again. “I don’t know, but I believe they thought Mags knew,” he grieved. Katniss’ breath hitched in her throat.

“Why do you say that?”

Peeta gave her another pained smile. “I think Gale told you that I’ve been to the King’s Vault, right? He told me he mentioned that to you. I think he was worried I’d be angry with him that he’d
revealed that,” Peeta laughed strangely, so unlike his usual warm tone.

“Yes? He...he did tell me that,” Katniss said slowly.

“I had to flee that night. The guard sent someone back...I assume to make sure no one survived. He was tall and blonde. I could smell the wine on him even from where I was hiding.” Peeta continued to reminisce. “I took my bow and Bogg’s sword and whatever food I could find, which amounted to a few loaves of burnt bread.” Peeta looked around the cave with eyes obviously seeing something entirely different. “I ran back into the woods. I ran and ran until I couldn’t run any further. Then, I found this place.” Katniss looked around the cave, too, seeing it in a new light, trying to imagine eleven year old Peeta, tumbling into this dark, dank place after finding his village, and the only father figure he’d ever known, had been murdered. Katniss shivered.

“But what does this have to do with the King’s Vault?” she asked.

“Nothing really,” Peeta shrugged. “Just after a few days of staying here and living on stale bread, I realized that Mag’s was the only one who was actually missing. Everyone else, I...I had found. That’s when I knew they must have taken her to the Capitol. I begged my way there, and then found work as a serving boy in the guard’s house. It wasn’t exactly a...pleasant experience,” Peeta grimaced. “But I did find out where they took prisoners and eventually, I was able to sneak my way into those dungeons.” Katniss watched as a look of extreme sadness came onto Peeta’s face, and he bowed his head. Dread filled Katniss’ heart even though she did not even know what she was about to hear.

“Did you find Mags?” Katniss asked in a barely audible tone. Peeta nodded.

“She... I don’t even know what they did to her. Mags was just this tiny little thing, harmless and frail,” Peeta choked out, one hand moving to the small pouch he wore on his hip at all times. “She was barely recognizable when I found her. So many broken bones. So many bruises. With the damage and swelling that had been done to her face, I don’t even know how she was breathing.” Katniss felt Peeta begin to tremble, the vibrations jarring her body, and she wrapped her arms around his waist as tightly as she could, trying to keep him with her as his grief threatened to bury him. “When Mags saw me, she smiled. Katniss. She actually smiled. Even though I’d failed her. Even though I let them do that to her,” Peeta continued, tears beginning to trickle down his cheeks. Katniss felt her eyes begin to sting with sorrow over this woman that she’d never met, the terrifying death she had suffered, and the fact that an eleven year old boy would blame himself for it.

“Peeta, it wasn’t your fault,” Katniss said, but by the hollow stare Peeta gave her, she realized she might as well have been talking to the cave wall.

“Mags died in my arms. She died in that terrible place, her body and spirit destroyed, so alone and scared, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it. I couldn’t even take Mags’ body out of there to bury her at home,” Peeta finished his tale brokenly, his chest now heaving with emotion. He would not look at her.

For a second, Katniss did not move, soaking in the horror of Peeta’s childhood even as she could barely process it. She sensed there was still more to tell, but Katniss could see that Peeta was spent from the effort of revealing so much already, and she decided it would unwise to push him further. Instead, Katniss surprised herself by hiking up her dress enough so that she could move into Peeta’s lap, straddling his waist, forcing him to look at her.

“Yes?” Katniss said gently. She reached up and tenderly brushed the wetness off his cheeks. Then, she wrapped her arms around his neck and bent her head so that their foreheads touched, holding him close to her. Peeta wended his arms around her and buried his face in her neck. “It
wasn’t your fault, and Mags wasn’t alone. Mags died with someone who she knew loved her. From what you’ve told me about her, I don’t think she would have asked for anything more,” Katniss whispered into his ear. She felt Peeta’s grip around her tighten. Katniss ran her fingers through his hair, stroking the silky strands over and over to calm his shaking form.

A few quiet minutes later, Peeta finally lifted his head and gave Katniss a watery smile. “And you say you aren’t great with words,” he said as he ran his hand along her bread. He leaned in to give her a gentle kiss, and Katniss tasted his gratitude for her words on her lips. She kissed him back, pouring into Peeta her own gratefulness that he had somehow survived his childhood without bitterness, wishing still to comfort him. “You were just a little boy, and their deaths were not your fault. You shouldn’t blame yourself for their deaths, and you don’t have to atone for them either,” Katniss said firmly, tugging lightly on his curls again. She kissed his nose and embraced him again, finally able to understand some of the shattered parts of his soul.

Peeta looked at her for an eternity, the anguish in his eyes slowly fading away. “You think so?” he asked in a voice that echoed into the past, recalling the scared little boy he’d once been.

“I remember getting so lost, trying to find my way out of there. When I’d snuck in, I followed a guard, but the Vaults are extensive. I found more rooms with weapons than I cared to count, though I did steal several bags of that blue powder you’ve seen us use.” He let out a small laugh. “That was actually the first time I’d stolen anything, and then I ended up following this stray orange tabby cat out of there. I figured it knew its way around those evil halls better than I did, and sure enough, it took me back to the light. That was the last time I was in the Capitol, but Mags, Boggs, my village… I’ve never forgotten their murders.”

“I don’t think anyone would expect you to, Peeta, but hear me. I can’t say it enough, as often as I think you need to hear it. You were just a little boy, and their deaths were not your fault. You shouldn’t blame yourself for their deaths, and you don’t have to atone for them either,” Katniss said firmly, tugging lightly on his curls again. She kissed his nose and embraced him again, finally able to understand some of the shattered parts of his soul.

Peeta smiled again and reached into the pouch, pulling out a shining white jewel on a string. It caught the light of the fire and suddenly glowed softly red, like it had absorbed the flame into itself. “This is a moonstone,” Peeta said, turning the orb until it turned yellow, then orange, then red again. It had to be one of the most beautiful things she’d ever seen, even more so than her own long-gone necklace.

“Where did you get it?”

“It was Mags’. She gave it to me the day she told me to go play and joked that I should give it to the moon when I found her.” He considered the moonstone with a contemplative expression before placing it carefully back into the pouch.

“There’s something I would like to give you,” he said a little hesitantly.

“Oh, what is it?”

Peeta made a non-descript noise in his throat and reached back into the pouch. Katniss watched as he pulled out a thin golden strand that she recognized. Her heart began pounding in her chest. She could see the little emeralds on the golden circle surrounding the mockingjay glinting brightly, their centers the color of a deep green forest glittering in the first rays of light after a thunderous storm.

He kept it! He kept it! He kept it!
The thought echoed over and over in Katniss’ mind as Peeta offered her back her father’s gift, blinking hard against the tears that sprang unbidden to her eyes.

“You didn’t sell it,” she choked out, grasping at the chain.

Peeta placed the necklace carefully into Katniss’ palm. “I’m sorry, Katniss,” he said with a voice filled with remorse. “I couldn’t bring myself to send it off to Beetee, that day we met. I don’t even know why. I think I just wanted you to accept me for who I was without my having to make a grand gesture. I’ve done that before, and it didn’t…I just ended up… Nevermind. Just…you were the most beautiful, most challenging, most frustrating person…but I still felt such a connection to you. I can’t even begin to explain it. I was going to give it back to you the night you told me about your father. I had no idea why you felt as strongly about it as you did; I didn’t bother to ask. I thought it was just a jewel. But when you told me those things, I wanted to give it back, but then Darius asked you to dance, and I couldn’t. And there hasn’t been a right time since then. I’m sorry for keeping it so long,” Peeta said all in a disjointed rush, looking a little lost.

Katniss blinked, startled at Peeta’s abrupt admission. Her hand closed over the necklace, savoring the feel of the cool metal against her skin. Katniss slowly placed the jewel at her throat, scarcely able to believe Peeta thought enough of her to return this. It felt like a long lost friend had returned home to her.

“I’d understand if you were furious with me,” Peeta said quietly. Katniss looked up at him to find his blue eyes filled with sorrow and fear. “I’d understand,” he repeated. Katniss suddenly became acutely aware that she was still straddling his torso.

“Oh, Peeta! You kept it!” she cried out as she crashed her mouth down upon his, laughing a little at his grunt of surprise, and reveled in the feeling of his hands clutching at her hips to anchor himself.

Katniss pressed herself against Peeta insistently, easily parting his lips so that she could slip her tongue inside his mouth. Katniss ran it over his teeth and palate while she again brought her hands up into his hair. Peeta groaned and gripped her more tightly, pulling her over his now rock-hard member, and Katniss gasped as his length brushed at her core through her undergarments.

“You’re beautiful, Katniss,” Peeta mumbled against her mouth. He sucked on her tongue, running his over her bottom lip, before he trailed kisses along her jaw and worked his way up to her earlobe, which he drew into his mouth. The sensation was exquisite, and Katniss tilted her neck to give him better access, inadvertently pressing her breasts into his chest as she did so.

“You already…oh…” Katniss moaned, unable to speak for a second as Peeta moved to kiss her along her neck, stopping at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. He finally pulled back, his eyes twinkling with laughter. Katniss scowled.

“I already what?” he teased. Katniss deepened her scowl, amazed at how much she could miss his lips when they’d only been gone a few seconds.

“You already called me beautiful,” Katniss said.

Peeta grinned. “It doesn’t make it any less true.” Katniss snorted with impatience.

“Well, then why don’t you just show me!” Katniss said loudly, blushing as she saw Peeta’s eyebrows rise with amusement, but it was not enough for her to regret it. She was more than thankful Peeta had revealed so much to her, but now, all she wanted was him. She whispered, “Touch me.” Katniss felt Peeta stiffen at her words, jerking his hips upwards to again hit her center. Katniss moaned and ground down on him. She grabbed Peeta’s hands and boldly placed
them on her breasts.

“Katniss,” Peeta breathed, his voice gruff with want, as he began to pinch at her nipples through her dress. Katniss felt them erupt into hard, tight buds at his ministrations, encouraging him to massage them, as little gasps of pleasure fell from her lips. And when he placed a hand over the leather straps that held her bodice in place, the question of whether she would allow him to undo them in his eyes, Katniss nodded her head enthusiastically and without a second thought. Peeta unlaced the leather slowly, and when he finally had them undone, he tugged her dress down gently, exposing the fullness of her breasts to the cool air. “Oh Katniss,” he murmured before his mouth descended onto one pert mound. Katniss let out a sharp cry that echoed around the cave as he began to suck at her sensitive skin, drawing her nipple to an even higher peak. He squeezed her other breast firmly in his free hand as Katniss clutched at his back to keep herself from melting away from the intense heat boiling within her.

As he switched sides and lapped at her other breast, she felt Peeta reach behind him to grab his cloak, now dried from the fire, pulling it towards them. He moved away from her to lay Katniss down upon it and settled his solid warmth on top of her, but Katniss still shivered from the feel of the cold floor through the cloak.

“I, um, think it’s too damp and cold in here to fully remove any, uh, clothes,” Peeta said, trailing a finger along the mockingjay necklace, his eyes still unabashedly on her breasts. He began to suck on them once more while Katniss mewled in protest of his statement. Katniss heard him chuckle. “We can still...do other things...” Peeta looked up at her, and Katniss saw his neck go pink and rise into his face.

“Like what?” she asked before she could even think about what she was saying. Katniss blushed profusely, realizing she had revealed how little experience she actually had in these matters. She worried that Peeta had perhaps thought differently, given the way she had touched him the night before. “Sorry,” she said quietly, staring hard up at the ceiling with a determination born of absolute embarrassment, but a second later Peeta’s smiling face came into focus above her. Heat pooled in Katniss’ belly as she looked into his darkened eyes, which had turned midnight blue with his desire. He leaned down until he was so close that Katniss could feel his warm breath on her face.

“Let me show you.”

Katniss inhaled sharply as she felt one of Peeta’s hands begin to skate along her leg while his lips descended upon hers once more, plunging his tongue inside to probe every crevice of her mouth as his thumb came along her jaw to anchor her in place. Katniss tried to kiss him back, but the light circles he kept rubbing over her calf proved too great a distraction, and her head fell back against the cloak. Katniss groaned and lifted her hips in a desperate attempt to urge him to move higher.

Peeta took the hint and slowly tugged her underclothes off, running his hands up both her legs until he could stroke her inner skin, his smile lighting up the darkness. He trailed a finger over her folds, sending a rush of wetness flooding to that sweet spot between her thighs, and the throbbing bud at Katniss’ apex cried out for attention. Katniss almost wept with frustration. His hands felt so good, and yet, they were still not quite where she wanted them to be. “Peeta!” Katniss cried out. Peeta’s grin widened, as if all he had been waiting for was the sound of his name on her lips. He swirled a finger in her wetness before thrusting it inside to pump her. “Oh, God,” Katniss moaned when he added a second one, feeling him curl his fingers back inside her to hit right there.

“You’re so wet, Katniss,” Peeta murmured as he began to shower her breasts with kisses once more. Katniss moved in time with the rhythm Peeta created, drawing his fingers deep inside herself. She snaked a hand down her body, wishing to rub her pulsing nub, but Peeta’s thumb got
there first, circling on it until Katniss let out another loud cry. She pulled Peeta’s face roughly back up to hers for a deep kiss, while she began squeezing her breasts as her body rushed rapidly towards her climax. With one final thrust of Peeta’s fingers, Katniss tumbled over the edge. Peeta continued to pump her, to touch her, until she finally stopped trembling and became a sated, melted mess in his arms. Katniss watched with wide eyes as he removed his hand and sucked her juices from his fingers. She wasn’t sure she’d ever seen anything more erotic.

“Was that...good?” Peeta asked hopefully, and Katniss could see the genuine concern for her pleasure in his eyes. He turned onto his back and gathered Katniss up against his chest, while Katniss nodded serenely, lost in her happiness for this day, the past few moments, and the utter, complete safety she felt in his arms. They spent the next minutes in blissful silence, until Katniss became aware of the evidence of Peeta’s own need against her thigh. She moved her hand to cover the bulge in his pants, and Peeta jerked at the touch.

“Katniss...” he said a little uncertainly, letting out a loud groan as she began to stroke him through his pants. With titanic effort, Peeta placed his hand over Katniss’ to stop her movements. “You don’t have to do that,” he said breathlessly, but Katniss just placed a soft kiss on his lips.

“I want to,” she insisted but saw the doubt still on Peeta’s face. So, to prove her point, she reached for the leather binding of his breeches and quickly undid them while Peeta looked on with wide eyes. “Lift your hips,” she ordered firmly.

Peeta did as he was told silently, and Katniss tugged his pants down just enough to expose his cock, watching as it slapped down on his hard stomach. Desire rippled low in Katniss’ stomach. She had already seen this part of him once, but it was one thing to see him from afar and quite another to finally have him to touch. She placed her hand over his member, coating it in the fluid leaking from the head and began to stroke him again.

“Katniss,” Peeta hissed, all traces of uncertainty gone from his voice. He thrust into her hand repeatedly and closed his eyes as pleasure contorted his face.

“Is this what you like?” Katniss asked.

“A little...harder,” Peeta said through gritted teeth. He covered Katniss’ hand with his own, showing her how he liked to be gripped. He continued with her for a few strokes but eventually his hand fell away to ball into a tight fist. Katniss brought her other hand up to fondle his sack, delighting in the loud groans Peeta was making, and increased her pace. He began to jerk his hips in an erratic manner until he suddenly came, spurting white, hot, beads of semen over his abdomen. Katniss continuing to pump him until he was spent. She watched his breathing slowly return to normal with satisfaction, pleased she could make him feel as good as he had made her. Peeta grabbed a handkerchief from his pack to clean himself with, pulled his pants back into place, and then pulled Katniss back down to him.

Katniss rested her head against his chest in the place she could best hear his heart, its steady rhythm lulling her into a sense of peace. “Thank you, Katniss,” she heard Peeta murmur and felt him kiss her hair. Katniss made an incoherent noise of contentment as he pulled out her braid, letting her hair fan over his chest. Peeta tightened his arms around her to keep her close to him, and it was in this way that they fell into a blissful sleep.

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Katniss couldn’t help but smile as she caught Peeta sending her another covert look from across the fire, a grin of his own playing on his lips. They both looked away from each other bashfully, and Katniss attempted to refocus her attention on Rue, who was chattering away next to her, but it proved to be impossible. Katniss’ happiness made her feel like some light had finally found its
way to her soul. It was a feeling she wanted to hold on to as long as possible.

She and Peeta had slept for a few hours in the little cave, exhausted from Peeta’s confession and their explorations of one another, and by the time they had awoken, the storm had blown itself out. They had traipsed through the forest, hand in hand, laughing as they both slipped multiple times on the slick ground, the mud splattering their clothing. Just before they had reached the Falls, Peeta had spotted a buck so they had not returned from the day’s hunting trip empty handed.

Everyone had been so pleased by the appearance of the large animal for the evening’s meal that Katniss didn’t think anyone had noticed the way she and Peeta could barely keep their eyes off one another. And that was how Katniss wanted to keep it. What was happening between her and Peeta was exciting but so new. Katniss didn’t want an audience just yet...or ever, if she could manage it.

“Katniss?” Rue asked with a playful nudge. Katniss looked at her guiltily.

“Sorry, Rue. Uh...What were you saying?”

Rue shook her head and laughed. “It’s ok. I was just saying that Thresh asked me to take a walk with him tonight. Don’t you think that’s wonderful?” Rue beamed, radiating excitement. Katniss smiled.

“I’m sure it’ll be lovely, Rue.” She kicked out the bottom of her mud-covered gown and laughed. “Though just beware of the wet patches.”

“You and Peeta both got really dirty today,” she laughed. “But did you have fun? Did you shoot anything?”

“I’m still...a work-in-progress,” Katniss said slowly with a blush. Of all the things from today, the actual hunting lesson was the part that stood out the least in her mind. “I’m sure Peeta will be willing to keep teaching me,” she said hastily.

Rue nodded her head seriously. “When I was having trouble using my knife, he gave me lessons every day for a week.” She looked across the fire to where Peeta was talking with Gale and Darius. “He’s very attentive during private lessons. It’s amazing how talented he is with his hands.”

Katniss, who had just taken a swig of water from her cup, choked heavily at her friend’s innocent words, her mind immediately flashing to the other ways Peeta was good with his hands. Rue patted her on the back mild alarm. “I’m all right,” Katniss said hoarsely, eyes watering. In that moment, she noticed Peeta get up and head towards the baths, and a wicked idea struck her.

“Hey, Rue,” she said. “I think I’m going to go take a bath now and get cleaned up. I’ve spent way too long in this damp dress.”

Rue bobbed her head in understanding, and Katniss made her way quickly out of the circle without being addressed by anyone else. She smiled as she remembered the pool and waterfall that lay at the end of the men’s pathway, her stomach lurching at the thought of seeing Peeta naked beneath it again...perhaps, now with Katniss next to him. She grinned even more broadly and increased her stride. So focused was she on getting to the path that would lead her to Peeta that Katniss failed to notice the figure leaning against the rocks, watching her.

“Just where are you hurrying off to, Brainless?” a cutting voice rang, finally halting Katniss’ steps.
A Past Revealed (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

Chapter 12 is finally here! I want to thank everyone so much for their patience. My goal is to get these out faster, and hopefully life won’t get in the way too much. Thank you as always to my wonderful betas, Solas Violetta, Peetabreadgirl, and ct522/titania522. You guys do too much for me, and I can’t thank you enough. Please review! And thank you for reading. :)
“They’ve never found this place,” he tried to counter, but a new horrifying thought entered his head. If Snow somehow discovered Peeta’s newfound feelings for Katniss, how might he use that information? What could he do? At the very least, the consequences for Prim would be disastrous. He felt sick and had to be grateful when Finnick, who had been sitting next to Gale and remained silent until now, finally spoke.

“That’s true, Peet, but you know as well as I do that this place can only sustain us for so long. And I took stock of our supplies this morning. We’re going to run out sooner than we thought. We maybe have a week’s worth left.” He looked at Peeta apologetically. “I think Gale’s right. We need to retreat for now, come back here in a month or two when they hopefully give up the search, perhaps thinking she’s dead.” Peeta nodded, feeling beaten.

“I want people hunting every day this week, but no one goes out alone. Order everyone to stick to the routes we know well and to not travel more than two miles from the falls. Whatever we catch will be smoked or preserved. Look for berries and wild vegetables too, anything that can be carried easily on the road. I have a feeling we won’t be able to stop many places before we reach District 8. Anyone not hunting will be making shafts or drilling with me. We leave five days from now at midnight. Agreed?”

The two men nodded their assent, and Peeta got up from his log, unsmiling. Primrose Everdeen’s rescue was going to have to wait.

Peeta stepped under the small waterfall that fell on the back wall of the hot spring, choosing it over the pool of hot water that lay at the center of rocky outcropping, which housed the men’s designated baths. It was faster than soaking in the hot water and Peeta suddenly didn’t feel like being here longer than necessary. He wondered if whoever was on guard duty tonight wouldn’t mind a relief guard, knowing he wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight with the tidings his friends had brought him. Trying to distract himself, he let his thoughts drift as the water pounded down onto his back, and when Katniss rose to the forefront of this mind, it wasn’t out of worry that his group was being hunted because she was with them.

He saw her face as he told her his story, the way she’d held him as he revealed how Mags had died. He could still feel her fingers stroking through his hair and almost couldn’t believe he’d shared so much about himself. Even those who had been with him longest didn’t know the full story, but it had actually felt good to reveal it all to Katniss, and he wasn’t quite sure why. For some reason, he just wanted her to know everything about him. And then there had been what happened after…

Peeta felt his cock twitch, the blood in his body rushing to his groin as he the erotic images flooded his mind of what had happened next. He could see her firm, soft breasts, the perfect size for him to cup with his hands, could feel her wetness on his fingers as he pumped her into a state of pure ecstasy, could hear her loud moans at the moment she finally fell apart for him. He was still amazed she’d let him touch her, had never expected that to happen so soon, if ever, but it wasn’t until he remembered what she’d done to him that he began to stroke himself.

He braced one hand against the warm wall of rock, pretending that it wasn’t his own hand gripping his hardened length but Katniss’, wishing for the smoothness of her skin rather than the rough, calloused feel of his. And he let the fantasies that had haunted his sleep since her arrival take over.

He murmured her name, picturing her writhing beneath him, yelling out his name, as he first ravished her with his hands and then his mouth. She was begging him to slip inside her, so that
they could be one, telling him that she was his. He thrust inside her, obliging her wishes, wanting to show her that he was hers, too, and her velvety walls encased him, pulling him even deeper into her. Over and over, he pushed into her, filling her with each jerk of his hips, covering her breasts and mouth, anywhere he could reach, with wet, sloppy kisses, claiming her with the invisible brands left by his lips, and her imagined cries drove him closer to his climax. But then, he heard a sharp clattering of rocks behind him.

Peeta whirled around, fists raised, his bow, laying on top of his clothes, was too far away to reach if someone was about to attack him. And then he froze, mouth dropping open, as he looked across to the spring’s opening, where Katniss was also looking at him open mouthed.

“Katniss?” he questioned, fully aware of the fact that he was naked. He didn’t have any shame about the way his body looked, and Katniss had already seen the most private part of him earlier that day. But depending on how long she’d been there, he knew there was no way to hide what he’d been doing while calling out her name.

He stepped out of the waterfall when she continued in her silence, catching her eyes sweeping down his body before darting away when she realized he knew she was looking. He almost laughed. She was so pure.

“Is everything alright, Katniss?” he asked, walking over towards her with confidence. He watched her swallow and glance at him, her eyes flitting down over his chest and abdomen before wrenching back up to meet his amused expression. She blushed heavily.

“I, um, I…”

“Yes?”

“Peeta, maybe some pants?” she said in a strained voice. Peeta looked down at himself, his cock still half-hard with the regret of his lost orgasm, and the seed of an idea sprung in his mind.

“Why?” he asked, jutting his hips at her slightly, relishing the way her blush deepened at the gesture. “Do you find this distracting?”

“That sounds like a terrible line Finnick would say.”

Peeta laughed at her words, agreeing with her. “I have a better idea than putting on some pants,” he said and pointed towards the pool. “Join me in there? The water is warm.” He didn’t miss the look of longing on her face as she followed his finger, but he could see the reluctance as well. He wondered why she was acting so shy considering the aggressive way she had touched him today and the very fact that she had come here tonight, obviously knowing he would be here but decided pushing her on the matter right now would only drive her away.

“We don’t have to do anything, Katniss,” he said gently. “Here, I’ll hop in the water and turn around while you undress. I won’t be able to see anything. Even with the torches, it’s still too dark.” He walked over to the pool and jumped in, taking care to keep his back turned to her. For a long minute, there was only quiet, but eventually Peeta heard the sound of her clothes dropping to the rocky floor followed by the slow swish of water as she entered the pool.

“You can turn around now,” she said quietly. Peeta turned around, his eyes traveling over her loosened, dark brown, loosened hair that tumbled over her exposed shoulders. The top swell of her breasts were just visible above the waterline, the mockingjay necklace nestled in the valley between them, and Peeta felt himself hardening again as he remembered what lay hidden beneath the rippling liquid. Her eyes blazed brightly in the firelight, and for a long moment, he couldn’t speak. He felt as though he wanted to live in this moment forever, but finally, he repeated the
question from a few minutes before.

“Katniss? Are you really alright? You seem…” But he trailed off without finishing his sentence, unsure of how to phrase it without making it sound like he was worried she was reverting to the proud and stubborn but closed off woman she’d been on the day they met. He knew she would bristle at that. Katniss stared at him, and Peeta almost sighed in frustration. He could tell she was hiding something. Finally, she spoke.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Katniss said a bit hesitantly. She considered him with a troubled expression that Peeta didn’t like. “I just…I’m not sure we should do this Peeta. I’m sorry. There’s so much going on, so much I have to do, and so much you have to do. I have Prim to think about, and you have everyone else.”

“You’re with us, too, now,” he reminded her. “Please look at me.” He slid closer to her but did not reach out for her like he wanted to. “Please,” he repeated, and when Katniss finally lifted her head, he saw the tears she’d been trying hard to conceal in her eyes, could see the lie written on her face.

“Katniss, what’s wrong? What brought this on? Is that what you want?”

“That’s what I want,” she said, setting her chin stubbornly but a lone tear escaped down her cheek. Peeta reached out and swiped it away, letting his hand linger on her face, and he felt her lean into his touch.

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a terrible liar?” he challenged, the first sparks of anger beginning to rise. “Just tell me what I did wrong, Katniss. I’d like to fix it.” She threw her hands into the air.

“You did nothing wrong, Peeta. I, I just…” She bit her lip, her nose wrinkling in a way that Peeta would have found cute if he wasn’t feeling so annoyed.

“What?” he demanded.

Katniss shouted, “You’re so much more experienced than me!” Peeta’s eyes flew wide. She couldn’t possibly think he cared about that, and her extremely pink face suggested she did to, and she carried on anyways. “Not, I mean, not in necessarily, um that way, though, uh, you are…But I just mean you’ve been out in the world. You know what it’s really like. I know my own problems, but you care about all of Panem. All I want to do is save my sister. I’m selfish, Peeta. You can’t possibly want someone like that.”

*She doesn’t think she is good enough for me?* he thought. If anything, he was unworthy of her.

“Katniss, I’m not perfect. I’m far from perfect. You need to stop thinking I’m any different from you or anyone else here.” But she only shook her head vigorously.

“Everyone loves you, Peeta. You’re brave and handsome and kind and funny. You put everyone else’s needs before your own. You’re not like me. You’re not selfish.” Peeta gave a short bark of laughter that had no humor in it. He hadn’t expected after the exhausting, if cathartic, day of sharing about his past, that he’d have to reveal the rest of it so soon. He grabbed her hands and pressed them over his heart, warmth spreading from where her fingertips touched him. Katniss looked up at him, startled.

“I’ve made mistakes, Katniss. I’ve ignored good council and I have endangered my friend’s lives. I have put my own needs before those of others. I have been selfish. Believe me.”

“When?” she asked. Her eyes were burning again, and Peeta gave her a half-smirk, half-grimace.
“Well, there’s more to my story than me having escaped the Vaults. I was only eleven, remember? We’ve still got six years of my life to go,” he said flatly. He knew this was going to be even more painful and shameful than anything he’d told her in the cave. Katniss gave him a confused look for a moment before a look of understanding dawned on her face.

“Finnick said he met you when you were fourteen…” she said. Peeta nodded, waiting for her to ask the question he didn’t actually want to answer.

“I was only a few days off my fifteenth birthday when I met Finn, so yes, I suppose that’s correct.” He felt his heart rate increase, and her eyes rounded. Peeta realized he still hadn’t let go of her hands; they were still clutched to his chest, and she must feel the staccato rhythm under his skin. He quickly let go and said, “So…” to prompt her.

“So what happened to you between the ages of eleven and almost-fifteen?” she asked. Peeta let out a long sigh, stealing himself for the misery he was going to have to relive.

“After I escaped those terrible dungeons, I left the Capitol. The cat who’d let me out was my only companion. I was always grateful he stuck with me as long as he did,” Peeta said thoughtfully, thinking about the orange tabby cat with the squashed nose and ragged ears. It had stayed with him until he found work at the baker’s house but had disappeared soon after the day the baker’s wife had thrown a shoe at it. Peeta was still thankful for the many nights he’d spent on the road before that, the small animal’s warmth the only source of heat available to him.

“Peeta?” she prompted. He shook his head to refocus his attention.

“I wandered Panem for almost two years after that, looking for work. I wanted to apprentice myself to someone; I would have taken any trade. But no Master wants to train a pupil of low-standing who can’t pay the apprenticeship fee. I did, at least, get hired to help in the fields during the harvest those two years, but I was only paid for it with a temporary roof and one or two meager meals a day for the duration of the season.” He shot a small smile at her. “I guess you could say that’s when I began to master the art of thievery. By the time I was thirteen, I was a Master in my own right.” Katniss laughed.

“Did you start giving away what you stole right away?” Peeta shook his head.

“No. Back then, I was just a scrawny runt, and I could barely take care of myself.” He watched as Katniss’ eyes traveled over his toned arms and chest, giving him an incredulous look that made Peeta smile. “I haven’t always looked this way, Lady.” Katniss narrowed her eyes at the use of the title, and Peeta actually laughed, but he sobered soon enough.

“I’m grateful for those years, even though I was starving most of the time. I got to know Panem and meet its people, the ones the Capitol, the Lords, King Snow don’t think exist.” Peeta frowned. “The only value of those who do not have a title attached to their name is measured in the money they can generate by the labor they can perform for the rich.” He looked at Katniss seriously. “We aren’t human; we’re commodities.”

“I’m sorry,” Katniss said with a heavy swallow. Peeta retrieved one of her hands and squeezed gently.

“It’s not your fault.” He looked across the pool, studying the light from the torch flames.

“I finally did find some work in a bakery in District 2, not long after I turned thirteen. The baker was called Antony and his wife was Julianna. They had two children, a daughter named
Cashmere and son called Gloss. Gloss was, of course, apprenticed to his father, but he’d been severely injured in a riding accident, and they needed help for however long it was going to take him to fully recover. The baker told me I could well be there for several years, as they weren’t sure how well Gloss would ever do.” Peeta bowed his head in shame. “I confess that I hoped that would happen.” He looked at Katniss, only to find her watching him with trepidation, and Peeta wished he had happier stories to tell. He continued on.

“Antony was kind but distant. He taught me his trade to the point that I could do practically everything he could, but he hardly ever spoke to me. He was forbidden to by Julianna, was ruled by his wife in every sense of the word,” Peeta said, remembering the stick-thin woman with greying hair, a pursed mouth, and icy black eyes.

“I think she had probably once favored both her children but once Gloss was rendered practically invalid, finding her daughter a good match became her primary focus.” Peeta took a deep breath. “I think she saw me as a threat, for whatever reason, and there wasn’t a day that went by, no matter how hard I worked, that I didn’t receive some sort of criticism from her. She made a point to say those things in front of Cashmere.”

“It was because you are so good. And kind. And handsome. I’m guessing you were beyond compare even then.” Peeta stared at her, and she blushed. He would have smiled, beginning to relish the times that red color brightened her olive skin, but the subject at hand was like a vice around his heart.

“Perhaps,” he acquiesced. “Either way, the verbal spars soon morphed into physical beatings. Julianna was a hard woman, made harder still by the fate that had befallen her son. She wanted to make it clear, I think, that I could never be a replacement for him or someone worthy of her daughter.” Katniss looked at him in horror and then confusion, as she thought over his words.

“Why would she want to make sure you knew she didn’t think you were worthy of Cashmere? Why did she criticize you in front of her?” She blinked. “Unless…” Peeta grabbed a small rock lying on the side of the pool and skipped it across the water.

“Unless I was in love with her,” he finished. He grabbed another rock and shot it against the far wall, the humiliation building deep in his chest. He couldn’t look Katniss in the eye anymore.

“Cashmere was beautiful; I cannot deny that, and she was the first girl that had ever paid any attention to me. I had been too isolated with Boggs and Mags to play much with the boys in our village, much less allowed to be within a hundred yards of the girls. But Cashmere…” He paused, willing her face to stay out of his head, but it was no use. Seconds later, he could see her, her wavy blonde hair falling to her perfectly round ass, her large breasts, straining against the top of her ill-fitting tunic, her blue eyes twinkling as she beckoned him to the back room. “Cashmere didn’t seem to care that I’d been homeless, that I had no money, no prospects.”

“How old was she?” Katniss asked, and Peeta couldn’t help but think he could hear envy in her voice.

“She turned sixteen about the time I turned fourteen. That’s when I...that’s when we...had our affair,” he finally struggled out, his groin tightening again as he remembered her hands and mouth on him, the way she’d taught him to touch her, to lick her. He cursed his body for reacting even after all this time, even after he was long over the woman, if not over the hurt she had inflicted upon him.

“How long did it last?” Katniss asked so evenly, Peeta was finally compelled to look at her again.
“Nearly a year,” he replied. She nodded slowly.

“How did it end?”

“Julianna caught us one morning. She never woke up before dawn usually, but Gloss woke up in pain. We always went to their back room, where they kept their extra supplies, when we wanted to be together, but Julianna also kept her herb remedies there too.” He bowed his head as he remembered the sheer rage and hatred on that woman’s face when she’d caught him with his head between her daughter’s legs.

“Cashmere claimed I’d…” He swallowed thickly. “She said I’d forced myself upon her. I ran when she said that. It wasn’t true, but no one would have ever believed me.” A sick expression crossed Katniss’ face, and Peeta remembered what her own stepfather had tried to do with her.

“Did...what happened next?”

“I went back that night to retrieve my things. Expert thief, remember?” he teased humorlessly.

“Did you see Cashmere?” she asked, and Peeta nodded.

“I’d already forgiven her for what she said. I thought she had just panicked, that she had to love me, and that our year together couldn’t have meant anything to her. I asked her to come with me,” he replied, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. Katniss bit her lip again, and this time, there was anger in her expression.

“But she didn’t?”

“No.”

They remained quiet for a few minutes after that, listening to the rushing of the waterfall. Peeta studied Katniss’ profile discreetly, wishing he could read her thoughts. She was an open book much of the time, but he had no idea what she thought of this new revelation. Finally, she looked at him with both determination and apologetic regret.

“There’s more to the story, isn’t there?” she asked. Peeta’s eyes widened in surprise, but his stomach sunk to the bottom of the pool.

“How do you know that?”

“Finnick. He hinted or well said you’ve been hurt before. Twice,” she said bluntly. Peeta groaned and shut his eyes. *Thanks Finn.* He now knew who would be getting the worst jobs for the next month.

“You want to hear how I made myself out to be a lovesick fool a second time?” he asked more sharply than he meant it. The pain from what happened the second time was even worse than the first.

“You don’t have to tell me about it if you don’t want to,” she said quietly. Peeta ran a hand through his hair, the ends made more wavy by the damp, humid air, knowing that he owed this to her if he truly wanted to be with her. She’d told him about her past, after all.

“No, I should. At this point it’s just more humiliating than anything else,” he said. He could see the confusion but also curiosity in Katniss’ eyes and continued his tale.

“After Cashmere rejected me, I went back to wandering the districts...and back to stealing again,” he added with a painful smirk. “But the one thing working the bakery did for me was make me
strong. I had hidden my sword and bow during my stay there, but I renewed practicing in earnest.” He smiled. “Luckily, all the things Boggs had ingrained in me returned quickly. I was faster and stronger and more acutely aware of the poverty in the districts, the mistreatment so many were having to endure.” He skipped another rock across the pool and looked at Katniss. “That’s when I began taking for more than just myself.” Katniss opened her mouth as though to speak, but before she said anything, the soft trill of a mockingjay lying down for the night echoed among the rocks.

They listened to its comforting calls, falling silent for several minutes, and Peeta was grateful Katniss was not pushing him to talk even though he knew she had to be impatient. “That’s around the time those birds started following me as well,” he said when he was ready to speak again.

“They’ve never given you away when you’re on a mission?” Katniss asked. Peeta shook his head.

“I was telling you the truth when I told you they aren’t ordinary birds. If they are around while I’m doing something, they either remained silent or if anything, give me warning calls when something dangerous is coming.” Katniss bobbed her head in understanding, though Peeta wondered if she really believed him. Most of his band members hadn’t at first.

“Anyways, shortly after I left, I rescued Finnick from a slave ship. He’d been condemned to slavery by Annie’s father actually.”

“I know,” Katniss said. Peeta blinked in surprise. “He told me his story. About how he was once the head of Annie’s guard and how they fell in love but Annie’s father wouldn’t have it. He sold Finnick into slavery and forced Annie into a terrible marriage.” She grimaced. “He said you helped him rescue her.” Peeta nodded.

“She’s been with us for about a year now, though I don’t think she’ll ever fully recover from what was done to her. Did Gale tell you how he came to join me too?”

“He said while you and Finnick were traveling, you found him, nearly dead, on the side of the road. He was beaten for trying to protect Rory.”

“Yes. We actually brought him back here to nurse him to health. We’d found this place not long after I rescued Finn, but Rory had to go back to his mother until he was old enough to join.” He smiled, remembering the thirteen year old Rory’s vehement protestations to being told he must return to Hazelle. “Johanna found us not long after that; she’d left home when her family was killed. Actually, the first time we met her, she attempted kill us and take our things,” he laughed. “She was surprised when I pinned her to a tree with arrows. We had to find her some new clothes because of the holes.”

“How is that funny?” Katniss asked. Peeta looked at her, for the first time seeing the darkness in her face at the mention of Johanna’s name. It dawned on him that whatever the reluctances that had popped up in Katniss’ head about a relationship with him must have had to do with his abrasive friend. He felt a small surge of anger, making a note that he would have to talk to Jo about her behavior, but he still felt compelled to defend her as well.

“It’s not, really,” he replied. “But her entire family had been murdered not long before, and she was desperate. And very, very afraid.” He gave Katniss a sad smile. “Once she realized we would help her, she joined us without hesitation, and I’ve never doubted her loyalty. She’s been a good friend.” Katniss’ brow furrowed at that.

“How so?” she asked. Peeta turned to face her more directly.
“Not long after I turned sixteen, we returned to District 2. By then, the group had grown substantially, though none of the soldiers had yet joined. Besides you, they are the newest additions to the Band, but even without their strength, we were becoming quite well known throughout Panem. Everywhere we went, the peasants celebrated and the Lords cringed.” He smiled. “Finnick was the one who found my first reward poster. One thousand pounds for the capture of the Sun Thief. That was well before we arrived back in District 2. It was up to thirty thousand pounds by then.” Katniss smiled back at him.

“And what’s the reward for your capture up to now?”

“Last I checked it was at one hundred thousand.” Katniss’ eyes widened. It was enough to buy a small holdfast and farm, the perfect setup for a comfortable life. Peeta shrugged. “There’s a reason Thread tries so hard to capture me. I’m guessing it’s gone up now since we took you.” Katniss studied him with thoughtful eyes.

“What happened in District 2?” Katniss asked. Peeta looked upwards to concentrate on the twinkling, star filled, night sky.

“We went back to District 2 to restock our supplies and arm our new recruits. Most of the truly gifted blacksmiths and craftsmen live there. And of course, some of the wealthiest landowners live in 1 and 2, so we figured the time was ripe for some further wealth re-distribution.” He smiled bitterly. “We stole into the estate of Seneca Crane not a week after we arrived.” He suddenly felt Katniss’ hand on his arm, and he looked at her.

“I know him,” she said. “I met him at court. His wife was--” She stopped talking abruptly, but Peeta could see she already knew.

“A beautiful, blond woman?” he asked. Katniss gave the tiniest shake of her head, and Peeta looked back up at the sky.

“Johanna was the one who wanted to rob Crane’s estate. While his father was the one responsible for the destruction of her family, his son had beaten her more than a time or two.” He paused as he tried to remember the circumstances leading up to his part in the story.

“There was a very wealthy lord in District 2, whose name I don’t remember. He had three daughters, and since women aren’t allowed to inherit, their hands were sought after by what I’m sure was every noble’s son in Panem.” He noticed Katniss’ eyes darken at this statement, knowing that her inability to take charge of her father’s lands was partially what was responsible for the troubled events of her life. He continued, “I’m not sure what Seneca’s father offered to the District 2 lord, but he arranged a marriage for Crane to the eldest, a woman named Bonnie. It meant he would inherit all the lands and assets when the lord died. Even before we headed to District 2, we’d heard the rumors, not only of the enormous wealth of the estate, but of the mysterious deaths of the lord father and his two younger daughters.” Peeta sighed. “It seemed perfect… Johanna could get some justice for her treatment at Crane’s hands, and everyone else was more than a bit curious considering what we’d been told.” He took a deep breath.

“The night we snuck in, I had assigned myself to the tower rooms, which were the most dangerous to get to, as it was virtually impossible to know how many guards were on the upper floors.” Peeta closed his eyes and breathed out slowly. “That’s when I found her.”

“Was it Cashmere?” Peeta bowed his head to answer her question.

“She was in this dingy, freezing room. I remember wrapping her in my cloak and trying to warm her.” Peeta balled his hand into a fist. “She told me her mother had forced her to offer herself to Seneca as a mistress not long after I had left and that she had lived in the tower since and was
guarded nearly all the time. The only reason she was alone that night was because the men would always leave their posts at the time Seneca would come. She told me he’d just left. She apologized to me for her treatment of me and begged me to help her. She said she was in love with me. I should have known I was being played for a fool.” Peeta fell silent to gain his courage, his stomach pitching violently in anticipation of what he next had to share.

“I insisted the group stay in District 2 until we could rescue Cashmere, told them some of my history with her, though I kept secret how we ended, but those who knew me best guessed it anyways. They tried to warn me against her, but I...” He felt Katniss’ small hand clasp his under the water, but he couldn’t look at her, his shame boiling over.

“I went back to her each night for two weeks, and we r-renewed our courtship. I gave her a-all of me,” he stuttered out, fighting against the powerful flashbacks he was now having. Katniss’ hand constricted against his own.

“What did she do you, Peeta?” she asked. He could hear the anger in her voice, and he could only hope it wasn’t directed at himself. He finally turned his face to her, the humiliation he was already feeling almost enough to stay his words.

“It was all a trick. Her feelings for me, her seduction of me. She only lay with me to get me to let my guard down, to get me to forget about my men. The last night we were together, she convinced me that she did not want to see me as a warrior or thief, but as the boy she had fallen in love with, the one who did not carry weapons or appear so threatening. So I went to her unarmed,” he said with disgust. “When I entered the tower, she was waiting for me along with twenty guards. She told me I was a fool to think she could love a penniless man, and that I was now going to help her become rich enough to be worthy of marrying Crane. She would kill Bonnie the same way she had killed the rest of Bonnie’s family...”

“Oh, Peeta!” Katniss exclaimed, covering her mouth in shock. There were tears in her eyes, and he grimaced.

“It was perfect...Seneca had persuaded her to kill anyone who could contest the lands. If Cashmere had been caught in her deed, he wouldn’t have been found culpable, but if she succeeded, he would be made all the richer. And from the very beginning, she wanted me and my group to come to the estate, had lain in that dirty tower room for months in the hopes that I would find her, so she could trap me, claim the reward, and become rich in her own right. And I fell for it, completely,” he said flatly. “It shouldn’t come as a surprise that not long after I escaped that Seneca’s wife drowned in the pond on the property, and he married Cashmere. I suppose Seneca decided she would be of more use to him, even without the thirty thousand pounds. If you saw them at Court, they must be doing quite well.” Katniss’ eyes flashed, a hurricane brewing in their depths.

“How did you escape?” she asked

“Johanna, Gale, and Finnick rescued me, at great risk to themselves, while the others set a giant fire in the woods nearby as a distraction. I owe those three so much.” He tried to smile at Katniss but found he could not, the memories so painful now that he could barely breathe, but he had a few last things to say. “So you see, Katniss, I can be selfish, and it could have cost my friends their lives.” Katniss shook her head, but Peeta stopped her from speaking.

“I know you don’t like Johanna, Katniss but try to get to know her. After all that happened, she was the one who wouldn’t let me give up. I had told them I wasn’t worthy of being their leader, not after all my mistakes, but she insisted, it was the fact that I apologized and owned up to them that made them want to continue following me. More so even than Finn and Gale, she wouldn’t take no for an answer.”
“That doesn’t surprise me,” Katniss said, though there was an edge to her tone that suggested her comment wasn’t entirely a positive one. Peeta could practically see the wheels turning in her head, and he turned away to let her think, too exhausted to explain how having his heart smashed twice by Cashmere had, coupled with the events of his childhood, affected the way he perceived every relationship he had, platonic or otherwise. His friends had more than proved their loyalty, but the doubts that they actually truly cared about him and not just their cause sometimes took hold, and this growing thing between he and Katniss scared him in some ways. He hadn’t expected to want to become close with someone ever again, but she had changed all that. He was already completely smitten with her, though he wasn’t ready to tell her that, and somehow he knew she wasn’t ready to hear it.

“So now you know my whole sordid history,” he said. Katniss looked at him sharply, her brow furrowing. “I wish it weren’t so grim a tale, but I’m assuming you already guessed anyone who ends up doing what I do for a living doesn’t have the happiest story.” He shrugged dismissively, as though all he’d told her didn’t matter. He could tell she wasn’t fooled, but it was a second before he realized she was leaning in to kiss him.

He gasped as her soft lips brushed his, pressing until he opened his mouth to let her slip her tongue inside. He intertwined his own with hers as they slowly began to consume one another. Peeta reached to bring her in closer, having temporarily forgotten in his determination to confess everything to her that she was naked, only inches of warm water separating them. Now, he just wanted to show her that though he knew he still had issues to deal with, he was stronger than the things he had endured. He pulled back from her. “I am not my past,” he said firmly.

“I know.” She stood up out of the water, and Peeta groaned softly as he finally got to look at what had been hidden from him today.

His gaze drifted to her breasts, which were glistening in the dim torchlight, before skimming lower to her perfectly taut stomach. He traced the line of her hips across the water, and his now rock-hard erection throbbed when he caught sight of the dark patch of curls between her thighs. Under his stare, she brought her hands part way up her body, dropped them abruptly, and raised them again, and he could see her rapidly changing emotions playing across her face, a lifetime of lessons teaching that ladies of nobility were not supposed to behave this way, that modesty was the ultimate virtue, conflicting with her desire. The painful confessions of the last hour temporarily forgotten, Peeta knew what he wanted to do.

“I’m going to touch you now,” he said. Katniss said nothing, her eyes widening almost imperceptibly in surprise, but she did not protest when he drew her close to him, bringing her arms up to coax them around his neck.

For several moments, Peeta stood, reveling in the feel of his skin against hers as her nipples hardened against his chest in the humid air, his erection caught between his stomach and hers. With every small movement either of them made, his cock twitched in pleasure at the friction. He had never wanted anyone as badly as he wanted her, not even Cashmere.

Peeta began to kiss her, starting with her forehead, then her cheeks, her nose, and finally her lips. He sucked in Katniss’ moan as he thrust his tongue inside her mouth, bringing his hands up to massage her breasts. He rubbed his thumbs over her taut nipples, rolling them until Katniss was gasping with pleasure. “More,” she whispered, panting. Peeta smiled and heaved her up against him fully, causing another gasp to fall from her lips as his cock brushed her core. He turned to lay her on the warm stones surrounding the pool, her legs bent and dangling off the rock into the water.

“What are you doing?” she asked, when he gently spread her legs, his need for her only growing
when her sex was fully exposed to him. He traced the inside of her thighs gently with his fingers, and Katniss shivered.

“I want to kiss you.”

“You have been kissing me, Peeta,” she said, confused. He shook his head.

“No, I want to kiss you here,” he said, pointing to her opening. He could see her arousal glistening even in the dim light. “God, I want to kiss you.” But Katniss shook her head.

“What? Peeta, no. You don’t have to do that; you shouldn’t want to do that; it isn’t proper; it isn’t...ohh.” She groaned as he licked up her slit, just catching the hood of the little round button that would hold the key to her undoing. Her legs would have clamped around his head if he hadn’t wrapped his hands around her thighs. He licked her again, and she cried out his name, wrapping her fingers in his hair.

“You taste so good,” he said, plunging his tongue inside her. Over and over, he thrust into her, but soon, she was tugging on his hair, trying to direct him to the place she really wanted him to be. She called out when he finally gave in to her demands, laving the tender button above her entrance with his tongue before he sucked it into his mouth. He pumped two fingers into her, curling them back inside to hit the spot on her hip bone that he knew would make her fall apart quickly. “Come for me, Katniss,” he urged, massaging her at an increasing speed, circling her sensitive bud until she shattered against his mouth. He did not stop until she asked him to. He pulled her to a sitting position with a smile.

“I...I didn’t think it could be so good,” Katniss said.

“I didn’t either.”

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“We’re going to be leaving the Falls earlier than expected,” Peeta said as he pulled on his clothes, watching Katniss as she pulled on hers as well. He almost groaned with regret as her chest disappeared from view beneath her tunic, longing to touch them again. His mind wandered to the way she’d slid off the rock after he’d gotten her to fall apart, moving swiftly to him to grind against his hardness. He’d almost come right then, but she had instead drawn his mouth down her breasts to distract him before finally jerking him off the way he’d shown her he liked.

“Why?” Katniss asked. He grimaced when he saw the hope spring into her eyes, knowing his answer was going to disappoint her. “Are we going to get my sister?”

He shook his head. “Johanna spotted birds scattering from the tree tops in a line yesterday. About 20 miles to the northeast of here. We think they are searching for you.”

Katniss’ eyes contracted in both fear and anger. “They? Who are they?”

“It may just be Thread, but Gale speculated that it’s either the king’s own guards or Thread or both. He didn’t think Snow would tolerate the capture of his future daughter-in-law by a bunch of thieves.” Katniss looked like she was trying not to throw up as she bobbed her head to agree.

“He would think it would make him look weak. He has rivals in court that might want to challenge him if they thought he was losing control,” she said. Peeta bit his tongue. He didn’t think it would do any good to tell her what Snow actually did to his rivals, but the man couldn’t very well poison the entire population of Panem, which would likely be the King’s true worry.

“So, we have to leave my sister? For now?”
Peeta reached out and squeezed her hand. “I’m truly sorry, Katniss. I made you a promise, and I intend to fulfill it, but yes, Prim will have to wait. For now.” The utter look of sadness and despair that Katniss fought but failed to conceal nearly broke him.

“Where are we g-going?” she said with a tremble.

“District 12. We think it would be the safest place for us. They’d never dream we’d take you back to your home and Gale’s family lives there as well. We have some friends who will help us. On the way, we’ll go through a few districts and pay a visit to some spoiled lords,” he said with a small smile. Katniss frowned.

“Won’t that just help them to track us?”

“No,” Peeta replied, his smile broadening at her astuteness. She was learning quickly. “I’ll be splitting us into two groups to travel. It’s easier for smaller groups to travel undetected, and each will be assigned different areas. Plus, it’s not like the districts are all in one straight line.” He took a deep breath. “There’s one more thing.” Katniss gave him a nervous look.

“What is it?”

Peeta didn’t say anything for a long second, and instead, he tugged her back to him, enveloping her in his arms. She felt so good right there, her warmth filling his heart with strength. He wished he knew when he’d be able to do this again. “I know you have been reluctant to tell the group we have this together because you wanted to try to gain their respect on your own merits...” he said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. She tensed, a disturbed look on her face.

“But now you want to tell them?” Katniss asked. Peeta looked at her sadly.

“No. I don’t think we can tell anyone, at least for now. It’s too dangerous for any of them to know. I don’t think anyone in our group would care about our relationship...” he said, not entirely believing that was true. “But if someone were to be taken captive, they won’t be able to confirm that you are more to me than just a captive or a regular group member. It’ll be safer for you, for me, and for them.” He couldn’t deny the hurt he felt at the look of relief on Katniss’ face at the realization that they would not be declaring their relationship. He’d respected her reasons for concealment even before all these concerns had come to light, but it didn’t make this any easier for him. “I don’t know how often we’ll get to be together like tonight, Katniss. Not until we’re in a better place.” Katniss brushed a wave of hair off his forehead, something he’d noticed she liked doing. She kissed him lightly.

“We’ll get through it,” she said stoically. And Peeta knew, whatever would happen on this next journey, it would be different from anything he’d experienced before.

Chapter End Notes

All right...It’s time for some action! The next chapter of TST will hopefully be up in the next month at maximum, so look for it soon!
Katniss winced as her horse jumped over small brook, the thick leather of her saddle rubbing against her already chafed thighs. She struggled to hold in a cry of pain as the animal trotted around a fallen tree, biting her lip to keep in the sound.

“Are you alright, Katniss?” Delly asked, drawing her horse up beside Katniss’ own, a look of concern on her face. Katniss gritted her teeth and nodded.

“I’m fine, Delly. I’m just not…used to riding so much.”

Delly nodded her head sympathetically. “It takes some getting used to, all this traveling. These past few weeks have been so unusual, taking that long rest. But no one seemed too restless…even Peeta.” Delly gave her a bright smile. “I think you had something to do with that.”

Katniss blushed and frantically waved a hand. “What? I’m not…there’s not…I don’t… What do you mean?” She sputtered and trailed off, not even sure what she was trying to say, flushing even more as Delly giggled.

“Katniss,” she said, “All I meant was that training a new person was a good distraction for him. And you learned so quickly. I could tell he was so happy about it, that’s all.” She eyed Katniss curiously. “Did you think I meant something different?”

Katniss scowled. “Um, no. I’m sure he just wanted everyone to recuperate from following my tour,” she said too bluntly, but she kicked her horse to send it cantering away from Delly anyways. Sometimes the blonde girl was too friendly for her liking, and she and Peeta had agreed
to keep whatever was happening between them a secret.

Katniss looked up at the trees overhead, studying the soft morning light filtering through the branches, the occasional drop of dew flashing as it dripped from a leaf and heaved a guilty sigh. It hadn’t gone beyond her notice the way Peeta had reacted when she’d so eagerly agreed to keep their feelings for each other hidden. He could be so reserved sometimes, but was beginning to know his moods the way she knew Prim’s, attuned to everything he did the way she noticed every soft sigh and smile her sister provided. She had been able to tell that it bothered him, but Katniss couldn’t help but think of all the other issues she had at the moment, most importantly that of Prim’s plight. But beyond that, even if nothing had been wrong, Katniss wasn’t sure she would have wanted to reveal her deepening link to him. Her newfound independence was slowly making her bolder, but her feelings were still overwhelming and sometimes terrifying in their power. Therefore, it was with a scowl that she looked along their line of riders and didn’t find Peeta among them, realizing she missed him more than she wanted to admit.

She knew when she had looked that she wouldn’t find him; he had gone on ahead of the rest of their group with Finnick to watch the woods and nearby road that morning while Gale led the rest of them. Darius and Thresh had taken another group on a different route with the plan to meet at a designated spot in District 12 that Katniss hadn’t recognized called the Pool of the Birds. Katniss couldn’t help but worry. She could not protect him if he wasn’t near her.

“Trouble in paradise, Lady Everdeen?” a mocking voice asked. Katniss turned with a frown, knowing who it was without having to look.

“What do you want, Johanna? And it’s Katniss. I left that title behind,” she said firmly. She scowled as Johanna’s eyebrows rose with amusement, struggling to remember the council Peeta had given her that this woman could be a good friend.

“Just wanted to check in on our newest member,” Johanna replied blithely. Katniss knew her face did not hide her skepticism so it was no surprise when Johanna chuckled. “Yeah, I wouldn’t have bought that either.” She glanced up the column as Katniss had just done before giving Katniss a knowing look. The flush returned to Katniss’ face.

“You really are a terrible actress, Brainless. Finnick is right. Try to be a bit more subtle.”

Katniss stared at her. “You talk about me with Finnick?” she asked with confusion. Johanna smiled, though it was not in an entirely kind way.

“Thought you would have figured that one out from our conversation the other day.” Katniss’ grip tightened on the reins as she remembered her previous discussion with the woman riding
“Just where are you hurrying off to, Brainless?” a cutting voice rang, halting Katniss’ steps. She spun around quickly, shock and not a little bit of anger radiating through her as she looked at Johanna, who was leaning against the rock. Katniss realized there was no hiding where she had been heading, her foot already on the path that led to the men’s hot spring. “This makes things more complicated, you know,” the girl said, twirling her axe in one hand in a way Katniss understood was meant to be an intimidating gesture.

“What does?” Katniss asked, bristling at Johanna’s accusatory tone, but Johanna just rolled her eyes.


“Makes what easier?”

“This.” Johanna reached into her pocket and drew out a small crushed velvet bag. She tossed it in Katniss direction, who deftly caught it out of the air. But when Katniss looked inside, she recoiled at the sight of the large clump of dried nightlock berries within. She stared incredulously at Johanna.

“What is this? Are you telling me to kill myself?” Katniss had known Johanna disliked her, but she hadn’t expected her to cross this line since she had been let into the group. She threw the bag down at Johanna’s feet. Johanna sighed, picked it up, walked over, and shoved the pouch back into Katniss’ hands.

“No, I’m not, but don’t push it,” she said bluntly. Katniss shook the bag, unbowed.

“Then why the fuck are you giving me poisonous berries?” she demanded.

Johanna smirked. “Temper, temper, Lady Everdeen. I can’t imagine you get away with using that language at court. It seems we do have some sort of influence on you.” Katniss just glared at her until finally Johanna laughed again. “Dummy, they aren’t poisonous when they’re dried, but they do keep you from getting pregnant.” Katniss’ entire body went rigid.
“Wha--what?” Katniss spluttered, floundering. “We haven’t...we don’t...we haven’t done anything.” But Katniss’ reddening face betrayed her as she recalled the afternoon spent in the cave, and her dreams of what could happen in the springs. Johanna closed her hand over the hand Katniss was holding the berries in, balling it into a fist for her.

“I’m not stupid either. I saw the way the two of you looked at each other after you came back from ‘hunting,’” she said sarcastically. “Whether you’ve done anything or not, it was clear to a few of us that that’s the way you’re headed, and no offense but you don’t seem to be in a place where you’d be capable of taking care of a kid. And Peeta is the most wanted man in all of Panem so as much as I’m sure you like him, he’s not great father material at the moment.”

Katniss’ mouth fell open at Johanna’s bluntness. No one had ever spoken to her so honestly about such intimate things, but with the thought of what she and Peeta had already done, it threw into sharp relief how inexperienced she was. She’d not received any instruction from her mother when she first had her blood, and there had been no one to help her understand what was expected of her when it came to bedding with Cato. She felt embarrassed but also a strange sense of relief, the panicked moment when Johanna had mentioned pregnancy receding from her.

“How do I take it?” she whispered.

“Take one every day for a week, and then once every week after that. That’s what seems to work best for Delly, Annie, and I. We’ve been with our men for a while and,” she patted her stomach, “no pregnancies yet. Careful not to take more than that though. They may not be able to kill you once they’re dried, but they can still wreak havoc if you take too much.” Katniss slipped the pouch into the small pocket sewn into her breeches.

“Why are you helping me? You have no love for me,” she told Johanna, who looked at her thoughtfully. “Don’t deny it,” she challenged, earning a grin from the black-haired girl.

“No, I won’t deny it,” she said plainly. She waved a hand over the path Katniss was still standing on. “But I do care about him, and he, unfortunately, cares about you.”

“That’s the second time you’ve used unfortunately in relation to Peeta’s feelings toward me,” Katniss observed. It felt like the thorn being driven into her side every time Johanna used it, and when Johanna remained silent, her dark brown eyes unfathomable, she blurted, “I saw you and Finnick and Gale. The night Peeta and I danced. You manipulated him into dancing with me. You admit you don’t like me. You don’t want me in this group, and yet, you did that. So...why?” she asked, surprised at the words now flowing out of her. Johanna stayed quiet for a long moment before she finally kicked at a rock, for the first time not daring to meet Katniss’ eye.
“There aren’t any easy answers to your questions,” Johanna admitted, now looking up at the moon. “I told you I care about Peeta. That’s the truth. We all do, and when he’s with you…he’s different. Happier. Himself. Not just the person he thinks we want him to be. So part of me thinks you actually should be here for his sake, even though I question if you really have that right to be with us at all,” Johanna said wistfully. Katniss’ heart thudded hard in her chest, Johanna’s words strongly reminding her of the ones Finnick had spoken to her when he’d begged her not to hurt Peeta.

“You sound a little jealous,” Katniss said without thinking. Johanna glared at her for a moment but then laughed.

“I suppose you could say that. It’s not just Peeta you’ve changed. Everyone, with a few exceptions, seems inspired by you. ‘The noble mockingjay who joined the rebel cause.’ It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? At least, it pairs up well with the legend of the Sun Thief. People are drawn to something like that.” Katniss could hear the acid in Johanna’s tone and only shrugged, deciding the conflict wasn’t worth it.

“But you still called our…” Katniss hesitated, not sure what to call what she and Peeta had. “You still said it was unfortunate,” she finished awkwardly, aware of Johanna’s narrowing eyes.

“Yeah, it is, Lady Everdeen,” Johanna drawled. “Precisely because of what you just said…Or rather didn’t say. You’re brave in some ways, I’ll give you that, but you’re a coward in others.” Katniss flinched, wondering if it was true. Johanna ignored her reaction and just kept talking. “I’m sure you have your issues. Seems I was wrong to assume your life has been perfect. But if you can’t fully commit to us, to him, then at the end of the day, all you are is a distraction. We all trust one another here, depend on one another for our very lives, but I don’t think I can do that with you.”

Katniss decided she’d had enough. “You can trust me,” she said firmly. “I’m not out to betray this group, Johanna. I want to be a part of it and help end the injustice I’ve seen running rampant in Panem. Snow must be taken down.” Johanna only snorted.

“You haven’t seen shit, Lady. You know nothing of the world’s injustices. Ask anyone here what they’ve endured. Fuck, ask Peeta. I’m sure he hasn’t told you half of what’s been done to him.” Katniss tried to argue, but Johanna put up her hand. “What I heard when you asked to join the group was that yeah, you maybe want to help us, but what you really want is to rescue your sister. That’s your ultimate goal.”

Katniss blinked. “So? What’s wrong with that?” she asked. Johanna quirked her head to the side.
“Because there could potentially come a time when you have to choose what matters most, Lady Everdeen. And when that time comes, will it be your sister or will it be him? Remember who we have to rescue your precious sister from. He doesn’t give up his toys so easily, and as good as Peeta is, that won’t be an easy save. Some sacrifice or other will have to be made and Snow will play every single card he has to get an advantage,” she said harshly. Katniss blanched at the new scenario Johanna had put forth as the woman nodded with satisfaction.

“So you see why it’s unfortunate he likes you. If he’ll do anything for you, what would become of him if he has to choose between saving his own life or getting you back your family?” Katniss couldn’t look her in the eyes, too stunned to move. Johanna turned on her heel and walked away. “Think about it,” she called out before she disappeared into the darkness.

Katniss still wasn’t sure how she’d gotten down the bath to where Peeta was after that conversation. It had felt like she was floating in a dream...or a nightmare, but she’d resolved to tell him she couldn’t be with him all the same, the conversation with Johanna throwing into light how dangerous the situation for them could be. Even Peeta had recognized that danger from the way he’d asked they not flaunt their relationship, after all, but Katniss had faltered in her resolution to stay platonic with him.

She’d done her best to explain to him that, as Johanna had pointed out, she was inexperienced in too many things to make for a good partner, too naïve to the world, too focused on her task to save her sister, but it had been for nothing. She had caved under his silly, sweetness when she’d caught him naked and calling out her name under the waterfall, a side of himself he only showed to her. She had been seduced by the pain he’d endured under Cashmere, wanting to protect him always from such cruelty, and his strong arms and soft lips had done the rest. He had seen through her lie when he’d asked if ending it was really what she wanted. For all the risks involved, she still could not deny him.

“I’ll try to be more discreet,” Katniss mumbled to Johanna, who laughed, her bark echoing in the wood.

“Lady Everdeen…” She clicked her horse forward to make her way up to Gale. “I don’t think you’re really capable of that.”

Katniss wiped the sweat off her brow, her body drenched with sweat from the hot, humid air of the forest. Only some sunlight managed to reach the forest floor from the high canopy above, but she imagined the day was boiling. She got slowly down from her horse and led it to the little pond of water Gale had directed the group to stop at and with a sigh of relief, splashed some of the cool
liquid on her face and neck.

“Are you alright, Katniss?” Gale asked, coming to sit beside her. She took the leather canteen of water he held gratefully, having not yet acquired one of her own. Peeta had discreetly offered his that morning for her to carry, but she’d refused, telling him that she’d get someone to show her how to make one. She smiled as she remembered his look of surprise over her determination.

“Yes, I’m doing fine,” she said to Gale, though her aching body protested at her words. Judging by the quirk of Gale’s brow, he didn’t quite buy it either.

“We run a hard pace when we’re traveling,” he admitted. “The faster we move, the less likely our trail will be picked up. We’re already in District 6.” Katniss’ mouth fell open in shock.

“We’ve already crossed three districts?” she asked in wonder. Gale nodded with a laugh.

“Only two actually. Panem isn’t a linear place, if you recall from your tour.”

Katniss’ face flushed. “Oh, yes, I remember,” she said shortly, now thinking of her visit to District 6 with Cato and the others. “They make carriages here. And sleds. And ships. Anything the Capitol could want by way of transport. But we are far from the sea…” Katniss trailed off, caught in her own thoughts so that she failed to notice Gale’s face darken.

“Yes, they do. They’re required the cart the ship frames overland to four, where they can be completed in the wharfs. It would make more sense to let four just build the ships in their berths but labor like that...Well it keeps the population too exhausted to focus on much else. And those from District 7 have to lug their lumber to District 6. And District 8 has to carry their clothing everywhere and on and on it goes,” Gale finished bitterly. Katniss placed a hand on his arm to comfort him.

“You can change it,” she said. “Peeta will change it.” Gale looked at her sharply; Katniss could see the cavalcade of thoughts running through his head.

“It’s not enough,” he said slowly, his eyes flashing with ideas. “The people will need more than just a group of robbers, who barely can take care of themselves on a day to day basis. We inspire them, but it’s not enough.”

“What would be enough?” Katniss asked confusedly. Gale opened his mouth to answer her but
before he could, a soft pounding of hooves echoed in the distance. They both stood up, and Gale reached for his crossbow. Katniss realized she needed to make it a practice to always carry a weapon with her, cursing the distance between her and her animal, and had to breathe a sigh of relief when Peeta and Finnick trotted into the clearing.

“What would be enough?” Katniss asked confusedly. Gale opened his mouth to answer her but before he could, a soft pounding of hooves echoed in the distance. They both stood up, and Gale reached for his crossbow. Katniss realized she needed to make it a practice to always carry a weapon with her, cursing the distance between her and her animal, and had to breathe a sigh of relief when Peeta and Finnick trotted into the clearing.

“Hello, mates,” Finnick said cheerfully as he got down off his horse. “Wonderful day, is it not?” He winked at Delly, who giggled, and grinned further when Gale snorted loudly.

“Yeah, Finn, it’s been great. Loving the stale air here. It hasn’t been the least bit oppressive. I suppose you and Peeta have been keeping closer to the road?” He queried this more towards Peeta then Finnick, who nodded his head, his eyes darting to her for the briefest of seconds. Katniss refused to look and see if Johanna was watching.

“You didn’t miss much, Gale,” Peeta said calmly. He knelt down to fill his canteen with water, ignoring the suspicious look Gale gave him.

“Nothing? This is one of the most traveled roads in Panem,” Gale said incredulously. He looked at Finnick, who shrugged, scratching his chin thoughtfully. Gale folded his arms over his chest crossly.

“Spit it out, Finnick. I can tell you’re dying to say something.” For the first time, at Gale’s words, Finnick looked unsure of himself. His eyes shot between Gale and Peeta, who was still kneeling on the ground, now cupping some water onto his arms and neck. Katniss saw puzzled expressions on most of the company.

“Well…” Finnick started slowly. “We did see a caravan this morning. We doubled back a while to make sure neither our group nor the other group were being followed. Supplies for whatever lord rules these parts, Peeta guessed.” He shot Peeta another uneasy expression. “It looked like mostly food-stuffs coming from the outer districts. At least one cartful of silks as well.” He took a deep breath, seeming to steel himself for what he wanted to say. “The people in this district could certainly use the food and while I doubt they could use the silk for clothing, it’d make for good bandaging material.”

Gale grinned as excited chattering broke out among the remaining group members, and Katniss heart skipped to a new faster drum. “Sounds brilliant,” Gale said, echoing Katniss thoughts. “When do we start?”

“We don’t,” came Peeta’s sharp reply. They all gaped at him.
“What? Peeta, why?” Gale asked, flabbergasted. Peeta shot him a mild look that still plainly read to Katniss as think, you idiot.

“Easy,” Peeta said, finally getting to his feet. He leaned on his bow, looking around at everyone. Katniss wondered if anyone else noticed the way his eyes again lingering on hers, and for once, she found herself wishing they could reveal their relationship. She knew nothing of the world, it was true, but she still wanted to hold Peeta’s counsel just as much as the rest.

“Why easy?” Gale muttered.

“Because we’re without true back-up without the others, and a robbery would give away our movement towards the outer districts. They’ll know it’s us if everyone around here somehow has food and the ability to pay for things.” This time, he shot Katniss an obvious look. “Until they give up searching for Katniss, we can’t risk something as big as thieving from a lord.” Gale looked entirely put out.

“We don’t need to act like our usual selves, Peeta,” he argued. Peeta’s eyebrows shot into his hair, but Gale gestured wildly. “We can make it look like a regular robbery. Our group isn’t the only band of vagrants out in these woods. I have a plan.” Finnick laughed, but Katniss could see the eagerness in his face, a look everyone except Peeta seemed to have.

Peeta sighed. “What plan, Gale?”

Gale thought a second before speaking. “You’ll have to hang back,” he said quickly. “You’re right that we’re recognizable, and honestly, at this point, you most of all, Peet. And Katniss, too,” he added. “The way she holds herself...She’d be recognized as a noble woman for sure.” Katniss glared at him, but he’d already turned away.

“Probably a few of us should stay back. Delly and...Johanna,” he said.

“Like hell that’s going to happen,” Johanna said loudly, but she shut up when Peeta raised his hand. His face was still ripe with skepticism, but he let Gale continue.

“The rest of us...Finn, Me, Lyme, Paylor, Tax, Titus, Dalton, Blight, and Woof can take care of the actual robbing. We’re not recognizable the way you are, Peet. We can be quick. If you saw the caravan this morning, they probably won’t reach this area until after sundown. We’ll have plenty of time to set up a trap, and we’ll be in and out before they even know we’re there. You won’t have to lift an arrow, Peeta. It’ll be fine.”
Peeta shook his head slowly, a pained expression coming onto his face. “It’s too much of a risk, Gale. We only attack on the open road when we’re at full force and Thresh’s group is miles away. I know you wanted this, too, Finn,” he said, turning towards his other second-in-command. “But would you want to do this if Annie were with us instead of with the others?” he asked bluntly, his eyes darting to Katniss, and she finally understood. He was trying to protect her, the rest of the group as well, but most of all her.

Finnick sighed, flushing slightly. “I don’t know, Peet. Probably not. But this is a chance we don’t often have, and the people in this district need just as much help as anyone else.”

“Yeah, I can’t tell you how many times I had to come to this shithole, dragging lumber,” Johanna sniffed out. “I didn’t know which was more pathetic, this place or home.” A large chorus of echoes rang out after her in agreement, but Katniss could tell Peeta wasn’t going to have it, so whether right or wrong, she blurted out--

“I think we should try it, Peeta.” Everyone stopped talking abruptly, turning to stare at her as she blushed. Peeta’s brow furrowed subtlety, but he showed no other signs that he might be troubled. She swallowed heavily, wondering if she was hurting their alliance, but her desire to finally do something was too strong. “They need help. I...I joined you all to help. I want to help,” she struggled out.

Johanna whistled her pleasure. “Seems like our lady has got a spine after all. Don’t let her show you up, Peeta.” Peeta’s eyes shot to his friend once, not deigning to respond, before looking around at everyone, his eyes yet again finally coming to rest on Katniss. He let out a long sigh.

“Seems I’ve been outvoted,” he said and turned to Gale. “Let’s get planning.”

Everyone started talking at once again, pulling weapons from their horses, whetstones from their bags, while Delly eagerly began pulling out some food to make a meal that would last them through the long wait. Only Katniss stood silently, studying Peeta, waiting, until finally he walked towards her, a grim sort of smile on his face.

“Do you feel ready for your first robbery, Katniss?” he asked, his face a mask but for the tumult of emotion written in his eyes. Worry. Frustration. Anger. They were all there, and then gone in a flash to be replaced with determination. Katniss nodded her head, hoping she looked more confident than she felt.
“I’m ready,” she said firmly. Peeta nodded curtly.

“Good. Sharpen your arrowheads. You can use my whetstone.” Katniss held out her hand, and Peeta dropped the dull rock into her hand, his fingers skating across her palm ever so briefly, but it was enough that Katniss wanted to snatch up his hand and kiss it, to reassure him that things were going to be fine. But they both knew that was a question with an unknown answer.

“Thank you,” she said, but Peeta had already turned away to address some question Paylor had. She smiled a little. It was time to fight.

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“I can’t believe I’m here,” Johanna grumbled for what had to be the twelfth time in an hour. Katniss was tempted to kick her, being crouched below a prickly berry bush already uncomfortable without Johanna’s dark needling.

“Peeta and Gale said they needed one experienced warrior besides him on backup.” Delly said diplomatically, gripping her knife in an awkward way as she looked at it with distaste. She finally sheathed it with a shrug when she caught Katniss staring at her.

Johanna gave a soft laugh. “Ha. No. Gale claims he loves me, but really, this is just punishment from last time. Bah,” she spat, thwacking her axe sharply against the tree, the thud echoing in wood, interrupting their silent watch.

“Johanna!” Delly squeaked. “You’ll give us away!”

“Who cares?” Johanna said sullenly, but she dug out her weapon from the trunk and fell quiet, her angry eyes glittering in the dark. Katniss listened hard, anxiously trying to decipher if anything was amiss, but all she heard was the light night breeze rustling the leaves and somewhere in the distance, a mockingjay calling to its mate softly. She breathed a soft sigh of relief, the bird’s call strangely comforting to her ears.

It had been nearly an hour since the sun had set, and the moon had only recently appeared to color their faces like pale milk. The light shifted with the occasional clouds overhead, casting strange shadows on the road that lay at the bottom of the hill that led up to the forest. It was an eerie sight, and though the night was hot, Katniss felt cold. She puffed out a small breath, clenching and unclenching her hand around her bow.
A half-mile down the road she knew that most of the group lay in wait, ready to spring the complex trap of woven vines and thorny snares Gale and the rest had created to confuse and capture the caravan’s horses. They would be poised to spring into action the second the contraption was triggered, to rush in and grab what they could that was of most value, and if they were lucky, Peeta had said, to snatch at least one of the many carts in the grouping to be able to carry away other goods more easily.

Katniss had joined in Johanna’s frustration when Gale’s decision to have her stay on the side of the road with Johanna and Delly to be used as an extra set of weapons only if needed had been supported by Peeta. Katniss had tried to catch Finnick’s eyes with a silent plea that she wanted to do more than what was being offered to her, hoping she could find an ally in him, but by the frown on Finnick’s face, it was obvious Gale’s orders and by extension Peeta’s, were to be obeyed without question.

So instead, she had sat here mutely for the past few hours, listening to Johanna’s endless complaints and Delly’s annoyingly cheerful ramblings, trying but failing not to brood on Peeta’s decision. Did he really have so little confidence in her? Or was it all about her protection? Katniss wasn’t sure which one was the worst option. All she knew was that she didn’t want to go back to her cage. She frowned into the night.

Peeta was out there somewhere. He, too, was technically acting as the main group’s backup, but he had been flitting between them and wherever Finnick or Gale was hidden, or perhaps even farther down the line, always making sure everyone was doing alright. He was the first defense if the others needed help, the three of them were still to remain hidden unless called upon, another fact Johanna hadn’t been able to let go of.

Delly was timid and not really a fighter, and Katniss was untested, but Johanna had been lumped with them, yet every time Peeta had come back to check on them, her protests had fallen on deaf ears. Katniss decided patience was a virtue she had not yet attained as she’d watched Peeta’s practically serene expression in the face of Johanna’s increasingly violent threats. Katniss ran her hand along the string of her bow, the itch to shoot and try her new skills growing with the darkness, though it seemed that the chances were slim.

“The carriages are approaching,” Peeta said suddenly in a soft whisper, his warm breath caressing Katniss ear as he arrived back in their hollow. Katniss shivered when his hand brushed against hers, the gesture unseen by either Delly or Johanna. She looked into his eyes, the darkness having turned his eyes dark blue, like the ice that accumulated in shallow pools on the deepest winter night. She squeezed his hand tightly, the other clutching at her bow even more tightly than before.

“It’s about time,” Johanna said crankily. “Do the others need help? I can go…” She stopped, looking cross, as Peeta shook his head.
“You, Delly, and Katniss need to wait here. If they need you, you know you’ll hear the call. Do you remember it, Katniss?” Peeta asked. She felt the pulse quicken in his wrist where she was holding it and thought of the whistling tune Finnick had taught her early that morning to sing to the mockingjays still fluttering between the trees. It was also the signal to send if they happened to need help, too.

“Yes,” she said. Peeta nodded and drew up his hood to cover his hair, golden even in the moonlight, though the moon made his skin almost too white. *Like a corpse*, Katniss thought, before she firmly shoved the thought to the back of her head. *Everything was going to be fine.*

“Remember, Johanna. You aren’t to move unless they signal you,” Peeta commanded, his tone demonstrating he would hear Johanna’s complaints no longer, and Katniss saw he was no longer her maybe-lover, but instead, he was her leader, the one she’d encountered on the day they’d met. She felt oddly proud as he said, “And that goes for you as well, Delly. And you, Katniss.”

It was Katniss turn to nod, smiling at the brief flash of gratefulness on Peeta’s face. “Not unless we receive the signal,” she confirmed. Peeta smiled back.

“Be safe,” he whispered and disappeared back into the wood to take up his own watch, but Katniss could hear his soft clumping as he made away from their position. She grinned when Delly laughed.

“It’s one of the few things he’s not good at,” Delly said brightly. Johanna rolled her eyes with a snort, but they all quickly stopped making any noise.

At first, the wood remained quiet, the hustling wind still their only company, as low hanging clouds blocked the moon. Katniss felt her sticky, cold sweat drip down her forehead, watching the creeping, thick fog that had come with the clouds slowly envelop them. The mist clung to her garments until Katniss felt like she was swimming in her own clothes. She cast Johanna a worried look that she could tell Johanna understood perfectly...It would be nearly impossible to see through this unexpected weather. Suddenly, a deep male shout, too indistinguishable to determine who it might belong to, ripped through the quiet.

Katniss sprang to her feet, an arrow already knocked in her bow, but Johanna quickly yanked her back down. “We can’t be seen,” she hissed, looking both angry and concerned. Delly chattered out a little nervous giggle, and Katniss scowled, straining hard to hear the noises now echoing through the trees.
There was more muddled shouting. The clang of steel ringing together. The twang of an arrow. The crack of splintering wood. The scream of a horse. Each sound was more terrible than the last as Katniss imagined what each could mean. A sword through Finnick’s belly? Gale trampled by a horse? Peeta hit through the heart with an arrow? It was beyond horrific to imagine, and even the thought that Peeta, too, was in theory laying low brought her no comfort. With each new rent of cadence, Katniss wanted to bury her head between her knees with her hands over her ears, and yell for it all to stop. She jumped when Johanna stood up abruptly.

“I can’t take this,” she said. “I’m no good for back-up. I need to fight.” Without another word, she ran off through the trees, ignoring Delly’s cry to stay put. She looked wide-eyed at Delly, whose face had turned as white as swan feathers.

Katniss looked at her grimly for one long second. “I’m going too,” she said. And then she was off and running as well.

Katniss moved swiftly through the trees, bounding over the roots and branches that might have made her stumble when she had worn her heavy formal skirts with ease. She might have laughed but for her fear. The wind was now howling, the noise not unlike the thundering calls of the exotic baboons King Snow had brought to his court from a faraway land for entertainment in celebration of her engagement. Katniss had been horrified by their long teeth and large, sharp claws, the memory of them spurring her to run faster, as if they were at her heels. Rain splattered on her face as she finally reached the road.

Chaos reigned down on the road, and Katniss could not tell who was friend or foe in the sheets of rain falling down upon them, the only light coming from the sputtering torches that the caravan’s guards must have been using to guide their way. She searched for Peeta desperately, slipping and sliding down the hill while she went. She cried out his name, but she knew the likelihood he could hear her in the torrent wasn’t good. A large shape loomed up before her, and she yelled out again.

“Katniss?” Gale’s voice came with confusion as he pushed back his hood and surveyed her, anger blooming on his face. “What are you doing here? Didn’t Peeta order you to stay where you were? Go back to where you were at,” he commanded, his eyebrows contracting with fury.
Katniss didn’t know what to say, but she didn’t have to. “Where’s Johanna?” he thundered out, realization illuminating his face, his loud voice somehow managing to echo above the din. A flash of lightning finally brightened the scene. Katniss blinked in surprise.

Most of the guards seemed to be knocked out, already bound to a tree, though some were still fighting, while members of the group were loading stuff into one of the larger carriages. Paylor and Lyme passed her with a chest of some goods, though Katniss couldn’t say what they were. Peeta was nowhere to be seen because, Katniss understood too late, he hadn’t been needed and neither had she and Johanna. Except…
With a sonorous boom of thunder and another lightning strike, Katniss saw the group of guardsmen still fighting break out from several of the men who had been guarding them. She pointed them out frantically to Gale, but she saw too late that he’d wandered away from her. She sprinted after them, the mud sucking at her feet so hard that at some point one shoe came off her foot. Suddenly, a glittering flash of silver blinded her.

“Out of my way, Brainless,” Johanna yelled, jumping into the melee of guardsmen attempting to run down the road. One cried out loudly as Johanna’s axe found her mark, but the others drew their steel. Katniss saw she was outnumbered as Johanna spun around, trying to keep her back to the glinting blades, but there was nowhere to turn that did not expose her unshielded back.

As they moved forward, Katniss raised her bow, studying the movement of the nearest guardsman, remembering what Peeta had taught her. She let her arrow fly, and with a loud thud, the weapon hit its mark, buried within his chest. Katniss snatched another from her quiver quickly as Johanna took to the battle, too. Another guardsman dropped, felled by an arrow to his knee, another to his arm, a third to his belly. The moment seemed to last forever but could have only lasted a minute at most, and when all the escaped men had fallen, those still alive groaning with pain in the dirt, Katniss dropped her bow to the ground in both horror and exaltation, her entire body trembling with adrenaline.

She looked at Johanna, who was eyeing her with astonishment and perhaps something akin to admiration, but Katniss didn’t move until she felt a cold hand on her shoulder. She turned around slowly to find Peeta looking at her, his eyes a mix of sadness and anger.

“To murder innocent people,” he said. “It costs everything you are.” Katniss knew he didn’t mean it as a question and it took all her willpower not to sink down to the ground. She could think of nothing to say when he spoke next, looking from her to Johanna and back again at her.

“You both disobeyed my command,” he said coolly. Katniss’ tongue felt like lead in her mouth.

“We were worried about you,” she said softly. The grim line of Peeta’s mouth did not change as Johanna sidled up next to her.

“It’s my fault, Peeta,” Johanna said. Katniss cast her a sideways glance, but if Johanna saw she ignored it. “I was angry about being left as back-up and when the fight started I…” Johanna stopped talking for a second, studying the unimpressed expression of her leader. “Well, I shouldn’t have done it. It won’t happen again.”
Peeta sighed. “You say that every time this happens. Jo, I didn’t put you there to punish you, whatever you may think. I put you with Katniss and Delly because you’re a seasoned warrior. For times when things like this happened.” He gestured towards the men on the ground. “I don’t suppose you noticed that two got away. You would have seen him coming if you’d stayed stationed where you were.” Katniss’ stomach dropped to the ground.

“But...but he won’t know it’s our group, right?” Katniss sputtered out. “You didn’t need to reveal yourself? They’ll just think this was a band of brigands.”

Peeta smiled sadly. “I stopped one of the two from escaping,” he said simply. He looked between them. “You both will be reprimanded. Johanna you’re on guard duty tonight. Katniss...I…” He trailed off, and suddenly Katniss was fearful of a lot more than one escaped guard. “I’ll figure out what to do with you, later,” he finished. He turned to the other members of the group, who had been loitering about as Peeta had talked to issue more commands. Katniss couldn’t remember ever feeling so small.

A mockingjay tweeted out a lonely note as the rain continued to fall.

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Katniss pulled her cloak around, using it to shield herself against the damp wind, not quite believing the way it could have been so warm that afternoon and so chilly tonight. She glanced at the fire, which she’d stayed well back from tonight. She watched Gale, Finnick, and the others laughing and exchanging some of the food they’d found with each other and the captured guardsmen. Finnick had told her they would be released at some point in the next few days, after most of what they had stolen had been delivered to the hungry district population.

Katniss kept hoping to see Peeta stepping into the firelight, but he’d disappeared shortly after they’d made camp without so much as a glance at her, and she knew her hopeful roving of the woods would be fruitless. She’d resolved to stay up until he felt compelled to come back and sleep though and had deliberately not eaten anything, hoping the hunger gnawing in her belly would be enough to keep her up. She sighed.

“You really can’t act, can you, Katniss?”

Katniss jumped, and she looked up, startled to find Johanna standing over her with an amused expression. “What?” she asked.
A grin split Johanna’s face. “I said you can’t act, and it almost makes me wish I could have seen you in court,” she laughed. “I’m guessing that was a sight to behold.”

Katniss scowled, and her eyes shot back towards the fire. “I don’t need this tonight. Leave me alone,” she snapped.

“Don’t get your britches in a twist, Brainless. I just wanted to say thank you.”

Katniss shot her a look of surprise. “Thank you?”

Johanna nodded. “Yes, thank you. You saved my life today, as much as that pains me to say, and you looked damn good doing it. I’m glad you’re on our side.” She smirked at Katniss’ astonished expression. “Not that Snow probably would have ever let you get near a bow... He’s gotta protect his precious princeling, after all.”

Katniss finally laughed. “Cato isn’t precious.”

Johanna’s grin broadened at her words. “Ain’t that the truth. That brute looked like the least intelligent fucker I’ve ever seen. But I do know who you think is precious.” Katniss’ smile fled as quickly as it had come, but Johanna continued to smile. She pointed between two trees.

“Time for you to talk, Brainless. I’ll tell them Peeta thought you needed to be punished with guard duty tonight too. We already had ourselves a talk tonight anyway, and I’m sick of looking at him.” Katniss narrowed her eyes at Johanna, but she just shrugged, nudging Katniss’ leg with her toe. “Go before I decide I don’t like being nice to you.”

Katniss scrambled to her feet and made off in the direction Johanna pointed without a second thought, but she didn’t miss Johanna’s crude last words. “Kill him with kisses, Kat. And I don’t mean just his lips... He’ll forget all about today, guaranteed.” Katniss blushed so much that she wondered if faces could glow in the dark.

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