This Life, All Mystery and Magic

by openmouthwideeye

Summary

"Powerful infatuations can be induced by the skillful potioneer, but never yet has anyone managed to create the truly unbreakable, eternal, unconditional attachment that alone can be called love." - Hector Dagworth-Granger

The day Katniss Everdeen turns eleven, she wakes to an owl perched by the window. What follows is seven years of mystery, misery, and the unexpected magic of a baker's boy.

Notes

So it turns out I have a lot of opinions about the wizarding world and THG.

See the end of the work for more notes
The day Katniss Everdeen turns eleven, she opens her eyes to find an owl perched on her
windowsill. Downstairs a chair scrapes against the rough wood floor. Her sister’s giggles crest and
fall, scolded silent by a soft murmur from their mother.

Katniss is eleven. Her letter has arrived.

The tawny bird ruffles its feathers, scratching impatiently at the chipped paint now that it knows
she’s awake. The window is uncharacteristically open. She’d felt heady — rebellious — pushing
it ajar before bedtime the night before.

Katniss throws back her covers, not bothering to stuff her feet into her father’s old work boots
before her fingers fumble for the letter. She dashes downstairs, heart hammering as she tears into
the envelope. The bird squawks behind her, wings flapping angrily.

*You’ll get your treat, you stupid bird,* she thinks as her eyes catch on the words “Everdeen” -
“Hogwarts” - “start of term.” I’ve been waiting for this forever.

She skids to a halt in the kitchen, feeling suddenly foolish, but her mother’s smile warms her like
the sun.

Prim bounces giddily in her seat. “Did you get it, did you get it?”

“Take a look, Little Duck.”

Katniss drops the letter on the table, unable to push back a swell of pride as her mother gently
retrieves the parchment to memorize its contents. Prim ignores the thick paper, launching forward
to wrap her arms around Katniss’s middle.

“I knew you would!” she whispers into her sister’s pajamas, smiling widely enough that Katniss
can feel the apple of her cheek rise against her stomach.

“You will, too,” Katniss promises, dropping a kiss on top of her sister’s head.

Their mother, finished with her perusal, holds the letter carefully between her hands.

“Congratulations, dear. We’re so proud.”

Katniss beams, tugging Prim against her side as she looks around the kitchen for the first time that
morning.

“Where’s Dad?”

“At the bakery,” her mother says as Prim bursts out, “We’re getting a cake. A real one! With
white flour and frosting and everything.”

“A cake?” Katniss repeats dumbly, looking between her mother and sister in disbelief. They both
nod, in turn amused and enthusiastic.

A cake was almost as good as Hogwarts.

“You betcha.” She turns to find her father framed by the tangle of trees behind their house,
holding a large white box from the bakery in Dufftown.
“Did I miss it?” he asks, floating the cake to the table with a flick of his wand.

He opens his arms. Katniss dives into his warmth, burying her nose in the familiar scent of his cloak: woods and morning dew; dust from the packed dirt road; a rich, sweet smell that lingers from his trip to town.

“You’re just in time,” she says, squeezing tightly before stepping back.

“I saw the owl outside her window when I fetched the morning paper,” her mother says, placing the letter back on the worn kitchen table. “I don’t know how it found us.”

His eyes twinkle as he leans in, motioning his wife closer, as if imparting some life-altering secret. “Magic.”

Prim breaks into another round of giggles. Katniss laughs, too, sliding into the chair beside her sister.

“So, cake for breakfast-”

Their father waves his wand to accentuate his point. The box unfolds on the table, twisting under itself to create a raised sort of platter. The cake is small and circular, with speckled gray frosting and a bird rising from the center. Flames seem to lick its wings, scattering to embers as they fall, while a raging fire sweeps around the cake's base.

If Katniss didn’t know any better, she'd have said it was made by magic.

“- and then,” he continues, doling out slices onto first her plate, then Prim’s, “we’ll floo to Hogsmeade and buy you a wand.”

A lump settles in the pit of her stomach that has nothing to do with some old wizard poking around her aura while he waits for a wand to choose her.

“Can we-” She bites her lip, unwilling to let the word afford taint the morning. “- do that?”

“We’ve been saving,” her mother assures, reaching over to pat her daughter’s hand. She nods toward the threadbare armchair in the living room, where Katniss has failed to notice a stack of books and baubles and faded black robes. “And your father kept most of his old school things.”

“We knew this was coming, Katniss.”

Her eyes shift from her mother to her father. The lump rises from her stomach to her throat.

“I’ll miss you.” Traitorous tears well behind her lashes. She studiously examines the cake, willing them away. “What’s with the bird?”

“Your mother’s idea.” Her father's voice takes on a teasing lilt. “‘It’s symbolic, dear. Rebirth. She’s entering a new stage of life.’”

“She is,” her mother insists, but it’s not really for Katniss. Her parents are looking at each other in that way they have, the way that says the rest of the world has fallen away.

She turns to her sister, grinning as she scoops a frosting flame onto her finger and plops it in her mouth. Prim giggles, flicking guilty eyes to their parents before reaching out to skim sugary ash from a corner of the cake.

Katniss decides that there’s more than one kind of magic, if only you know where to look.
Facedown on the dresser rests a plain pewter hand mirror that belonged to Katniss’ father. It’s not the first time she’s thought about selling it — taking it down to the wizarding black market outside of Dufftown to see what it’s worth. It used to say things like, “Cute as a button,” and “missed a spot, handsome” when Prim or her father used it, but it hasn’t said anything nice in weeks.

As usual, she leaves it where it lays. Even if she could brave the Hob, Prim would never forgive her for selling their father’s shaving mirror. Instead she rifles through the drawers, coming up with a bundle of dried leaves and two vials of eucalyptus oil. She shifts her bag around her hip and they join a jar of rosewater with a large clack.

Her wand rests in its usual spot on her back, tucked snugly into a pocket sewn onto the strap of her father’s old forage bag. The press of the wood mocks her as she overturns another drawer, hunting for something she can trade.

Her stomach gurgles, a hollow sound of displeasure. The small stash of chicory roots she’d scavenged from the meadow won’t carry them through the winter.

She slams the drawer shut.

“You can’t conjure food,” she snaps, glaring down at the gaping hole her shirt hides. In a year and a half at Hogwarts, she’s learned more can’ts than cans. “You can’t transfigure food and you can’t bring back the dead.” She chokes off, clenching her teeth as tears spring to her eyes, threatening to bury her.

Like her father.

*Don’t think about that,* she reminds herself harshly, slamming another drawer. *Think about Prim.*

Prim, who was alone with their mother for four days before anyone bothered to owl Katniss. Prim, who cries herself to sleep and swears, “Of course you’ll go back to Hogwarts,” whenever her sister speaks reason.

After she spent their last pence, Katniss flipped through her father’s old textbooks in a fit of desperation, searching for a spell that might save them. She’d tried “Accio food!” three times to no avail, but the next day she got a telephone call from the crotchety wizard on the other side of town.

“Try that again, sweetheart, and you’ll have more than just the Ministry beating down your door.”

She doesn’t try again. They are starving. Prim is starving. And no amount of wand-waving will change that.

Their mother is a ghost. Not like the ghosts that roam the castle, a veneer of joviality covering their discontent. Her body lingers, wasting away, but her spirit has moved on.

Prim and Katniss are alone.

So she stuffs her bag with odds and ends, hikes the mile to Dufftown proper, and prays that the aromatherapy shop is low on stock.

Her feet ache by the time she trudges into town, muscles protesting her overlarge boots. Her fingers are numb, nose stinging in the cold that makes her eyes water. She forces herself past the
brightly colored shops, loathing the people merrily milling in their post-holiday haze.

When she stops in front of A Whiff of Wonder, the anger drains away. She feels numb. Empty.

Away on holiday. Back for the New Year.

Katniss doesn’t know she’s moving until the buildings change from squat shops to aged stone houses. She quickly turns back the way she came, wandering aimlessly through the streets. She could try the shop again tomorrow, but she doubts they’ll be open on New Year’s Eve. Greasy Sae will let her scrub pots if the patrons don’t see, but it’s too early for the pub to open and Prim will worry if she doesn’t come home.

Suddenly she remembers crisp, white-washed walls that she passed on her way into town. The perfumery doesn’t make their wares in-house, but the owner dabbles in “local color” like homemade soaps and essences. If Katniss plays it just right, she’s sure Ms. Trinket will buy the eucalyptus.

It’s not much of a plan, but it’s all she has, so she trudges up the cobblestones toward the perfumery. Her heart lurches when she sees the pristine, handwritten sign hanging in the window, but the shop still bustles with activity. Closing at noon, she reads. By the look of the sickly sun peeking through heavy clouds, she’s made it just in time. She pushes inside before her luck turns.

On the few occasions she’s ventured into the perfumery — happier times, when her father collected plants from the forest and her mother distilled them into medicinal oils and fragrant essences — Katniss had hated it. Ms. Trinket is a stickler for propriety, and even a grateful smile is beyond Katniss’s acting abilities. When she wasn’t tracking magical creatures with her father, she was waiting in the courtyard, watching birds fly overhead while Prim and her mother attended to business.

But today she has no choice. Joining the queue, Katniss unravels her braid, combing out knots with her fingers before hurriedly plaiting it. She smooths the stray strands around her face, scrubs chapped skin off her lips, and clutches the vials in an unsteady hand.

My name is Katniss Everdeen, she practices as the line inches forward. You used to do business with my mother. Would you like to buy some oils?

The line moves quickly, giving Katniss little time to prepare. When she reaches the counter, she sees why. Effie Trinket’s usually cheery demeanor is clipped, hurrying each customer along with polite determination. When she fixes her painted smile on Katniss, the girl freezes.

“May I help you?”

“I-” Katniss begins, pausing to swallow. “I, um-”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Ms. Trinket says, not sounding sorry at all. “But as you can see I’m on a bit of a schedule. If you don’t have official shop business, I’ll have to ask you to come back another time.”

“No!” Katniss yells as the woman inches up on her heels, preparing to motion another customer forward. Ms. Trinket sinks back to the floor with an audible clack. “I mean, sorry, I just- I have these.” She juts out her hand, fingers white around two dusty vials. “Would you like to buy them?”

Ms. Trinket staves off a wince, murmuring a delicate, “Oh. Dear.”

All she needs is a little convincing. Katniss has seen it, watched her mother chat amiably about the
benefits of sandalwood until a customer wanted half a year’s supply. The only problem is that Katniss doesn’t know how.

“Is that eucalyptus?” a boy says, stepping up beside her to examine the vials. Katniss nearly jerks them away, but he doesn’t reach for them, only looks. “That cures respiratory infections, right? Like coughs and stuff?”

“Yes,” Katniss agrees, desperate. She has no idea if it’s true.

“Great for asthma, too,” he adds when Katniss falls silent.

Katniss nods, hoping Ms. Trinket, at least, believes him.

It’s clear from her expression that she does. A smile blooms on the pale backdrop of her foundation, transforming her face like sunlight on fresh snow.

“Oh, that’s simply perfect. Eucalyptus smells heavenly, of course, but I had no idea of its medicinal properties. I’ll take them both. Right away.” Her hand sweeps circles through the air, urging Katniss to wrap it up, like she has some pretty little ribbons tucked away in her bag. She sticks out her hand lamely, vials flat on her palm. Ms. Trinket pauses for half a breath before snatching them up, rooting under the counter for a garish pink bag and sparkling tissue paper.

She chatters as she dusts the vials, wrapping them artfully in a square of gold cloth. “Flavius has come down with the most dreadful cold, and those quack physicians refuse to let him attend my little New Year’s affair.” Katniss hates her for implication that this is tantamount to tragedy. “I’m told these charming little home remedies do wonders for the spirit.” Ms. Trinket pauses, looking up as if Katniss might take offense. “And the body, of course. Of course.”

She smooths her skirt before snatching up a calligraphy pen, scrawling an elegant note on a piece of paper shaped like a flower. “This is just the thing to speed him towards recovery.” She loops the note onto the gift with a length of ribbon, tying it with a flourish.

“Now,” she adds after examining the package from every angle, “will a cheque suffice or would you prefer—”

“Bank notes,” Katniss interjects, antsy to have the money in her hands. “Please,” she amends hastily when Ms. Trinket purses her lips.

Katniss doesn’t know how much to ask for, but the woman must remember from business with her mother. She pops the register with a loud ching and places a crisp five pound note in Katniss’s hand. The shopkeeper hums to herself, glancing at Katniss through lashes that look like spider legs, then adds a single pound to the pile.

Katniss clutches the scant money to her chest.

“Oh, dear heavens,” Ms. Trinket murmurs, glancing at her watch. She bustles around the counter, patting the arm of the stocky boy who eased her into the purchase.

“I simply must run. Be a dear and stop by tomorrow, will you? I’ve had a bolt of inspiration.” Ms. Trinket pauses, eyes going starry as she pantomimes a glittering marquee. “Auld Lang soiree.”

Katniss had nearly forgotten the boy was there.

“I’ll see what I can come up with.”

He seems unperturbed as the woman shuffles them out of the store. Katniss notices for the first
time that they’re the only customers left. Ms. Trinket clicks the lock shut, carefully zips her keys into her purse, and smiles at them. She reaches out a lace-gloved hand to smooth a blond lock from the boy’s forehead, then pats his cheek.

“Six o’clock, sharp!”

“See you tomorrow, Effie.”

She nods and hurries down the street, gaudy gift bag swinging from her wrist.

The second she disappears from view, Katniss blurts, “You didn’t have to lie for me.” She winces, hearing the accusation, but she’s never figured out how to thank someone without sounding angry or pathetic. She crosses her arms and barrels forward. “I would have figured something out.”

He looks startled. “I didn’t lie.”

“Then how’d you know all that? About the eucalyptus.”

“My dad used to know this herbalist.” For some reason he’s watching her reaction. She shrugs. He looks disappointed. “After twelve years of the same stories, you pick up a few things.”

“Your father. He owns the bakery, right?”

“That’s us.”

He smiles, clearly surprised she remembers. She is, too, if she’s honest. She vaguely remembers him from primary school, the Muggle one that Prim still attends. But he had a lot of friends and she kept to herself, always worried that she’d accidentally curse someone and wind up in Azkaban.

“Could I- ” She gestures with the hand clutching the money. She doesn’t want to go home empty handed.

He gets her meaning. When she opens her palm, he smooths the bills carefully and tucks them into his pocket.

“Come on. I’ll take you around the back so my mother won’t see.”

Shame surges through her and Katniss almost turns around on the spot. She feels like a gutter rat fed scraps from the trash bins. Not worthy of polite society. But he’s already a dozen paces down the street, walking away with her money.

Idiot. Always get the goods first.

She scurries after him, stewing silently as they duck down an alley and into a small, gated backyard.

“Wait here,” he instructs, disappearing into the back.

Hot, fragrant air bursts into the winter sky before the door swings shut, sealing it away. Katniss becomes keenly aware of the pangs gnawing at her belly. They’re halfway through a series of embarrassing rumbles when he returns, a bag in one hand and a handful of bills in the other.

“Hearty nut bread,” he announces, handing her the bag, “and your change.” He hands her that, too.

“Change?” she asks warily. “Are you sure?”
“Positive.”

She nods, feeling stupid. Of course the baker’s son knows how much bread costs.

“Ok.” She presses the bag under her arm. The heat sinks through her coat, her shirt, her skin, sparking an ember somewhere deep within.

She should thank him. Katniss almost works up the courage, but the boy isn’t looking at her anymore. He’s frowning at the window, watching a scene she sees only in shadow.

“I’ll see you around, okay?” He doesn’t even glance at her.

Point taken.

She doesn’t grace that with a response, stalking silently up the alley as he disappears inside. She tucks the bag inside her coat, surprised to find herself holding not one, but two fat loaves.

A sharp voice echoes off the paving stones, and Katniss instinctively walks faster. She hears a clatter from the bakery, then the dull thump of flesh meeting flesh. The bread burns into her ribs, pulsing hot with her guilt, but Katniss makes herself keep walking.

It’s nothing to do with you. You don’t owe this boy anything.

It’s not hard to convince herself. After all, why would anyone risk punishment to help a stranger? There must be some other reason for what she heard.

Prim’s eyes light up when Katniss pulls the bag from her coat. The smell permeates the house, filling forgotten corners with its heady aroma. After a few minutes their mother stirs upstairs. Katniss slices the first loaf slowly, savoring each burst of escaping steam. Prim stops trying to steal crumbs when Mrs. Everdeen shuffles downstairs to join them.

“Mom,” Katniss asks. She almost starts when her mother’s glassy eyes find her in the firelight. “Where’s dad’s old notebook? About the magical properties of forest-dwellers?”

The fog drains from her mother’s eyes, unearthing a whirlpool of misery. She flinches from the question, shakily shaping her fingers into a Muggle ward against evil.

“Ms. Trinket bought your oils,” Katniss presses. If she could find a cluster of bubotubers, maybe a moonstone or two . . . The Hob seems less frightening now, sitting in the lamplight with fresh bread for dinner.

“I can help pick stuff,” Prim pipes up. She squares her shoulders, so small and thin. She’s always been terrified of the forest. “Mom let me distill lavender once. A lot plants are good for medicine.”

Medicine. Could her 8-year-old sister really make medicine?

“I have books,” their mother says. Her voice is like the rasp of dry leaves whispering across the hearth, brittle and faint. “From when I lived in town.”

She doesn’t say more, but Prim jumps up from the table and crawls into their mother’s lap. She wraps short arms around her thin neck, sobbing a laugh when Mrs. Everdeen pats her ribs vaguely.

“You’ll help me, won’t you, Katniss? If I just learn how . . .”
. . . then maybe they can get by. Everybody loves Prim. Effie Trinket won’t think twice before buying herbs and oils from pretty little Primrose Everdeen.

“We’ll start tomorrow,” Katniss agrees, trying vainly to ignore the hope that stirs in her chest. After all, isn’t Hogwarts only a few miles away? If she can sneak to the forest unseen, she can slip through to check on Prim. She can bring her treats from the kitchens and hopping teakettles from Charms and enchanted paper flowers that transform into birds. She can learn real magic, *useful* magic, like how to brew potions from forest plants and what wand cores fetch the best price.

Her family can survive.

“Let’s eat.”

Katniss digs the second loaf out of the bag, preparing for a feast to rival any in the Great Hall, and finds a crumpled five pound note beside a small bag of cookies under the bread. And she knows that she was wrong. She can never repay this Muggle boy, not if she lives to be six hundred.
Three times a week Professor Chaff forces Katniss to brew potions with Clove, a sharp-eyed girl Katniss joined Frog Choir to avoid first year. Their tentative peace lasts about as long as Katniss’s music career, but instead of assigning them detention or allowing them to switch partners, their professor merely chortles whenever they start hexing each other under the table.

Despite a year of scavenging potions ingredients from the woods behind her house, Katniss’s brewing abilities are passable at best. Clove works with finesse when chopping the heads off beetles or dicing dandelion roots, but otherwise ignores their cauldron in favor of a thick-necked Gryffindor who seems to think predatory grins count as flirting.

Then again, Clove seems to think so, too.

“What’s it going to take to see some of those knife skills, huh?” The hulking boy props his elbow beside a pile of chunky white mush that will surely turn his potion noxious. Clove, who has long since minced their daisy roots, toys with her knife while Katniss attempts to juice leeches.

“Cato,” Clove says sweetly, dragging the blade through the legs of a discarded caterpillar, severing them neatly. “That would be cheating.”

Katniss rolls her eyes as he leans across the aisle.

“Afraid to break the rules?”

Clove flips her blade toward the ceiling. The gleam of it bewitches him as it rotates midair and lands with a *thwunk*, spearing the rat spleen beside her cauldron. Fluid leaks onto the table as Clove prods the hilt casually.

“The risk has to be worth the reward.”

“We needed that,” Katniss complains while Cato makes some uninspired comment about “making it worth your while.”

Clove flicks an annoyed look over her shoulder, so Katniss abandons her leeches to grab another spleen. She takes her time digging through the jar, dragging her feet on her way back to their table. By the time she gets back, Cato’s partner is frantically waving his wand as a thick slime oozes from their cauldron.

Katniss can’t help but grin. “Professor?” she calls. “Cato must’ve sniffed the Shrinking Solution. I think it’s affecting his brain.”

“Watch it, Everdeen,” Cato hisses, but he can’t exactly hex her with Professor Chaff ambling over.

“Yeesh.” He wrinkles his nose. “I think you’d better start from scratch, boys. That looks as foul as my last home cooked meal.” With a wave of his wand, the slime puffs into nothingness.

The professor leans around Clove to peer into their cauldron. “Looking good, girls.”

Knowing Cato’s temper, he’s only waiting for the man to turn his back before aiming his wand at Katniss. She tosses the last few ingredients into her drought, stirring quickly, and raises her hand to ask for Professor Chaff’s approval to visit the owlery before Defense Against the Dark Arts.
“Yes, yes,” he waves his hand, dismissing Katniss and Clove. “It’s passable. See you Monday.”

Katniss wastes no time hauling her bag onto her shoulder and sprinting up the stairs. She can’t afford Saturday detention if Clove decides that chasing her is more fun than tormenting Cato. Instead of heading to the owlery, Katniss ducks behind a tapestry that leads back to the dungeons. The common room is empty this time of day; no witnesses. She changes into sturdy Muggle clothes, throws on a dark cloak that may pass for Hogwarts robes at a distance, and slings her forage bag over her shoulder. If the past is any precedent, neither Professor Atala nor Professor Wiress will notice she’s missing.

She follows a familiar path out of the castle, slipping behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy and following the dank tunnel as it winds through the walls. Halfway through it changes from cold stone to damp earth. Katniss can’t help but shiver as she hunches lower, shuffling quickly down the passage until she climbs out near the blackened husk of the old groundskeeper’s cabin. It’s a simple matter to crouch behind the overgrown garden, double checking for prying eyes before she darts for the tree line.

The foliage swallows her, soothing and damp. It reminds her of the dormitories, all cool greens and wet air, but unbound in a way she never feels inside the ancient stone walls. The twisting path that leads into the Forbidden Forest is familiar, its dangers known. She winds quickly through the looming trees, pausing now and then to follow a promising trail a few hundred yards off the path. She knows she should hunt more seriously — Prim’s turning eleven this year, and she’ll need a wand — but Katniss is eager to get home. She already scavenged a small sack of fire seeds from school grounds that week, enough to earn her a handful of Galleons at the Hob.

Eventually the trees thin, revealing soft clouds in a blue sky. The hard-packed earth seems to sprout grass from one step to the next, swaying gently in a meadow dotted with wildflowers. She’s tempted to linger, savoring the sunshine, but it’s been a week longer than usual since she’s seen Prim, so she jogs across the field and disappears into the woods that lead to her house.

It’s nearing evening when Katniss skirts the back garden and slips into the kitchen. She expects to find her mother at the counter, listlessly chopping vegetables for dinner, or Prim grinding rosehips with the old stone pestle. Instead she’s greeted by the reflection of a dying fire flickering orange shadows on the worn kitchen table. Fading sunlight streams through the window, painting stripes on motes of dust. After the pandemonium of Hogwarts, the emptiness of the house feels stale.

“Hello?” She calls, letting the bag slip off her shoulder to thud onto the floor. Her wand, poking out of its pocket, clatters against a low cabinet. “Prim?” She pauses, listens. “Prim, are you home?”

She’s starting to worry when rhythmic thuds erupt on the stairs. A pale-colored blur streaks across the kitchen, and then Prim is safe in her arms.

“Katniss!” Prim burrows into her cloak. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too, little duck.” Katniss presses her cheek to the top of her sister’s head. “Are you here alone?” She tries to keep the accusation out of her voice, but she knows Prim hears it from the way her arms tighten.

“Mum’s in town.” Her voice is lighter than Katniss has heard in ages. Prim loosens her grip to smile up at her sister. “Katniss, she’s mixing herbs again. Ms. Trinket bought six bottles last week.”

Katniss hates the hope in Prim’s voice.
“She says mum’s are better than anyone’s in town,” Prim continues as if she heard the thought. “She pays her an extra fifty pence per bottle.”

Katniss musters enough enthusiasm for a smile. “That’s great, Prim.” She considers the items in her forage bag, wishing she’d stopped to raid a few Doxy nests after all. “We can get you new robes to match your wand.”

Prim tries to protest, but she’s interrupted by an angry yowl at their feet.

“What is that?” Katniss asks sourly, releasing her sister to watch a yellow-furred beast pounce on her abandoned forage bag.

Prim transforms like she’s been hit with a Cheering Charm. “Buttercup!” She scoops the thing up, ignoring its hissing as it twists in her grip, snagging threads of her dress with its claws.

It’s been three weeks since the last time Katniss snuck home. The last thing she expected was another mouth to feed.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” Prim purrs, settling the cat comfortably in her arms. “I think he’s part Kneazle.”

‘Beautiful’ is the last word Katniss would use to describe him. His teeth gleam in the light of the fire, illuminating the haughty look in his yellow eyes. His fur is clumped, though Prim has worked free most of the mud. One ear ends in a jagged line, clearly chewed off by some less dangerous creature.

“You can’t have a cat, Prim.”

Her sister cuddles the beast closer, pressing her cheek to its patchy fur. “I need him,” she says reasonably — or as reasonable as one can while cooing at a creature that could probably eat a hippogriff if it got hungry enough. “For Hogwarts.”

Sometimes they use small animals to practice spells and test potions. Katniss makes do with a horned toad she hunted down in the woods, but of course Prim would want a cat.

“You don’t eat enough as it is.”

Headmaster Heavensbee may turn a blind eye when Katniss owls home pilfered jars of breakfast jam, but her meager leftovers aren’t enough to feed two people, let alone a useless cat.

“He feeds himself,” Prim insists, clutching Buttercup closer. “And mum thinks she can make good money if she gets a few more clients. I trade fresh spices for nonperishables at the market, and every week Peeta brings us bread- ”

“Peeta? Who’s Peeta?”

“He’s really nice,” Prim hedges. “I pick berries for them sometimes.”

“Who’s Peeta?”

Her sister sighs, letting Buttercup squirm free to chase a mouse into the corner. “The baker’s son. From Dufftown.”

Blue eyes. Blond hair. Hands still warm from the bread that saved her family.

“Mum lets you take charity from strangers, now?”
But it’s not Prim she’s mad at, or even her mother.

*I never should have kept that bread.*

If she hadn’t, they’d be worse than dead. She imagines Prim lost in the Muggle foster system while Katniss goes slowly mad, unable to reach her from the school that becomes a prison. Imagines the crumpled shell of a once-hopeful girl getting her acceptance letter two years too late.

*I should have paid him back somehow. Conjured a muffin pan and left it on his doorstep. Sent Prim with a balm for burns.* She hears the muffled sound of a blow, still vivid after a year in her head.

“I’m going to trade,” she announces, snatching her bag off the floor and slinging it over her shoulder. “Start dinner without me.”

It takes Katniss just under an hour to unload her stash of fire seeds and asphodel root at the wizarding black market outside of Dufftown. The unicorn hair she found, perfectly suspended in the fork of a branch in the forest, fetches her more than she makes in a fortnight. On her way out of the Hob, she stops at the booth run by a shifty-eyed wizard in dirty purple robes to exchange half her coins for Muggle money. It’s no surprise to see a Magical Law Enforcement Patrolman chatting casually with Ripper one stall over.

“Got a pass from the headmaster, Miss Everdeen?” Darius asks when he sees her.

“Of course. Signed and stamped, just like the last one.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “You and your friend both.”

She knows who he means: a tall, dark-haired fourth year who traps forest creatures for the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley. Secretly she’s relieved she’s never run into him. She’s never gotten along with Gryffindors.

Katniss shrugs. “Haven’t had the pleasure.”

Darius nods, sidling over and leaning in. He drops his voice. “Next time you’re on a sanctioned family visit, mind keeping an eye out for a few Jobberknoll feathers?”

She agrees and he claps her on the back, smiling broadly when she doesn’t stumble like she would have a few months ago.

*Good*, she thinks as he returns to his business with Ripper. She needs the money.

It takes her half an hour to hike from the Hob into town. By the time she arrives the sun hovers near the horizon, casting warm pinks and oranges across the graying paint of Mellark’s Bakery. For a second she worries that they’re closed, tucked upstairs to enjoy the comfortable evenings of a middle class life.

*I could always try tomorrow.* Prim worries if she’s out after dark.

The bell jingles and a customer leaves the bakery, crisp white bag tucked under his arm. Katniss catches sight of an apron-clad figure disappearing into the back and steadies her resolve. She relives the memory as vividly as a scene in a Pensieve: the burn of the bread against her skin, the leaden guilt in her stomach, the hollow sound of her footfalls echoing the blows in the bakery.

Before she can pick apart her tenuous courage, Katniss pushes inside. The bell announces her. No turning back.
“Be right there!” a muffled voice calls.

Katniss looks around. The place is empty. In the corner, three little tables hold neatly stacked chairs, nearly obscuring a pile of dust on the floor. The broom in the corner is so ragged that Katniss recalls the History of Magic lesson on Quidditch matches in the late 14th century. All that remains in the illuminated display case is a broken cookie and two stale-looking muffins. Tubes and bowls are scattered across the back counter; Katniss figures they have something to do with the green cake in the corner.

There’s a muffled thump, the scuff of a box scraping concrete, and then a teenager emerges from the back. He’s blond and broad, though leaner than she remembers, and taller. His smile looks well practiced.

“What can I do you for?”

“Hi.” The word rasps her dry throat. She clears it determinedly. “My name is Katniss Everdeen and I- ”

“Peeta!” he hollers so unexpectedly that Katniss jumps. She crosses her arms, fingers digging into her ribs painfully. How did he know that she needed Peeta?

“Sorry, I’m actually on my way upstairs.” From his dung-eating grin, he’s probably sticking Peeta with cleanup. “Peeta will get you squared away.” He punctuates his words by clapping his — brother? — on the shoulder when he emerges through the swinging door.

Peeta stops, looking for all the world like he’s been stupefied. Is he remembering that pathetic, hungry girl in Effie Trinket’s shop? The older boy laughs, disappearing into the back and pounding up the stairs. It only takes a moment for Peeta to recover, surprise melting into a shy smile.

“How can I help you?”

It’s a standard question in a bakery, she figures, but his earnest delivery throws her. She doesn’t want his help. That’s the problem.

“She sho-” She shoves a fistful of money over the counter — too far. Her knuckles bump against the solidness of his chest. She jerks them away, pinkie catching on the top of his apron, and he bends awkwardly to keep her from spraining her finger in her haste. Cheeks burning, Katniss deposits the £20 onto the counter and backs away.

“What’s this?”

“Payment. For- for the bread.”

For someone with such an infectious smile, it drops off his face quickly enough. “I’m not taking that.” He shoves the paper to her side of the counter, as if Katniss will just pick it up. She ignores him, walking backwards, fighting to push ‘thank you’ past her lips before she reaches the door.

“Katniss- ”

She almost trips on the smooth tile floor. “How do you know my name?”

“We went to primary school together, remember?” He flashes a rueful smile, absolving her of guilt for not remembering his. “Prim says you left for boarding school. Home on holiday?”

He’s trying to distract her, she’s sure of it. But why?
“And how do you know Prim?” She doesn’t care if the question sounds accusatory.

“She trades with my dad. Nuts and dried berries, fresh herbs, that sort of thing. We use them in our breads, so I bring her a loaf from each batch.” He shrugs. “It’s a mutually beneficial relationship. No money owed.”

Katniss shifts in her boots, clutching the strap of her bag in one hand. That’s not at all how Prim made it sound. Had Katniss misunderstood?

“Why would-?” Realizing it’s a rude question, she abruptly stops talking. It doesn’t matter if Prim pays for the bread. She still owes Peeta for the first time. For Prim even learning to gather and trade.

He answers anyway. “My dad used to know your mum, you know?”

“Oh.” Her mother grew up in Dufftown, but she never talks about it. Like her husband, that part of her life is behind her. “I didn’t.”

“She’s an herbalist, right?” He seems determined to make this a friendly conversation instead of a feeble attempt to settle a debt. “Natural healing and all that?”

Katniss says nothing, but Peeta nods as if she did. She wonders if the baker still talks about her mother, or if Peeta gets his gossip from Effie Trinket over tea.

“Is your father-?”

“He’s dead.”

“Oh.” She can see the words forming on his tongue, I’m sorry, as if a rote apology from a stranger will bring him back. She’s not surprised that he didn’t know. No one from town ventures near the woods, and it’s not like there was a funeral. There was nothing to bury.

“He was a Magizoologist,” she explains quickly, struggling to sound unaffected over the panicky hollowness clawing at her throat. “He classified creatures from the woods behind our house.”

“A Master Zoologist, huh?” He smiles, banishing the alarm that lurches in her gut when she hears her words repeated back, neatly Muggle-fied. “I have to admit, those woods are a little intimidating. I swear they’re haunted.”

“They are not,” she says, irrationally defensive.

Unless thestrals count as dark spirits.

He raises his hands, placating. They’re dusty with flour. Puffs of it leap free as he moves, drifting in hazy moats to the polished counter. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“I guess you’ll have to.” She can’t imagine this pampered Muggle boy coming face to face with an angry bowtruckle, let alone an offended centaur.

The conversation has wandered into dangerous territory. Pretty soon she’ll say something that can’t be explained away. She steps forward, shoving the money back across the counter. It’s coated in flour, too; smudged fingerprints from where he touched it. Peeta opens his mouth to argue, but Katniss cuts him off.

“What’s that?” she asks, pointing randomly behind him. He gives her a disbelieving look, so
Katniss leans forward, feigning interest in the brightly-frosted cake.

He rolls his eyes, but humors her by turning toward the counter, wiping his hands clean on his apron. She almost bolts for the door, but he throws an unimpressed look over his shoulder, freezing her in place. Irritated, she sinks forward on her elbows while Peeta inches the platter forward, giving her a better view of the cake.

And suddenly Katniss’s interest isn’t so feigned. It’s a fairy garden, or what might pass for one in the Muggle world. Five towering layers of rich greens and earthy browns sprout from the platter as if planted. Half-finished flowers tumble down one side, suspended in time as they drift towards a pile of petals at the base of the cake. On the third tier, a realistic-looking beetle nibbles the corner of an intricately veined leaf. Above it, the unadorned figure of a fairy perches on the ledge, wings as frail as candyfloss.

“You know Effie Trinket?”

She nods. He knows she does.

“Her friends like to throw these bizarre parties. Themes and costumes like you wouldn’t believe.” He picks up a bag of frosting, piping a crown of flowers onto the fairy’s head. He seems to be watching her as much as the cake, but each dab of frosting lands right where he wants it. “This one’s for Octavia Antony.”

“You made that?” Katniss can turn a beetle into a button and back again, but she can’t fathom how he’s transfigured a mess of sugar and flour into something so alive she can practically feel sunshine on her skin.

Peeta nods, trading his bag of frosting for a tiny brush. He dabs it in a bowl of food coloring and shades the petals a rich purple. Katniss pushes up on her toes for a better vantage.

“It’s incredible.” She’s never seen so many shades of green outside the woods, even at Hogwarts. If Prim could see this, she’d press her face against the bakery window and live her life as a statue.

Peeta shrugs, but a pale blush paints his neck pink.

“I love doing the cakes,” he says. “I get to bring people’s dreams to life.”

And suddenly she’s not thinking of fairy gardens made of frosting, but ashen wings and living flame; the twinkle in her father’s eye as the bakery box unfolds before her.

“What’s your secret?” she asks, feeling inexplicably warm.

“Magic,” Peeta says so casually that Katniss thuds back to the ground. He grins over his shoulder. “Okay, the years my dad chained me to the fondant press probably helped.”

A joke. Of course it was a joke.

Abruptly she realizes that the money’s still on the counter, fluttering gently as the overhead vent kicks to life. Twilight blankets the world outside. Up and down the road, streetlamps flicker to life.

How much time has she wasted gawking at a stupid cake?

“I have to go.”

Peeta drops his brush back into the bowl. She almost imagines he looks disappointed.
“My sister will be worried,” she explains, moving towards the door.

“If you leave this here,” Peeta says, picking up the money she left, “I’ll just give it to Prim.”

Katniss throws her hands up and stalks back to the counter. “You are extremely unlikeable,” she snaps, though it’s not remotely true. “Just let me balance the scales!”

“What scales? It was two loaves of bread, Katniss.”

“We were s- ” She clamps her mouth shut. No matter how much she owes this boy, can’t admit it out loud. “We needed it,” she says finally.

“That’s why I did it.” His voice is earnest. “Not for money. I just- ” He shrugs helplessly.

*People aren’t that kind,* she thinks.

But maybe Peeta Mellark is.

“I’ll bring you things. Fruits and nuts that Prim can’t find. From deeper in the forest.”

Peeta nods, looking relieved.

“And you *won’t pay me for it.*”

“Prim always says you’re some kind of adventurer.”

“Peeta,” she warns. His name feels strange on her tongue.

“All right, alright. I won’t pay you for it.”

The knot of guilt loosens in her chest. It’s not enough — can never be enough — but it’s something.

She sighs, holding her hand out over the counter. Peeta folds the £20 note and presses it into her palm. His fingers are rough and warm, sticky from the frosting. They catch momentarily against the pad of her hand before she crumples the paper in her fist. She won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing it in her hand.

“Fine. We have a deal.”
Katniss hasn’t unclenched her jaw since the Sorting Hat broke into song. She’s squished beside Johanna Mason, an irritating fifth year who’s the closest thing she has to a friend, and Finnick Odair, who’s been nominated for Witch Weekly’s Most Charming Smile Award twice since he started Hogwarts. He claims, with perfect sincerity, that the librarian is responsible for the first and the groundskeeper for the second. Katniss prefers their company to others, but right now she wants nothing more than for them to disappear and give her nerves some peace.

“Oh, your sister’s a Slytherin for sure,” Finnick says mildly. Prim bounces on her toes, alight with nervous energy, as the Hat sorts a dark-skinned girl into Ravenclaw. Finnick’s overheard enough of Katniss’s fretting to know that Prim’s about as Slytherin as Katniss is Hufflepuff. “Mark my words: we’re looking at the next Minister of Magic.”

“Shut up,” Katniss mumbles. She knows where Prim will be sorted. She knows. But she remembers all those eyes on her, judging, as older students whispered bets on where each first year would be sitting at the Great Feast.

“Maybe she’ll be in Gryffindor,” Johanna muses. “She doesn’t look half as petrified about her Sorting as you do.”

Katniss ignores the slight. “My sister is not a troublemaker. She’ll be in Hufflepuff.”

And I’ll never see her.

“And you know what they say about Hufflepuffs . . .” Finnick intones, so suggestively that Katniss finds herself blushing.

“I don’t,” she snaps before he can finish. “And I don’t want to.”

Johanna laughs and slings an arm over Katniss’s shoulders, exchanging a look with Finnick that makes Katniss more uncomfortable than ever.

“We could always show you.”

Katniss grits her teeth, shrugging off Johanna’s joke with her arm. Prim is next in line. Finnick and Johanna snicker, but they don’t push. Katniss probably wouldn’t hear them over the rushing in her ears.

“Everdeen, Primrose.”

The collar of Prim’s robe has popped up in the back. Katniss’s fingers itch to smooth it, but her sister doesn’t notice. She climbs the stairs just a little too fast and slides smoothly onto the stool. When Professor Atala drops the hat over Prim’s ears, her pale eyebrows furrow in concentration.

Katniss remembers the raspy voice in her ear. Cunning, yes, and determined. You’d let the world burn for the people you love. Better be-

“Hufflepuff!” the Sorting Hat announces. It’s barely been ten seconds.

Prim bounds off the stool, throwing Katniss a radiant smile across the Great Hall as she joins her new housemates.

It’s over.
A wave of envy washes over her when a brown-haired Hufflepuff embraces Prim. Katniss tells herself not to be selfish, but it’s no good.

Finnick leans over, speaking low so Johanna won’t hear. “Annie will take care of her.”

Could Annie be the cause of his sudden, smitten smiles in the corridors? Finnick usually has no qualms about gossiping about his gaggle of admirers, but he’s been uncharacteristically mum about the girl who’s caught his eye.

You know what they say about Hufflepuffs, Finnick’s voice taunts in her head.

Ugh.

Katniss nods, swallowing bile along with her sisterly jealousy. The Sorting ceremony wraps up and Headmaster Heavensbee launches into a grandiose welcome speech. He claps twice, and Prim’s eyes pop as every food imaginable appears out of thin air on the table. She grabs a cookie first thing, nibbling it while the prefect helps her load her plate.

“See? All that wasted energy.” Johanna scoffs, spearing a healthy serving of roast lamb.

There’s no good response to Johanna’s ribbing, so she focuses her attention on the Slytherin table, which overflows with buttery mashed potato castles, steaming steak and kidney pies, and more vegetables than she could dig up in a year. Katniss eats a hunk of lamb straight off the platter. She scoops a hearty helping of stew into her bowl from a nearby tureen and washes down the first bite with half a goblet of pumpkin juice.

As Katniss gulps down her food, she listens to Johanna and Finnick argue over Quidditch strategies for their match against Gryffindor. She’s not sure why they bother — it’s over a month away — but figures that Finnick’s ego, as always, plays a sizeable role. Not many students hold captainship for four straight years.

She’s almost given up hope of congratulating Prim when her sister weaves through the crowd, smiling brightly enough to outshine the moon rising on the Enchanted Ceiling.

“Katniss!”

Katniss swings her knee onto the bench to meet Prim’s hug. Johanna grumbles something about them upsetting her digestion, but Katniss doesn’t let go until the uncomfortable angle shoots a twinge up her side.

“I always knew you were a Hufflepuff, little duck.” She releases her sister, reaching up to fold the rumpled collar of her robes.

“Katniss,” Prim whines, eyes darting around the table. They land on Finnick, who’s watching the exchange curiously. Katniss can’t really blame her sister when she blushes beet red.

“Sorry, Prim.”

On a whim, Katniss pulls out her wand, training it carefully on Prim’s standard black tie. After a few seconds of concentration, it fades from stark black to muddy brown. Darker shades seep through the fibers, streaking haphazard stripes across the fabric.

Johanna guffaws and Katniss scowls, grumbling under her breath about the pointlessness of color-changing charms. Prim, who can’t see what’s happening, flushes more deeply when Finnick points his wand at her. The colors separate into crisp lines of yellow and black.
“Thanks,” Prim squeaks, although she still can’t see what he did. She bites her lip to stifle the kind of face-splitting smile Finnick induces in people.

“Finnick,” he introduces in a normal voice. Then he sweeps his arm wide for an outrageous seated bow that no one besides Caesar Flickerman, The Daily Prophet’s most popular television personality, would attempt. If Prim’s expression is anything to go by, it’s charming. “The illustrious Finnick Odair, the only Slytherin ambitious enough to brave both Katniss and Johanna’s company.”

Prim’s eyes flit to Johanna, but they’re quickly recaptured by Finnick’s sea-green gaze.

“Thanks, Finnick,” she breathes.

“You should write Mum,” Katniss says, hoping to anchor her sister in reality. Katniss never writes her mother, but Prim’s always been the bigger person. “I think you’re the family’s first Hufflepuff.”

“I bet Mum would’ve been in Hufflepuff,” Prim demurs. It’s clear, though, that she can’t wait to owl home. “Annie’s going to show me the owlery before classes tomorrow.” She pauses, considering. “Do you think if I wrote to Peeta, Mum would deliver it for me?”

“What?” Katniss’s brow furrows. “Why would you owl Peeta?”

Prim looks surprised she even asked. “He doesn’t start school until next week. Don’t you think he’d like someone to talk to?”

As if he doesn’t have a million friends already.

It’s practically impossible to dislike Peeta Mellark. People react to him much the same way they react to Prim: with fond smiles and a readiness to please. If Katniss ever questioned where her sister was sorted, her heartfelt plea for Peeta’s imagined loneliness would erase any doubt.

“Sure.” Katniss snatches a roll, feeling guilty for raining on Prim’s parade. “Write Peeta.”

“And that, my dear Miss Primrose, is the sound of a dozen hearts breaking.” Finnick presses a hand to his chest, pantomiming pain, but the suggestive air Katniss normally associates with him is absent. “ Didn’t anyone tell you not to come to Hogwarts with a boyfriend?”

Prim blushes sweetly, but she meets Finnick’s eyes. “Peeta’s not my boyfriend.”

“They?” Katniss’s brow furrows. “Why would you owl Peeta?”

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“Yet,” Johanna adds dryly, watching Katniss for the ensuing panic attack.

Prim shakes her head. “He doesn’t want to be my boyfriend. He wants to be Katniss’s.”

Katniss chokes on a bite of bread, hacking awkwardly while Finnick pounds her back with the heel of his palm. Her sister leans forward, concerned, while Katniss fights for breath. Prim’s innocent blue eyes widen when she realizes she’s overshared.

“He does not,” Katniss finally hisses.

She feels her friends’ eyes on her. Heat prickles up her spine.

“Well, this is interesting,” Johanna says, clearly savoring Katniss’s mounting panic.

Finnick laughs. “I always knew you were a heartbreaker, Everdeen.”

“Prim.” Katniss puts three years of practiced authority into her tone. “Why would you say that?”
Prim hesitates, looking from her sister to her friends to the oblivious students across the table. Katniss crosses her arms and stares her down.

“It’s true,” Prim says stubbornly. “He always asks when you’re coming home.”

Vaguely, Katniss wonders if Clove might’ve hexed her under the table. What else could explain her pounding pulse, the suffocating heat making her lightheaded?

“I barely know Peeta,” she protests.

An image pops into her head: the shy, sweet smile she’s come to associate with the scent of fresh bread. She remembers asking Peeta if his brothers had quit, because he always works weekends.

“Are you kidding? This is the highlight of my week.”

“You know him better than I do,” Katniss insists, pushing the thought away.

“So,” Johanna asks pleasantly, “Who’s this Peeta fellow?”

Prim, who doesn’t understand that an amiable Johanna is a troublesome Johanna, smiles brightly. “Oh, he’s so nice,” she says. “He always gives me a cookie and two loaves of bread when I bring a batch of berries, even though it’s only worth one.”

Katniss isn’t sure what’s more embarrassing: her housemates knowing that she trades for food, or how earnestly Prim sings Peeta’s praises.

“You should write him, too,” Prim tells her. “I think he gets lonely sometimes.”

Katniss snorts, imagining the look on his face if an owl were to swoop into his window.

“Prim?”

They all turn to watch the dark haired Hufflepuff prefect weave around students leaving the Great Hall. “It’s time to see the dormitory.”

Johanna and Finnick greet Annie by name. She returns a small wave, blushing when she looks at Finnick.

_Harry bloody Potter, is anyone immune to Finnick’s charms?_

Katniss smiles for Prim’s sake. “Nice to meet you, Annie.”

As her sister prepares to leave her, Katniss resolutely decides that the last ten minutes never happened. She stands, kissing Prim’s forehead and affectionately tugging one of her short blonde braids. “Sleep tight, little duck.”

Prim ducks her head and smiles, following her prefect toward the other first year Hufflepuffs. Katniss escapes before Johanna and Finnick can start in on her, preferring solitude to another round of friendly torture. The typical evening ruckus echoes up from the Slytherin common room, but the dorm stays empty until almost midnight. Katniss knows she should unpack, find her books for tomorrow’s classes, and bewitch her forage bag to deter her roommates’ snooping, but Prim’s voice echoes in her head.

“Peeta’s not my boyfriend. But he wants to be Katniss’s.”
She thumps down on the lid of her trunk, tucking up her legs and snatching a self-inking quill from the floor. She spends an indeterminate amount of time scribbling threats to a certain Muggle on a scrap of parchment. When she hears Clove and Glimmer coming up the hall, she whispers, “Incendio,” and watches flames curl around the parchment until it disintegrates into ash.

Prim takes to Hogwarts like a duck to water, introducing her sister to first years from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and even Gryffindor. During the second week of classes, Prim accompanies a classmate to the Hospital Wing after the girl’s cauldron springs a leak, drenching her head to toe in Wideye Potion. Rue sleeps off the effects by the next morning, but from the way Prim devours books on magical maladies, Katniss suspects her sister will never recover.

Johanna and Finnick soon tire of taking the piss — or at least move on to teasing Katniss about Thresh, the sixth year boy who stalks her for a week before gruffly thanking her for taking Rue under her wing. Her friends promise to ease up if she suffers through their Quidditch practices. Although they renege almost immediately, Katniss enjoys the fresh air. She winds up sitting with Annie Cresta, the Hufflepuff prefect, who quietly discloses that she’s been dating Finnick since May. Annie prefers watching to talking, which suits Katniss just fine. Whenever the fifth year breaks the silence, it’s to share stories about Prim or make fun of Finnick, whose elaborate attempts to flirt across the pitch frequently end with narrowly avoided catastrophes.

When Hogsmeade weekend offers the perfect opportunity to sneak back to Dufftown, Katniss wastes the afternoon watching the Giant Squid float past the thick glass separating the Slytherin common room from the Great Lake. There’s simply no reason to risk detention when the only person she cares about sleeps soundly a wing or two away. The Hob will still be there at Christmas.

But one cool Sunday in October, she finds herself slipping down the familiar secret passage and winding into the trees. She spends a good three hours in the Forbidden Forest, hunting down leaping toadstools and uncovering porcupine quills in the brush. She snags a live Clabbert near the far edge of the trees, but regretfully lets it go. The penalties for poaching are severe. Still, it stings to watch it scamper free, forehead flashing red as it flees.

The bag on her hip sways with the additional weight of her haul for the bakery. Katniss ignores the catch of canvas on her clothes. Business or no, the thought of seeing Peeta makes her heart lurch like a jinxed racing broom.

Damn Prim for planting ideas in my head. And damn me for letting them grow.

Katniss pushes aside unwelcome thoughts of blond curls and sturdy shoulders and makes her circuit through the Hob. She wastes time rooting through boxes of trinkets that normally don’t interest her. She stocks up on floo powder. She even, impulsively, buys a broom kit on the off-chance that Prim wants to fix up the Nimbus 2020 rotting in their attic.

“It might be awhile,” she cautions when Ripper requests a weed rumored to increase the potency of Firewhiskey. “Prim’s at Hogwarts now.”
Ripper sighs and wishes her well, complaining in the next breath that no other fool at the market knows what they’re doing.

“There’s a Hogsmeade weekend coming up,” Katniss offers for no real reason. She’s not one to do anything out of charity. But Ripper’s been a good customer for two years, now, and Katniss’s feet itch for the door.

Ripper nods, looking satisfied. “Don’t be a stranger, girl.”

Katniss ducks through the magical barrier, ignoring a potioneer as he tries to get her attention. She hefts her bag, feeling the weight of the coins, the familiar lump of the berries.

*Prim doesn’t know what she’s talking about.* To an eleven-year-old, a free cookie could be the foundation of a romance so consuming it burns the world down around it. Katniss outgrew such fancies a long time ago.

That’s what she tells herself when she stops outside the bakery and Peeta smiles at her through the window, sending tremors through her stomach like she’s swallowed a flutterby bush. She stays outside while he rings up a handful of customers, waiting for the crowd to thin. Every time his eyes find hers through the glass, she convinces herself he’s just wondering what she brought him.

*Just like any other deal,* she thinks as she walks inside. *Like the ones you just finished at the Hob.*

“Katniss.” His voice is as warm as melted butter. The straight line of his teeth makes those blue eyes shine brighter. “It’s been forever. Where have you been hiding?”

“School,” she says shortly.

His smile is back so fast, she’s sure she imagined the slip. He grabs a tray of fresh loaves from the back counter, slipping on a pair of gloves to restock the display.

“Oh. Tough year?”

She considers her classes. She dropped Care of Magical Creatures last year, and Divination is a bit of a joke, but Professor Mags pulled her aside to compliment her bubotuber pus extraction after Herbology, and she’s a natural in DADA.

“Not really.”

“You usually visit,” he points out. He’s not smiling his usual *Peeta* smile anymore, but something closer to *Rye’s*: fixed and practiced. The flutterby bush turns sour in her stomach.

“Yeah.”

Peeta stops restocking bread. “Katniss . . .” He sucks his lip, then sighs sharply through his nose. “Did I do something to piss you off?”

“What? No!”

“Well you’re sure acting like it.” He folds his arms, looking down to meet her eyes. Suddenly, it’s impossible to ignore how much he’s grown. Not just vertically, but everywhere. His jaw is wider and blockier, his cheekbones more distinctive. His apron no longer covers his t-shirt across the chest.

Katniss swallows. “Well, I’m not.”
His stare turns flat.

“Sorry. Sorry. I’m just distracted, okay? And—”

—my sister thinks you fancy me. She bites down hard on the inside of her cheek, anchoring herself in the throb of pain. She can feel Johanna and Finnick’s eyes on her from across the forest. Get out of your head for two seconds and act, Everdeen.

“And it’s Prim’s first year,” she says instead. “At - boarding school.”

His expression softens. Prim has that effect on people.

“You’re a good sister. Prim adores you.”

You, too, she almost says. Katniss blushes, even after shredding the words to mental ribbons.

“I brought berries.” She quickly hauls the forage bag onto the counter. His eyes light up like that stupid Clabbert’s forehead and a laugh escapes without her permission. “I guess you missed these, huh?”

She almost imagines he falters, but his smile is so relaxed . . .

“I’m not the only one.” Peeta grabs a bowl from under the counter and Katniss carefully empties the berries. “These sell twice as many scones as the berries from our supplier. Mum’s desperate to know how I’m bribing customers. She actually accused me of doctoring the last shipment.” He shakes his head, blond fringe framing his eyes as they meet hers. “Don’t ask how.”

Katniss grimaces, hoping the horrible woman has apparated to another country.

“It’s the chemicals,” she says. “All the commercial farms use them.” Even wizards use spells to encourage plant growth, but the final product always tastes off somehow. Her father always said there’s no substitute for nature.

Peeta weighs the bowl of berries in one hand, plucking a plump one from the top and popping it into his mouth. His expression transforms as the tart sweetness explodes on his tongue. Katniss’s mouth waters, but she shakes her head when he offers her one. She’s here for business.

“Yes, still the best.” He sneaks another berry before covering the bowl in a sheet of plastic. “Any bread preference today?”

Nice try, her brain supplies sarcastically. That doe-eyed optimism trick works on Prim, not me.

He turns to the display case, glancing at her sideways. The fluorescent light filters through his eyelashes, which are so long and pale they look like moonglow on the sandy backdrop of his cheek.

She opens her mouth to find her voice has fled.

Peeta’s lips twitch, but he stifles his smile. After all these months, he knows better than to push his luck. “When are you heading back to school?”

“Tonight.”

He nods, ducking behind the counter and digging around. When he resurfaces, he’s slitting together a familiar white box.

“In that case, you’ll need plenty to share.”
He layers cookie after cookie with crisp, white paper: rich chocolate and sunshiny lemon, oatmeal raisin and praline, chocolate chunk and macadamia.

“That’s way too much,” she protests when he adds a handful of perfectly frosted sugar cookies and seals the box. All in all, it’s over a dozen. “Those berries are worth maybe four cookies.”

He shrugs, entirely unrepentant. “Sugar is Prim’s favorite.”

Prim’s favorite. Two words too powerful to ignore.

Katniss snatches the box before Peeta can add a layer of sheet cake or something. He’s going to put his dad out of business, trading with me. She makes a mental note to gather a few extra goods for her next trip home.

“She’ll love these. Thanks.”

He gives her a knowing look. “Why do I get the feeling she’ll be the only one?”

Katniss ignores the question, peering at the neat rows of cookies left in the display case.

“Did you make these, too?”

“Those ones,” he says, pointing at a row of lemon crackles. “And those.” He gestures to the sugar cookies, the iced ones Prim loves. “Rye made the rest. He’s sulking by the ovens ’cause he had to work a double.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Nah.” His dancing eyes invite her to share his amusement. “But apparently knowing you can’t snog your girlfriend ‘til after work makes icing cookies a Herculean task.”

Katniss drops to her haunches, staring fixedly at the cookies in the display case. Talking to Finnick and Johanna is bad enough; she doesn’t need sordid tales about Peeta’s brother. She looks up at Peeta through the glass, annoyed to find his grin wider than ever. Deliberately, she returns to ignoring him.

Her eyes catch on a smudge of orange. She leans closer, breath ghosting across the glass as she studies the image of a bird in flight, aflame. A hand closes around the cookie and Katniss jerks to her feet, embarrassed. A tinge of pink lines Peeta’s cheeks.

“Do you know the myth of the firebird?”

She does — her father was a Magizoologist — but something in his eyes makes her shake her head.

“They symbolize the sun,” he says. “Legend says phoenixes die in a blaze of fire. They’re reborn from the ashes.” Peeta idly rubs the burn scars streaking his forearm. “Kind of like bread, you know? Transformed by fire.” He laughs a little, sheepish, and breaks the cookie in half. “I was just playing around.”

I had a phoenix cake once, Katniss remembers. Dad brought it home when I got my Hogwarts letter.

She wonders if Peeta had watched his father decorate it, all those years ago. The thought zips through her chest, alarmingly pleasant.
Peeta glances over his shoulder and extends a broken piece to her.

“What are you doing?” she demands. “You already paid me.”

“You’re going to give those to Prim. Don’t pretend you aren’t.”

“I don’t want it. You’ll get in trouble.”

“Mum will never notice,” Peeta assures. Katniss isn’t sure she believes him.

He bites into his own cookie. She frowns, and he takes another large bite, exaggerating his murmur of approval. She rolls her eyes, but it seems silly to waste a perfectly good cookie. When she nibbles the broken edge, it practically melts on her tongue. She shoves the whole thing into her mouth, glaring at Peeta when he laughs at her attempts to chew.

“How long until you leave?” he asks, finishing his cookie. “Lev takes over in an hour if you-”

“No,” she says, choking a little on the crumbs she hasn’t swallowed. Business only. “I’m late already.”

His face falls. Maybe Prim was right. Maybe he is lonely.

“But-” Peeta looks up, hopeful, and Katniss forgets where she was going with that. “Um. I’ll be back. In November. I think.”

“Home for the weekend?” he asks casually. At least she thinks it’s casual. His eyes pin her in place like a Freezing Charm, blue and inescapable.

“Just Saturday.” Prim, at least, will notice if she disappears for two days. His face falls ever so slightly, and Katniss hurries on. “But then it’s Christmastime, and I—we’ll be home for a whole month. Prim—” Katniss takes a deep breath. Her heart beats faster, though she doesn’t know why. “She misses you.”

Peeta’s smile is so genuine it makes her insides hurt.

Her life takes on a predictable routine. She studies between classes, eats with Johanna, and spends every moment she can with Prim. Every Monday and Thursday Katniss and Annie hike to the Quidditch pitch for Slytherin’s bi-weekly practice; Katniss mostly does homework while Annie watches attentively, developing strategies for her boyfriend using some undiscovered form of mental magic. On Wednesdays, Finnick and Johanna join them to spy on Gryffindor. One afternoon the captain goes off on them, but when the Quidditch ref, Lyme, arrives, she tells him that school rules don’t prohibit reconnaissance. If Hawthorne wants privacy, he’ll have to perform an adequate Disillusionment Charm.

The holidays pass in a flurry of snowfall and trips to the bakery (“These primroses look good enough to eat,” Prim gushes to the baker, but everyone knows she’s talking to the boy with a broom in his hand. “Can I get a rue blossom for my friend?”). When classes begin again, Prim becomes a fixture in the Hospital Wing. Katniss takes one look at the large black bats crawling out of a student’s nose and retreats to the her dorm indefinitely. Solitude soon bleeds into boredom.
She writes letters, mostly to Peeta, but once or twice to her mother, which thrills Prim. Telling herself that she’s simply following her sister’s orders to “have fun and remember everything,” Katniss diligently leaves the castle each Hogsmeade weekend and sneaks back to Dufftown to trade.

“You’re chipper these days,” Finnick observes as they walk down the lawn for a rare afternoon by the lake. He has an arm slung around Annie’s shoulders, so he’s better behaved than usual, but his honeyed tones suggest he blames something salacious for Katniss’s good humor.

“It’s a nice day.” Professor Wiress cancelled Charms, so Katniss has the entire afternoon off. And with the arrival of spring, it’s finally nice enough to venture outside. “We finally get to see the lake from above as nature intended.”

“Please,” Johanna scoffs. “Yesterday, Katniss smiled outside the Great Hall and the Bloody Baron walked straight through Heavensbee.”

“The witches on the Grand Staircase think she’s experimenting with Euphoria Elixirs.” Finnick waggles his eyebrows at her.

“I’m pretty good at Fungiface Potions,” Katniss threatens. Slipping a sizeable dose into Finnick’s pumpkin juice would serve him right.

Annie swats Finnick’s arm. “Those portraits are gossips, Finnick. Don’t spread tales.”

He acquiesces for all of an hour.

Katniss knows Finnick doesn’t actually believe she has a boyfriend hidden in the castle. It’s Prim that worries her. Katniss hides her weekend trips to Dufftown, giving Prim and Rue vague descriptions of Skiving Snackboxes at Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes and feathered hats at Gladrags. But somehow Prim knows she’s talking to Peeta.

“I won’t tell, Katniss,” Prim promises. “Not even Rue. But isn’t his smile just . . . ?” She sighs dreamily, finishing the thought.

Katniss wonders if she fancies Peeta.

“It’s alright.” Katniss shrugs as casually as she can manage. “I’ve never really thought about it.” Before Prim can call her bluff, she continues. “You know he’s not my boyfriend, Prim.”

“I know,” her sister singsongs, but what Katniss hears is not yet. “Oh, when we’re home for Easter hols, we should bring Mum’s Muggle chess set to the bakery. I bet Peeta gets bored at that counter all day.”

“He doesn’t- ” Prim smiles innocently, and Katniss hastily adapts her words. “ - need us wasting his time. I’m sure he has work to do.”

But the next time she visits the bakery, Katniss finds herself making excuses to stay.

“Rhubarb’s back in season,” she tells Peeta one afternoon in early April. “The bush behind our
A sharp clatter from the back shatters the air around them. Peeta jerks upright, breath hitching.

“...why you let him laze out front.” Mrs. Mellark’s voice slices through her husband’s protests. “He’s going to waste his life living off our handouts, Farl, and I’ll have to tell my s-”

“You should go,” Peeta says.

No good can come of that spiteful hag finding Katniss in the bakery. Mrs. Mellark hates loiterers and layabouts, but she has a particular contempt for Katniss and her family. The last time she found ‘that witch of a girl’ distracting her son, Peeta’s black eye lasted two weeks. It was all Katniss could do not to hex her.

On impulse Katniss catches Peeta’s arm, tugging him over the counter. She lifts onto her toes, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. His skin is warm, bumpy from shaving and sweaty from a day at the ovens.

“See you soon,” she promises.

The air crackles and she all but bolts for the door, never looking back.

Katniss sucks a lungful of sweet spring air before the breath is knocked from her body. She’s sent sprawling, landing painfully on the cobblestone street.

“You,” slurs a gruff voice.

The scent of liquor burns in her nostrils, mingling with fresh air and the rank smell of stale sweat. She’s never seen Haymitch Abernathy out in public. The girl who shares her cart to school swears that the famous duelist died years ago, leaving his spirit to haunt the estate. But here he is, drunk and knocking into people.

He doesn’t offer to help her up. She sees a flash of wood disappear up his sleeve as she pushes herself to her feet, checking her bag reflexively for the safety of her wand. She brushes dirt off her hands and digs out a pebble that embedded itself into her palm.

“Mr. Abernathy,” she says sourly, hoping he’ll leave her alone.

He doesn’t.

“Haven’t you caused enough trouble?”

She glances reflexively through the bakery window, but Peeta has disappeared.

“I don’t know what you mean.” She’s never even met Haymitch.

“What d’you think the Board of Governors would say about your jaunts to town?”

A nest of snakes writhes in her stomach. “Headmaster Heavensbee gave me permi-”
Haymitch snorts, a phlegmy sound that reverberates in his throat like laughter. “Sure he did. And I’m a bloody pillar of the community.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“True. I just can’t seem to help myself.” He waves a sloppy hand. “Concerned citizen, and all that.” He leans close, fetid breath poisoning her air. “What game are you playing, girl?”

Between the snakes in her gut and the tainted oxygen, Katniss feels sick. All she wants to do is jerk away, but she sets her feet and scowls. “Excuse me?”

“I can tell you now, it’s not the one you think. You’re gonna get a heap of people into a heap of trouble.”

“I’m not hurting-”

She’s not expecting him to push her. She stumbles around the corner and catches herself on the bakery wall. In one quick motion she yanks out her wand and shoves it against Haymitch’s jugular. His grunt somehow communicates indifference, irritation, and incredulity, all at once.

“You want to get carted off for underaged magic, too?”

“Too?” Her wand arm doesn’t waver. They’re in such close proximity, the Ministry would never know if the stunning spell came from her wand or his. He’d be drowning his liver at home by the time Darius wandered over to investigate.

“Bread boy?”

The sounds of the street drain away. All Katniss can hear is the blood rushing in her ears, her breath ragged in her throat.

Haymitch growls. The sagging skin under his chin bunches around the point of her wand. “Look, do what you want. But everyone knows it’s a disaster in the making.”

She doesn’t know if she’s more confused, angry, or afraid. All she knows is that Haymitch Abernathy is watching her. Watching Peeta. It makes her skin crawl.

“There’s nothing wrong with Muggles.”

He laughs. Flat out, braying in her face, laughs. Faster than she thought he could manage, he grabs her wrist and twists it hard. Her wand drops. It’s in his hand before she knows what happened.

“Come on, sweetheart. Even you aren’t this thick.”

For one satisfying moment, Katniss considers going after him with her fingernails.

“Give me back my wand,” she says coldly. Like the Great Lake frozen over. But she knows what lurks beneath the surface of the lake, and if rumors are true, Haymitch does, too.

He considers her for a moment before shoving the wand back into her hand. When her fingers close around the wood, he uses it to yank her close.

“It’s not just you on the line, sweetheart.” His breath reeks of liquor and vomit. Katniss clenches her teeth and tries not to gag. “Don’t drag them down with you.”
Haymitch shoves her out of the way and stumbles out of the alley. She hears the familiar chime of the bakery, but for once, it doesn’t comfort her.

Katniss spends a week alternating between stony silences and wasping rages. In typical Prim fashion, her sister distracts her with anecdotes about Master Aurelius— she’s a great help in the Hospital Wing, even if she’s technically not allowed to be there — and stories about her Herbology partner, a boy named Rory. Rue follows Prim and Katniss to the library, and one day the three of them end up sharing a table with Finnick and Annie. Rue peppers the pair with questions about flying techniques while Prim munches a sugar quill, flipping through large tomes on famous magical healers. Soon enough Katniss puts the drunk bigot from Dufftown out of her mind.

The rest of the school year passes in a flurry of lessons and exams. Katniss spends the last Hogsmeade weekend practicing hex-deflection with Johanna, and doesn’t even think to write Peeta until Sunday evening.

And suddenly it’s June.

“Give Mum my love,” Prim calls, waving to Katniss from a window on the Hogwarts Express.

“Listen to Rue’s grandparents,” Katniss reminds her. “Stay safe. Drop a letter in the Muggle post if they can’t spare an owl.”

Rue pops her head out the window, curls bouncing as she waves at Katniss. “We’ll write from every country. Even the boring ones!”

The train lurches, knocking the giggling girls into each other, and slides smoothly out of the station. Katniss presses her lips together, forcing a smile as Prim and Rue disappear.

Thom and Leevy wait for her by the road.

“No pretty Prim?” Thom asks jovially. He laughs when Katniss scowls.

Leevy pats her hand. She’s a third year Hufflepuff and probably knows all about Prim’s holiday.

“All this work and no reward,” Thom exaggerates a groan. “You don’t smile like your sister, Everdeen.”

“Drop me off in town then,” she grumbles. She’s not ready to see her mother yet.

When he lets Leevy out by the chapel, Thom looks back at Katniss. “It’s no trouble to take you home. Hogwarts pays me good Galleons to lug you kids ‘round.”

Katniss clamber out of the wagon. “Earn your gold at Sae’s pub. I won’t stop you.”

He waves and drives off, leaving Katniss with the question of where to go. The bakery is the obvious answer, but when she sets her feet in that direction, she tastes bile in the back of her throat. Cursing Haymitch Abernathy for turning her into a coward, she walks in the opposite direction, dragging her trunk behind her like some kind of vagabond. An hour later she’s nestled
under a tree in the park, tossing chunks of treacle tart into the pond.

“So that’s why the ducks keep sinking.”

Katniss jumps. She assumed the heavy tread belonged to some gardener carrying fence posts. Those footsteps could wake a troll.

“If those are from the bakery,” Peeta continues, dropping heavily beside her. “I’ll have to push you in. You know, on principle.”

She scoffs, but doesn’t hide her small smile. “Don’t worry. I stole these from the Farewell Feast.”

“Blimey, do I go to the wrong school.” Peeta groans, flopping back on the grass. “You’d think performance evals were sweets the way they hand them out at Elgin.” He shades his eyes, taking in her battered trunk and preoccupied air.

“Where’s Prim?”

Katniss swallows, watching the little ducks wade in and out of the water. “Visiting a friend.”

“Boarding school isn’t exciting enough for her, huh?” There’s an undercurrent of support in his teasing. He knows she worries about Prim.

Katniss tosses aside the bag of treacle tarts and scores the earth with her fingers. “You’d like Rue. She’s thoughtful and clever and loves sweets.”

“Sounds like Prim is in good hands.”

“Yeah.”

They sit in silence, watching the sunshine play off the pond. It’s a nice day for a swim, but she stays on the bank. It’s peaceful sitting beside Peeta, watching ripples dance across the water.

Peeta’s not good at staying quiet, though. After a few minutes he sits up, propping an arm on his knee. He slips the other one around her shoulders and tugs her close, grinning.

“Two months since I’ve seen you, and not even a ‘Hiya, you alright? Frost any cakes lately?’”

His skin sticks to hers in the heat. She can feel the steadiness of his shoulders, the sweaty dampness of his shirt. Katniss sinks into him for a heartbeat before the heat makes her lightheaded. She lets air filter between them.


“Yes, actually.” His arm drops from her shoulders and she shivers. “There was this one-of-a-kind wedding cake we decorated last week. Three tiers of buttercream roses with a little archway for the bride and groom figurines.” He props his hand behind her and adopts a serious expression. “It was white.”

Katniss snorts. Peeta looks pleased.

“And just this morning Effie asked about Bombe Alaska for her next party.” On Katniss’s blank expression, he explains, “Take a fluffy sponge cake base, fill it with ice cream, and slather the whole thing with rich peaks of meringue.” He pauses for effect, blue eyes twinkling like the sky at twilight. “Then set it on fire.”

“A flaming cake?” Katniss asks. She’s seen them on feast days, but always assumed the house-
elves used magic. “How would you do that?”

“Alcohol.” Peeta explains the process, gesturing as if an actual cake floats before his eyes. Katniss nods along, but her mind has stuttered to a stop. The smell of liquor curls in her nostrils. Threats hiss coldly through the air.

“Do you know Haymitch?” she asks suddenly.

Peeta pauses his story, confused. “Haymitch Abernathy? The drunk recluse?”

She nods shortly.

“Sure, we chat over tea. I tell him the best way to fluff frosting and he gripes about the geese infesting his yard.”

“I’m serious,” she snaps and he sobers.

“Then no, not really. He comes into the bakery sometimes. Buys a loaf or two.”

Katniss nods, relieved.

“What?”

“No reason.”

He peers at her in concern. Katniss forces a smile and bumps her shoulder against his. “You should probably steer him clear of that cake. The whole bakery might go up in flames.”

She’s rewarded with a laugh, if a distracted one.

“With all the alcohol in his system, the whole town might go up in flames.”

“That’s okay,” Katniss promises. “We’ll live in the woods and give tours of the ruins. Don’t worry,” she adds, catching his glance toward the distant trees. “I’ll keep you safe from monsters and ghosts.”

“Promise?” His voice is soft. So is his smile.

They grin at each other and Katniss knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this is how she will survive the summer. Laughing with Peeta until the world’s problems seem far away.

“I missed you.”

Her heart stutters in her chest. “Me too,” she whispers. It feels like a secret she needs to protect.

He shifts to face her. Katniss buries her fingers in the dirt, anchoring herself in the soil. She’s not sure how she forces her eyes to his, but somehow, she does.

“Katniss, if- if I asked you to dinner tomorrow, what would you say?”

“Why?” It’s perhaps the stupidest thing she’s ever said, but nothing else comes to mind.

“Why?” His cheeks are pink, and for a second she thinks it’s the heat. Then his eyes drop to the curve of her lips, and Katniss can’t breathe. “Don’t you know?”

She shakes her head minutely.
Peeta exhales a strangled laugh. “You’re strangely shortsighted for someone so canny.”

He moves in slowly, eyes drifting up from her mouth, and suddenly there’s nothing in the world but blue. Her thoughts slow, oddly nonsensical. She wants to tangle her hands in his curls, feel the softness thread through her fingers. She wants to freeze him in place and count the eyelashes spilling across his cheek. She wants to press her hands against his chest and shove him into the lake so she can breathe.

Peeta’s breath is muggy in the summer air, puffing across the bridge of her nose, teasing the skin above her lip. She feels the distance like a tangible thing: a handful of centimeters, then one, then none.

Peeta presses his lips against hers and Katniss feels a rush of heat like a blast from the bakery ovens. Sweat pricks under her arms, under her breasts, chases her spine to burrow into the root of her braid. It should be unbearable — and it is, but not the way she expects. She presses closer, making a sound in her throat when Peeta’s mouth parts, introducing her to a new kind of this strangely enticing heat.

His hand comes up to cup her face tenderly, his thumb skidding up the sticky plane of her cheek. It’s like he has a vicegrip on her heart, blood pulsing through the cracks in his fingers while her heart beats against his palm. It’s too much. He’s too real, too good, when half the words out of her mouth are lies.

Guilt invades the heat in her veins, coursing through her like ice. Katniss opens her mouth, wraps her arm around his neck, praying that if she just gets close enough her guilt will melt away. His arm wraps around her waist, coaxing her closer, and suddenly he’s everywhere. The ice in her veins doesn’t melt; it shatters.

“I’m a witch,” Katniss gasps against his mouth.

Peeta jerks, severing the kiss.

Perverse satisfaction stabs through her, but it can’t compete with the throb of loss. She inhales deeply. The humid air tastes stale.

“What?” Peeta blinks wildly. His pupils make a game of adjusting to the light.

“I’m a witch,” she repeats hoarsely.

His eyes refocus, intent on hers. “No,” he says slowly. “You’re not.”

The splash of the ducks seems unnaturally loud. Her breath sounds harsh in her ears. Her hands fist in the dirt until her fingernails throb. “It’s true. I- ” She swallows hard. It’s impossible to think with his eyes on her, his taste lingering in her mouth.

A large hand covers hers. Peeta’s thumb soothes her taut tendons, dipping across her knuckles and back to her wrist. Tension digs furrows into his hand, but she’d never know it if she closed her eyes.

“Who told you that?”

The words tumble straight past her brain to her mouth. “My father.”

“Your- ” He clamps his jaw over the words, but they twitch against his cheek. If she thought his touch smoldered, it’s nothing compared to the blue flame in his eyes.
Why is he so angry? What doesn’t he understand?

And suddenly she’s ten again, scuffing her boots on the cobblestones while she waits for her mother. A group of kids bursts past her from the alleyway, shrieking “Don’t let the witch catch you!” as Mrs. Mellark appears, rolling pin in hand.

She sees Peeta duck that same rolling pin, eyes pleading with Katniss to flee while his mother screams slurs. “If I catch that witch at this counter one more time-” Even now Katniss’s fingers itch for her wand, to stalk over to the bakery and show that Muggle hag-

Her thoughts catch up to her all at once.

What are you doing, Katniss?

She tears her hand from Peeta’s, unearthing chunks of grass in her haste, and scrambles onto her knees. Unbalanced, he stumbles into the empty space. She surges to her feet and he gapes at her like she’s gone mad.

I’m going to prison. The thought sears through her, inescapable. In her mind’s eye she sees a team of Aurors looming over her mother in the kitchen, waiting for Katniss to come home. She remembers the train platform, smoke curling from the engine as Prim waves farewell for the final time.

Oh, Merlin. Thank you, Rue.

She whirls, grabbing her trunk. Her fingers tremble on the handle and it slips back to the bank. She clutches it again and yanks hard. The wheels don’t budge from their muddy prison.

Peeta scrambles to his feet. “Katniss-”

She abandons the trunk. Her mother can retrieve it after they arrest her.

He touches her shoulder — to pull her back, she thinks — and her hand instinctively curls around her wand.

“Flipendo!”

His fingers jerk from her sleeve as he’s launched backward. She hears a dull thud as he hits the trunk, a splash when he skids over the top and into the pond. He makes a pained sound, a grunt or a groan with the sound of her name lost in between.

If I care about Peeta at all, I’ll turn around right now and obliviate him myself.

Katniss bites her cheek and keeps walking, refusing to let the tears flow.
Apologies for the delay. I swear I had this written a month ago, but the edits gave me no end of grief. Eternal thanks to my beta, deinde-prandium, for having such patience!

A sharp pain in her neck freezes Katniss where she stands in a muddled, sinister dreamscape. She fights the pain, struggling to reach Peeta before Fiendfyre consumes the bakery, but her feet feel heavy, leadened. The haze of smoke stings her eyes. Dimly, she becomes aware of a dull ache skipping stones down her back. Has she been struck by collapsing debris? A hand strokes her hair. Groaning, she presses her face closer as cool, gentle fingers smooth the matted hair from her cheek.

“Katniss.” Her mother’s voice penetrates the haze.

_No!_ she thinks. _I can’t leave. Peeta-

“Katniss.”

She escapes the black vapor with a gasp, eyes stinging and heart racing. An acrid taste lingers in her mouth. There are no blissful seconds of peace before the memories of the day before crash down on her. They’ve haunted her since she fell asleep, slumped over her knees on the floor, holding a silent, tearful vigil for the life she’d always known.

Frantically, she searches her mother’s face for panic, dread, hopelessness — some sign that the Ministry has come. But there’s no fear in the press of her lips, no surrender fogging those crystal blue eyes. Katniss collapses against the wall, her head thunking against the hollow paneling. Her mother’s hand drops from her hair. It flutters above her knee like a moth at a candle: drawn, but fearing the heat. Finally, Mrs. Everdeen’s fingers retreat to her lap where they absently twist her worn wedding band.

“Peeta brought your trunk by,” she says carefully.

Breath catches in Katniss’s throat. She holds it there like a shield.

“I told him you were sleeping.” It’s a question, but Katniss refuses to answer. She still feels the fire licking her back, noxious smoke singeing the hairs on her neck.

_If I never speak to him again, will they know it was Peeta?_

The thought licks her lungs, stinging worse than the flames.

“I was,” she tells her mother flatly.

Itchy streaks of dried saltwater crinkle on her cheeks when she speaks. She wishes she could scrub them away without her mother noticing.

“Did something happen at school?”
Katniss digs her fingernails into her palm and jerks her head in denial.

Her mother pauses, worry drifting across her eyes like morning haze. “Is Prim . . . ?”

“She’s fine.” The snappish response would convince no one, not even her absentee mother. She conjures the image of Prim waving goodbye from the train. Stay safe, little duck. “She promised to write when she gets to France.”

Mrs. Everdeen sinks back on her heels. She clearly wants to press the issue, but it’s been a long time since their relationship included the illusion of honest communication. “Did Peeta do something to upset you?” she finally asks.

Katniss goes rigid, like an invisible rope has yanked her upright by the roots. It’s a familiar response, as if her mother has asked about money, or Hogwarts, or whether it’s wise to let Prim visit a family she’s never met. She lost the right to her daughters’ lives a long time ago.

“No,” Katniss says shortly.

“You know you can tell me if- ”

“No,” she repeats more forcefully.

Mrs. Everdeen presses her lips together, nodding mutely, and rises from the floor. Her dress unspool, falling from careful folds above her knees to swish around her calves. She presses her hands flat against her thighs. Katniss recognizes the motion; she feels the pressure against her palms as if she’s the one steadying herself.

“I drew a bath,” her mother says. “I’ll make breakfast when you’re done.” She slips out of the room like a shadow faced with sunrise.

Breakfast. When Katniss fell asleep, wand by her knee like her fourth year knowledge of offensive spells could protect her from trained Hit Wizards, the afternoon sun still glared through the dusty window. Her eyes fall on the untouched bed. Above a colorful quilt, her faded blue pillow hugs Prim’s bright floral one. Buttery rays of mid-morning light transform the scene into something peaceful, untouched by yesterday’s misdeeds.

Why haven’t they come?

Katniss digs her fingernails into the hardwood floor, breathing deeply. Bleak thoughts slip through her attempt at calm, injecting a ragged wheeze into every lungful.

Almost a full day after her crime, and not a whiff of an Auror, an official, or even Darius, the local peacekeeping wizard. If she’d received a Ministry summons while she slept, the letter would’ve rattled and smoked and exploded into something ten times worse than a howler. People go to Azkaban for breaking The International Statute of Secrecy. Even for a minor offense, the witch or wizard would get slapped with a warning before watching their bank vaults drain into the Ministry’s coffers on the pretext of fees. And Katniss can tack “underaged magic” onto her list of sins.

And Peeta.

They’ll send in a team of proficient, dispassionate wizards to scrub yesterday from his mind. Will they stop at her revelation, or will they steal the whole afternoon? Will they take the feeling of lips and skin and hearts pressed together?

We’ve known each other for years, she realizes suddenly. What if they erase me entirely?
Katniss shoves away from the wall and staggers to her feet. Her first impulse is to grab her wand and sprint to the bakery — to drag Peeta into the woods in a doomed attempt to keep him safe.  

*Don’t lie,* she tells herself harshly. *You’d do it for you.*

She doesn’t want to let him go.  

Tears sting her eyes, but she blinks them away, digging the pad of her thumb into the pain in her neck. Instead of abating, it becomes more pronounced, allowing her to justify the few tears that have already leaked onto her nose. She kicks aside her wand, wrenching her shirt over her head and shucking her pants in one swift motion. Peering out the door to make sure she’s alone, Katniss darts around the corner to the bathroom.  

Lavender-scented steam envelops her. The stickiness feels like Peeta’s breath on her skin, warm and sweet. Goosebumps erupt on her exposed flesh. She drops her bra and panties onto the ground and steps into the old claw foot tub without testing the temperature of the water.  

It’s too hot. Katniss hisses as the scalding water grips her with ragged nails, scouring her clean. But unlike the fire in her dreams, this one feels cleansing. She sinks down, letting it ravage her shoulders, her chin, her nose, to the very roots of her hair. When she breaches the surface with a ragged gasp, her head feels clearer.  

*Why haven’t they come?* She thinks for a moment, and an answer bobs to the surface. *No one knows.*  

How could they? The Trace doesn’t make words taboo, and there are a million reasons she might have used a Knockback Jinx. At two in the afternoon on the last day of term, she could have been in the castle, or on the train, or stuck in Hogsmeade. Last year Johanna had snuck up behind Finnick on the platform and charmed his hair green. If she’d been investigated by the Ministry, every student at Hogwarts would have heard about it before the train pulled into King’s Cross Station.  

Feeling calmer, Katniss sinks back into her bath. Lavender seeps into her skin and curls in her lungs, leeching out tension until she feels almost empty. When the water turns cold she stands, sloshing water over the side of the tub.  

After curling up in an old pair of her father’s robes, Katniss pads through the kitchen on silent feet and sinks into the armchair in the living room. The pocked flatscreen drones faintly in the corner. After a moment of indecision, she snatches the remote and presses a button on the side. The squiggly wand icon wore off long before she was born, but the spell’s still good.  

She mutters, “*Panem et circenses,*” and feels the button pulse against her finger. The image flickers from a Muggle fluff piece on Loch Ness tourism to an exposé on the late singing sorceress, Celestina Warbeck. She scans the news ticker for three full loops, but finds nothing more interesting than an announcement about Finnick’s new job at the Ministry.  

She clicks off the telly, tucking her knees up to her chest. Unfamiliar sounds drift from the kitchen: the sizzle of eggs, the clink of a glass, the scrape of a knife on the cutting board. She can’t remember the last time her mother made her breakfast.  

Katniss curls into the fraying armchair, savoring the faint pine scent. She must drift off, because her eyes flutter open to the sight of scrambled eggs and melted butter on toast. Her mother balances the plate by Katniss’s elbow and backs away, folding her hands into her apron. The bread is dark and crumbly, swirled with cinnamon and nuts. Katniss pops a piece into her mouth.
Warm crumbs shower her palm. As she digs them out of crevices in her hand, she pretends not to wonder where the bread came from.

“Why don’t I brush out your hair?” her mother offers.

Katniss reflexively tugs the frayed rope that used to resemble a braid. Between Peeta’s fingers and her bath, it feels like a snarl of seagrass washed up on the shores of the Great Lake. She hesitates, contemplating how long it will take to untangle on her own. When she nods, her mother gives such a relieved smile that Katniss stuffs a handful of eggs into her mouth.

Mrs. Everdeen works quietly. Her skilled fingers don’t pinch as she quickly unravels the mess of knots. She combs from the bottom, retracing her work as she methodically smooths away each tangle. Katniss closes her eyes, wraps her arms around her knees, and pretends she’s ten again, waiting for her dad to appear from the woods.

Lulled by the memory of sun-dappled trees, the question escapes without her consent. “When did you learn about magic?”

The comb slips in her hair, snagging painfully on a knot. Too late, Katniss remembers their unspoken rule: life for the Everdeens began on a bitter November night three years ago.

Mrs. Everdeen untangles the comb and resumes brushing, meticulous as ever. When she speaks, her voice scrapes like she hasn’t used it in years. “The day your father proposed.”

Katniss sinks her teeth into her cheek. Her eyes fix on a bare spot on the carpet.

Mrs. Everdeen pauses, inhaling shakily. She brushes hair from her daughter’s temple. “It was January. He snuck to the back of the apothecary to see me.” Her voice steadies as she sinks into the memory. “My mother disapproved, so I stepped outside without a coat. We walked to this little grove down the lane, and your father-” Her breath hitches like she’s experiencing both wonder and loss anew. “He took my hands in his. And he said, ‘If you marry me, you may not have a nice coat or warm gloves or good boots. But I promise you’ll never be cold.’ Then he took this odd stick from his coat.” A smile ghosts across her face. “And suddenly that snowy little grove felt like midsummer.”

“A Hot-Air Charm,” Katniss supplies.

“I suppose,” her mother agrees. “But his hands were all I needed.”

Katniss shoves a hunk of bread into her mouth, chewing until she forces the lump from her throat. The bread sticks on the way down, dry and heavy.

“Was it hard?” she asks.

“Surrendering my life, or learning about magic?” Suddenly there’s a gaping chasm between her mother’s eyes and wherever her mind has taken her. Panic surges through Katniss — a fear she thought she’d long since overcome — but after a moment, her mum returns to their shabby little living room as if nothing had happened. When she smooths her daughter’s hair, Katniss fights the urge to slap her hands away.

“It was hard to leave my friends. My family. Knowing how much they’d miss.” Her blue eyes don’t linger on the self-sweeping broom or the singing tea set Prim had given her for Christmas, but on the patchy cloak bunched around Katniss’s shoulders.

“And it was hard,” Mrs. Everdeen continues at last, “to not feel needed.”
The twelve-year-old inside of Katniss claws to the surface. You were needed. You just didn’t care.

Her mother reads the coldness in her stone gray eyes. Her pale mouth tightens in a defiant apology. “Magic seems infinite to a Muggle like me. But it can’t create love, and it can’t erase it, either.”

Katniss remembers flooing home to a shiny medal of condolence and a mum with dead eyes. She remembers Prim curled up on their bed, hiccuping through her tears. Katniss’s grief vanished into her sister’s hair like it had never existed. Both of her parents follow her like specters, but only one of them is welcome.

“He shouldn’t have told you,” she snaps.

“No,” her mother says firmly. “I wouldn’t trade that day for every star in the sky.”

A million accusations run through Katniss’s head.

“You could have--” She stops short, tripping over thoughts of a Muggle she trusts far more than her mum, but still not enough. You could have abandoned him, she doesn’t say. Betrayed him. Seen him as a monster.

Her mother glean her meaning from the silence. She sighs. “You’re too young to worry about that, Katniss. Give Peeta a few years.”

A surge of panic stifles the angry words in her throat. She’s never mentioned Peeta around her mother, not even to Prim.

Mrs. Everdeen sweeps hair off her daughter’s neck, trailing her fingers in a soothing gesture. “I do visit town sometimes,” she teases. She ruffles the end of Katniss’s hair. When Katniss pulls away, she straightens, tucking the comb into the pocket of her dress.

Katniss’s breath hitches. “Mum . . .”

The part of her that seeks comfort from her father’s old robes longs to confess, to burrow into her mother’s lap and ask, ‘What do I do?’ But the girl who met Peeta Mellark in a desperate attempt to sell oils for bread money resents her mum for understanding.

Wordlessly, she hands her mother her empty breakfast plate. Her mother holds the chipped offering carefully between her hands.

“Thanks,” Katniss mumbles to her knees.

“You’re my daughter, Katniss. And even if I couldn’t-” Katniss jerks her head, a clear warning, and her mother hesitates. “Well, I want you to be happy. Someday,” she adds sternly.

Katniss nods, and her mother retreats to the kitchen. But there is no someday. The damage is done. The only question left is how to rebuild from the ruins.

Katniss avoids the problem diligently. She scrubs the mud off her trunk, flips through summer homework, and unpacks odds and ends from her school things. She decides that by erasing Peeta from her life, she can avoid erasing herself from his. She locks her door when she hears his voice downstairs and lets pastries go stale by her door. When she unearths a sketch from her trunk — two sisters like night and day that he’d sent for her birthday — she shoves it to the back of a drawer, heedless of crumpled edges.
When she realizes her attempts to forget him are pointless, she escapes to the woods, relying on sheer stubbornness to get her through. She spends a full day tromping through the trees, pretending not to remember his berry-stained smile when she strips a bush of raspberries for lunch. The sunset makes her queasy, and she blames the way the light slants through the forest, making her squint. Even trips to the Hob give her telltale flutters, like her brain can’t comprehend why her feet don’t carry her to town when she leaves. Peeta has crept into her life like devil’s snare, twining through her thoughts until the struggle to escape only captures her more tightly.

A Memory Charm is the right choice. The safe choice. But whenever she considers it, her mind shies away. She finds herself wondering if she can simply stroll into the bakery and pretend he hallucinated the whole confession. Wizards compose entire books about Muggles’ propensity for self-delusion. She’ll claim Mum diagnosed her with heat stroke and ask — with obvious concern — how he’s faring after their dizzy day at the park.

But every time she turns her feet toward town, some distraction pulls her away. Her mother needs feverfew, or her forage bag needs patching. She actually makes it halfway to the bakery one day, when she spies Haymitch Abernathy on his way to the Hob. Her feet redirect her to the forest before he can read the guilt on her face.

Nearly a week after her transgression, a muffled screeek drags Katniss from sleep. Captured by the death throes of a nightmare, she thrashes against the blankets knotting her legs. She blindly gropes for the small forage knife on the bedside table, but even as her hand closes around the hilt, she knows it’s hopeless. A blade offers no protection from a dementor’s kiss.

Why did I hide my wand in the trunk? In her mind’s eye, Peeta’s soulless stare accuses her from the tattered remnants of her nightmare.

The grating sound scrapes a reprise, and Katniss tightens her grip on the hilt. She hears a sharp, insistent rap outside her window. As her eyes adjust to the night, a shape roughly the size of a Quaffle takes form, silhouetted against the stars.

A ruddy owl. The trees outside her window glow eerily, coaxed alive by the predawn light. Katniss stumbles to the window and yanks it open, slamming her knife on the sill as the owl flaps inside. It ruffles its feathers in annoyance when she snatches the letter from its beak. She wonders how long the creature would screech outside her window if she shoved it outside and latched the lock.

If this is Johanna complaining about her grandparents’ pureblood bollocks, I’m owling back a nose-biting teacup, she grumbles internally.

But the handwriting is round and neat, sweeping across the envelope in Prim’s favorite blue ink.

Katniss roots blindly through her trunk for a treat to appease the blasted bird. It gobbles down the hunk of dried squirrel meat midair, launching into the night sky. She’ll have to rustle up a delivery owl to write back, but she’s too distracted to care. She devours Prim’s descriptions of the Hogwarts Express (‘Johanna taught me to disarm a rude girl in our compartment’), Rue’s family (‘she has more siblings than my friend Rory!’), and their adventures in the French countryside (‘Rue’s aunt promised us a tour of Beauxbatons. I can’t wait to meet the wood nymphs in the dining hall!’). Katniss practically sees Prim bouncing on her toes as she reminisces about taking a portkey to Spain and booking a stay in London (‘even you’ve never been to Diagon Alley, Katniss!’).

Her heart constricts when she reaches the end of Prim’s letter.
I bought souvenirs for you and mum and Peeta. I can’t decide if I want to rush home and give them to you now, or stay on holiday forever.

Look after each other while I’m gone!

Love always,

Prim

Katniss folds the letter under, hiding the last few lines. She reads again about games of Crazy Cat (dropping dancing teacups around the room and watching Buttercup try to pounce on all six at once) and the message from Rue’s cousin Thresh (“We’re looking out for your sister, just like you do for our mockingjay.”). She spends several minutes tracing the doodle of a katniss flower that Rue’s grandparents must have charmed into motion. But no matter how many times Katniss rereads the letter, Prim’s farewell echoes like a rebuke.

Look after each other.

With Prim gone, Katniss has looked after no one but herself.

Am I really that selfish? That I care more about how obliviating Peeta will affect me than what it will do to him?

She knows the answer.

She carefully folds her sister’s letter and tucks it into her trunk. Then she yanks open her dresser, upending half its contents to find a Muggle shirt and bra. She tries to form a haphazard plan, but gets no further than bakery before slinging her bag onto her shoulder and easing out of her room. As she slips silently outside, her blood buzzes like the first time she gorged herself on Feast Day sweets.

The sun has just appeared over the horizon when she arrives in the merchant quarter of Dufftown. Her bag thuds against her hip as she dodges a handful of suits clutching fresh coffee. She tucks her chin, unable to shake the niggling fear that they’re undercover Aurors on the payroll of Minister Snow. She doesn’t look up from her boots until long after they’ve vanished down the street. When she enters the bakery, she’s surprised to find the baker himself bagging pastries.

“Katniss,” he calls around a customer. “Good to see you.”

The heavyset woman glances over the shoulder of her pea green suit. She blinks in recognition, eyeing Katniss curiously. Katniss recognizes her from Effie Trinket’s little group of human oddities. When the woman catches her eye, she quickly distracts herself with paying Mr. Mellark. But when she leaves, she sneaks furtive glances around her sugary drink.

She knows. Fear climbs painfully in Katniss’s gut, scouring her ribs with the feeling of betrayal. She pushes it away. Don’t be stupid. She’s just gawking at my night shorts. Her fingers pick a loose thread on their hem, unraveling the weave with one tug.

“Nothing better to do than gossip ‘bout a coupla teenagers,” the baker mutters, stuffing the receipt beneath the register.

Katniss flushes, twisting the broken thread around her finger. The counter looks freshly polished, streaked with dried cleaner. The sunrise reflects off the sheen, creating a shimmering mosaic of Peeta’s favorite colors.

How many times has she lingered here, rooted by the sunlight of his smile?
That’s all done now. Loss stabs through her, acute and aching. No matter how today ends, her friendship with Peeta will never be the same.

“Tea or pastries?”

Mr. Mellark’s question startles her. She squares her shoulders and approaches the counter. Her free hand pulls the string around her finger until it cuts off circulation.

“I’m looking for Peeta, actually.”

His dad blinks, but shows no other indication that he’s surprised. “He’s still asleep. Days off are rare around here.”

She drops the thread to the ground. Blood rushes back to her finger, making it throb. Her courage slips away with every charlatan heartbeat.

Mr. Mellark smiles kindly. “I’ll send Levan upstairs to wake him. Peeta’s been a bit . . . ” He glances toward the ceiling, smile slipping for just a blink. “Well, I’m sure he won’t mind if I tell him who’s looking.”

“No!” Katniss stumbles forward, arm outstretched. His eyes widen, and she forces a laugh. It sounds distant and tinny in her ears. “I don’t want to impose. I’ll come back later.”

She won’t. If she leaves now, she’ll hide in her room until Thom stops outside her house on September 1st. The thought stings, but it sounds infinitely more appealing than sweating it out in the bakery, waiting for Peeta to reject her instead of just the idea of her.

The graying baker glances around the cafe. A bleary-eyed university student fiddles with her holo-tablet in the corner, but otherwise they’re alone.

“Might as well stay.” He points to the clock. 6:27. “Baker’s hours are hardwired.”

Before she can back out the door, Mr. Mellark slips a cheese danish across the counter.

“Edges are a little burnt.” He shrugs, a weathered echo of his youngest son.

She shakes her head. “I don’t want-”

Mr. Mellark interrupts with a genial smile. “Come on. If you don’t eat it, I will.” He pats his doughy middle, eyes twinkling. “Save an old man’s dignity.”

She remembers a game of tug-of-war with Peeta and a twenty pound note. Katniss steps away from the counter, but Mr. Mellark moves faster.

“I’ll just be in the back if you need me.” He disappears without another word.

Katniss gnaws her lip in irritation. The baker’s gone, so technically she could leave. But as much as she should, she knows she can’t avoid Peeta forever. Leaving the danish on the counter, she shoves a two-person table into the corner with her hip. She goes back for the chairs, then drops her bag against the wall. Mr. Mellark never reappears for the abandoned pastry.

No use leaving it for the flies.

Katniss snatches it from the counter and takes a large bite, annoyed with the flaky sweetness of the dough. Wedging herself between the wall and the counter, she props her knees on the table and pulls a book from her bag. Professor Atala assigned a five foot parchment on Patronus Charms for summer homework.
She rolls her eyes, wondering what good it is to learn defensive spells against creatures no one’s seen in a century. But then an image flashes before her: blond hair and eyes like fractured ice over a drained lake. A wheezing black figure looming over her bed . . .

Katniss fights a shiver.

_Stupid._ She shatters the illusion, yanking the cap off her pen. Folding her parchment to resemble a sheet of Muggle paper, she viciously underlines sections in her book. Each time the bell jingles Katniss jolts, reaching reflexively for her bag. But it’s never an Auror, or even that Muggle-hater Haymitch. Just lawyers and accountants and librarians, in for a spot of tea with breakfast. Mr. Mellark pops out of the back to help each customer, or else Lev does, and Katniss settles back into her chair.

*Next time it will be Peeta.*

She hasn’t quite determined what to do when it is Peeta.

She scratches out an explanation about the power of positive memories, rifling through history for her happiest thought. She settles on Prim’s proud smile the first time she brewed a successful Antidote to Common Poisons. But halfway through the paragraph, Katniss realizes she’s writing gibberish about flour and curls and sun-kissed eyelashes. She slashes roughly through a quarter of the essay and starts again.

Peeta shuffles from the kitchen at quarter after seven. Katniss grips her pen so tightly that ink leaks out onto her fingers. He stiffens when they lock eyes, nearly missing a step.

_Don’t be afraid of me,_ she pleads across the intervening distance. Peeta regains his balance and approaches like she’s a Diricrawl, ready to disappear if he moves too fast.

Katniss clears her throat and looks away. She stuffs her homework into her bag, closing the toggle over _Charms of Defense and Deterrence_. Peeta’s eyebrows disappear under a few errant curls, but he schools his features so quickly that she almost doesn’t see it.

“Hiya, Peeta,” she says as casually as she can manage.

His fingers tap a discordant rhythm on the loose fabric of his sleep pants. His hair is still mussed from his pillow, pressed flat on one side. She feels phantom curls tickling her hands and twists them together so she doesn’t reach over and fluff it with her fingers.

“Good morning, Katniss,” he greets carefully.

She wraps the strap of her bag twice around one hand, letting the weight drag her fingers painfully toward the tile. “Your dad said you have the day off.”

“Yeah.” Peeta ghosts a smile that just misses his eyes. “Been trying to work up the courage to camp outside your door, but it looks like you beat me to it.”

Her fingers itch to sandwich his against his leg, stilling their soundless beat. The wariness on his face is maddening. “Look, Peeta-”

The door to the kitchen swings open, and Mr. Mellark pokes out his head. He pretends to scan the university student’s empty plate, but it’s clear from his lingering retreat that he’s more interested in the pair in the corner. Katniss chews her lip, watching Peeta ruffle his flattened curls.

“Do you want to go somewhere?” she blurs.
“Now there’s a question I’ve been waiting for my entire life.” This time, the smile touches his eyes, if only briefly. She frowns, not sure where that comment falls on the line between teasing, flirting, and self-defensive humor. Peeta shakes his head, dismissing her uncertainty. “Got somewhere in mind?”

“Just trust me.” The second the words leave her mouth, Katniss wants them back. Trust? If their situations were reversed, she’s pretty sure she’d be hiding behind a sack of flour.

Peeta’s arms cross, thumb beating a steady tempo on his bicep. Katniss opens her mouth, but no words spring to her lips.

“Yeah, okay,” he says after a moment. “What do I need?”

Sunlight refracts sharply off the closed glass door. Katniss blinks rapidly to dispel the stinging from her eyes. “Um.” She swallows, buying time to consider where it’s safe to talk.

“Grab your trainers,” she instructs. “And some lunch.” It’s a long hike for someone not used to walking.

Peeta glances at the ceiling. Katniss pictures his pinch-faced, cold-eyed mother pacing the little apartment she’s drawn in her head and reconsiders. “Or not. We can pick apples on the way.”

“Trainers and snacks. Gotcha.”

He sneaks glances at her as he retreats into the kitchen. Katniss tries to not to think about what she’ll do if he doesn’t come back. She fiddles with the loose seam on her shorts, ripping a pinkie-sized hole into the linen on her left thigh. She feels a rush of relief when he reappears a few minutes later, wearing a light green shirt that calls to mind upturned leaves crushed underfoot. He shakes open a bag, tosses in a few muffins from the display case, and calls goodbye to his father.

“Lead the way.” He punctuates his words with a casual gesture.

They wind through back streets, emerging on the main road once Katniss is positive they’ve bypassed the shops and townhouses populated by magical folk. She and Peeta are rarely seen in public together. She wouldn’t put it past the gossip mongers at the Hob to fabricate a titillating story about the youngest baker and their favorite forager. Rumors like that are liable to get her thrown into prison.

Mostly because they’re true, she thinks.

She expects Peeta to bombard her with questions as soon as they hit the pavement, but when she glances sideways, his eyes flit away. They trudge along in silence, Katniss fishing for the right words, Peeta waiting for her to find them. If he would only get her started, she’s sure some magic explanation would wash ashore during the ebb and flow of conversation. This stubborn silence makes her feel like the sea heaves all around her.

Curse you, Peeta Mellark. I could be leading you into the woods to hex you, for all you know.

They split off onto the dirt road that winds to her house, Peeta half a step behind. Sounds of nature filter through the distant rumble of cars. Finally, all she can hear is the hum of insects, the jackhammering of an industrious woodpecker, and the scrape of Peeta’s trainers on the packed earth.

Soothing sounds, all. But their normally comfortable silence burrows between her shoulder blades and takes root. It’s not like Peeta to stay mum for so long. When the tension becomes unbearable, Katniss clears her throat. “I’m sorry.”
There, she thinks. That’s harmless enough.

Peeta stops fiddling with the bakery bag long enough to raise an eyebrow at her. Katniss hears Johanna scoff all the way from Gloucestershire. You’ll have to do better than that, brainless.

She shreds the rough edge of the hole in her hem. “For shoving you, I mean.”

Not better, Finnick teases in her ear.

“Shoving?” Peeta asks. Incredulity flecks his eyes like the speckles on robin’s eggs. “Is that what we’re calling it?” A strangled note tightens his question, threatening to unravel his composure. It sticks in her throat like a fishhook, hitching her breath.

She looks around the empty street, feeling eyes press on every side. Are they watching us? Out in the open, with no magical energy to interfere, anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of eavesdropping spells could overhear her confession.

Divert! Annie chimes into her mental chorus.

“And I’m sorry for running away,” Katniss says quickly. “It’s just that it was my first kiss and—” She looks up, meeting Peeta’s startled eyes. Merlin, why did I say that?

Peeta opens his mouth, and Katniss abruptly wonders how many girls he’s kissed. She rushes on before she can find out. “I wasn’t running away from you, Peeta. You’re a—really good friend. I trust you. But I—” Her teeth clack together, trapping the remaining words in her lungs. Every road leads back to magic.

“Yeah?” Peeta pauses beside her, waiting expectantly. His fingers dig into the bakery bag until she thinks it might tear. Katniss shakes her head, braid jerking on her shoulder, and quickens her pace. It takes several uneven heartbeats for him to trudge after her. When he falls in beside her, he’s wearing his Rye smile, fixed and faintly sarcastic.

“You could’ve at least let me down easy about that date,” he says dryly. “I talked Greasy Sae into reserving a private table, and she made me scrub dishes for three hours to make up for lost revenue.”

Heat flushes her cheeks when she remembers why she never answered him. She feels the ghost of his mouth like a wordless confession; like a question. ‘It’s not just me, right? You feel it, too.’ She bites her lip to keep her tongue from tracing the phantom pressure.

“Sorry.” It’s a clipped echo of her earlier apology. Her hands fist around the hem of her shorts. Dust billows around their feet, settling onto her low boots and filtering into her socks. She focuses on that instead of how much she wants to snog him again.

Peeta scrubs a hand through his hair. Conversation has never been Katniss’s strong suit, but he normally has the ability to conjure at least the pretense of a two-sided conversation from her. These one word answers must drive him as mental as his silence drove her. “So we both know you didn’t shove me,” he says plainly. “I just can’t figure how—”

They round a bend in the road, and her house comes into view.

“Hold on,” she interrupts. She cuts across an overgrown field her mother can’t see from the kitchen window. Almost there . . .

Peeta tromps after her, sounding like a herd of insulted hippogriffs. “Blimey, Katniss. If we’re not
going to talk about this, why am I here?”

“We will,” she insists. *Let’s just get into the trees, where it’s safe.* They weave through a crumbling foundation, scattered bricks sinking slowly back into the earth. There’s no way of telling if the cottage belonged to someone magical or Muggle. Whoever they were, she’s thankful they’re long enough dead to witness her fumbling without judgement.

“Katniss.” Peeta’s hand gropes forward. His fingers catch on a wrinkle on her t-shirt and fall away. “Can you look at me?” he pleads.

She grinds her teeth and presses forward. *Just a few hundred meters...*

“Katniss.”

She shrugs him off. “Not. Yet.”

Peeta’s hand lands on her arm like a brand, and Katniss feels a rush of déjà-vu. *His hot breath, her wand in motion, Peeta splashing into the pond.* Just like last time, she reacts impulsively. One minute she’s on solid ground, and the next she’s suspended, boots slipping on a cinder block buried in the dirt. She shifts her center of gravity, pitching towards him as the perch turns precarious beneath her feet. He catches her forearms and, in the same breath, she presses her mouth to his.

His surprised groan reverberates across her lips, pebbling goosebumps from her hair to her boots. His lips feel cool and solid. Reassuring. Words always fail her, but *this...*

His hands slide to her elbows, and she angles her body so he can pull her closer. His fingers tighten, anchoring her. *No, not anchoring.* He’s pulling her the wrong way; she’s sliding inexorably toward the ground. Her feet slip off the block and she lands with a muffled thump. Katniss stares up at him, wounded, as anger and confusion war in his familiar blue eyes.

“Is this your way of avoiding the conversation,” he asks thickly, “or are you just really committing to these mixed signals?”

She grinds her teeth, letting embarrassment flare into anger. *But it's fine for you to kiss me, innit?*

Without a word, she turns, stalking across the field toward her house. Peeta makes a frustrated sound, jogging to catch up with her. She walks faster, fingernails pressing painful half-moons into her palms.

“Call me mental, Katniss, but I’d hoped that when my primary school fantasies came true, it would *help* all this, not hurt it.” His flustered gesture encompasses *her and him* and everything in between.

She presses her lips together, stalwartly bolstering her wounded pride. Weeds scratch her legs as she stalks through the field, fanning spiderwebs of blood up to her knees. If she were a better person, she’d have her mum whip up a salve before kicking Peeta out. His pasty legs practically beg for abuse.

“So last week was a pity snog, I guess. Or are you actually trying to mess with my head?” She’s surprised to hear resignation lacing his frustration. Maybe that’s what finally makes her reply.

“I don’t do things I don’t want to do, Peeta,” she snaps.

“Right, then.” He stumps over a rotted log, which splitters loudly under his weight. “Should we start with the snogging or the shoving?”
Katniss doesn’t deign to respond. Out an upper window, she sees laundry stirring in the breeze. She prays to Merlin that her mother’s too busy with chores to try playing Mum today.

“After everything, I don’t even warrant an explanation?” He swipes aside a long, spiky plant that springs back, snagging on the back of his shirt. Wincing, Peeta stops to pry himself free. Katniss slows instinctively until she hears him mutter, “At least it was good for both of us,” under his breath.

That’s so entirely unfair that if she had her wand, she’d animate those thorns into a concentrated assault. She makes do with abandoning him, stalking around the apple trees behind her house. He calls out to her, but she ignores him. When he catches up to her by the garden, a broken stem dangles from a rip in his shirt. She slams the gate, narrowly missing his ribs, and Peeta stops dead. He can take root there for all she cares.

Eyes fixed on the back door, Katniss nearly trips over something in her path. She stumbles to a stop, realizing suddenly that she had nothing to do with Peeta’s halt. At her feet, the Everdeens’ self-sweeping broom jauntily whisks upturned earth off the stepping stones, blocking her path to the door.

“Cessa,” she barks on instinct. The broom teeters sideways and clatters to the ground.

A strangled sound pulls her around. Peeta, always so steady, looks like Buttercup could streak by and knock him into the Gurdyroots that grow wild beyond the fence. She hears a soft thump, and knows the bakery bag has hit the ground.

“Katniss,” he asks, voice uncharacteristically strained. His eyes plead with her, lost and confused behind his pale lashes. His right cheek moves oddly, like he wants to smooth his features and can’t manage it. “What’s going on?”

Her anger vanishes in a puff of smoke. She tugs open the gate, swallowing hard. Carefully avoiding his eyes, Katniss grabs his hand and pulls him toward the forest. His palm is soft and broad, cool beneath a thin layer of sweat.

“Come on,” she says. “We’ll talk in the meadow.”

But when they reach the gnarled tree line, Peeta pulls free. He looks from her to the woods, palm scrubbing on the fabric of his shorts. “So when you said you’d protect me from the forest . . .” He trails off, clearly hoping she’ll laugh off his concerns.

Katniss crosses her arms, fisting her hands so they feel less empty. “They’re just trees, Peeta. They don’t bite.”

His eyes drift back to her house, then scan the dark, shadowed parts of the forest. His lips curl upward at the corners. “The trees aren’t exactly my top concern.”

She rolls her eyes, hoping the casual gesture will set him at ease. “There are no monsters in these woods, Peeta.”

His feet shift unconsciously into what she can only guess is a wrestlers stance. He studies the brush like an enemy might barrel free at any moment. “In these woods,” he mutters. “Right.”

She’s just about decided that an anonymous owl to the Ministry of Magic wouldn’t go amiss after all, when Peeta squares his shoulders and disappears into the trees. Katniss spends the next twenty minutes thanking some unknown deity for his obnoxiously heavy gait. The last thing she needs is a wild Crup to come yipping through the underbrush to make things worse. The canopy closes.
around them, muffling every sound but the twigs crunching under Peeta’s feet. Silence hangs like a fog, poisoning the air.

“Just tell me something real, Katniss.” In the heavy air, Peeta sounds distant and tired. Her gut clenches at the disenchantment in his tone.

The last of her pride dissipates, replaced by an unpleasant emotion that feels a lot like remorse. She watches Peeta tromp through the leaves, stumbling now and again on an upturned root. If she turned around and left, it could take him days to escape these woods. Woods that might be infested with dragons and chimeras for all he knows, and are infested with Doxies and wolves. Yet here he is, hiking deeper into the forest because she asked him to.

_Something real._ She doesn’t think, ‘I suck at color-changing charms’ is going to cut it.

Peeta stops abruptly. “I miss you when you’re not around,” he says. Katniss takes a deep breath. “When you’re at school or Mum’s at the bakery.” He falters, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Or when we’re not talking.”

With more courage than she knew she possessed, Katniss plants herself in front of him. It guts her to see the doubt in his eyes, but she raises her chin and lets him search her face for truth.

“I want this to be real, Peeta. I do. I want to stop lying, but there are _rules._” She pauses, pushing away her excuses. It’s too late for that kind of truth. “I’m sorry,” she says instead. “I’m sorry for ditching you. You’re one of my best friends.”

His eyes are so intent on hers that grindylows flip somersaults in her stomach. She can feel their tentacles catching on her ribs, squeezing her heart. Peeta’s hand drifts toward hers, but he catches himself and stuffs it back into his pocket. Her eyes drop to the forest floor. Katniss retreats to a downed tree and hauls herself up onto the trunk. Her left hand picks at her shorts, but she rests her right flat on the log. Peeta joins her a moment later, but her hand stays alone on the bark.

“I don’t care about anyone the way I care about you,” Peeta admits. He says it so matter-of-factly that Katniss almost wishes she could say the same; that he’s the only one who matters in her life. “But, Katniss . . . I tell you everything.”

_That’s not fair_, she wants to argue. _I never asked you to. It’s not the same._

Another thought drifts to the surface, so horrible she feels sick. _Your poxy mum and her rolling pin can’t start an international incident._

“My mum grew up in Dufftown,” she says, as much to suffocate that thought as anything else.

She expects to go at this alone, but Peeta nods. His hands drop to the trunk, fingers just centimeters from hers. “She knew my dad.”

“Right,” Katniss agrees. She watches him sketch absent patterns in the dirt, greenish shadows dipping into the contours of his shoes. His eyes stay trained on her face. “She was friends with your dad. Her parents ran the old apothecary shop. Very respectable.” She’s not sure if she’s trying to be funny, but Peeta smiles faintly.

“Not my dad, though.” She picks at her shorts, ignoring the uncomfortable scrape of bark against her thighs. “People from town thought he was strange, living out here alone. He studied animals. Published books.” Her throat tightens, thinking of long Saturdays spent crawling on her belly through the underbrush, helping her father search for an elusive new sub-species of fairy or beetle. She shouldn’t have started with her parents.
Peeta hooks his pinky around her thumb. Warmth zips through her belly.

“So they fell in love and he told her about magic,” she says in one breath.

His finger spasms around hers. “Magic,” he echoes dubiously.

Katniss huffs. “Are we calling it ‘shoving’ again?”

He clamps his jaw shut and stares out into the trees, struggling against a lifetime of neat explanations and ignoring what he saw with his own damn eyes.

_Muggles_, she scoffs in her head.

“My dad was a wizard,” she says plainly. “I’m a witch. I go to school to learn how to cast charms and deflect curses and brew potions.”

His thumb beats a staccato rhythm on the loose bark. Her hand shifts in response, coaxed closer by his hold on her. “Do you fly on broomsticks, too?” he asks sarcastically.

He’s only buying time. Trying to process what his brain classifies as insanity. Still, an impish smile springs to her lips.

“I’m a terrible flyer,” she says casually. His thumb stutters, then resumes its frenetic tapping. “It took me two days to get my broomstick off the ground.” He gives her an incredulous look, and she shrugs. “My dad’s old broom is ancient. I never bothered to learn.”

“I’ll lend you the one from the bakery,” he quips, sure she’s taking the piss.

“Wouldn’t work.” She waves a dismissive hand. “You’d need enchantments to fly, twig-trimmers for maneuverability, and a cushion charm if you ever wanted to walk again. Plus, I’m pretty sure the aerodynamics would be rubbish.” She laughs, finding puckish delight in the gobsmacked look on his face. “Trust me, there are better ways to travel.”

He nods in a way that suggests he’s still catching up. His gaze drifts aimlessly until it falls on the bag at her hip. Realization sharpens in his eyes. “Wait. So, boarding school? Is that—”

Her mirth fades. She shifts on the log, remembering suddenly just how _illegal_ this is. Katniss clears her throat, but the words that escape are faint and fragile. “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

His eyes widen almost comically, but after a steadying breath, he nods staunchly. “Alright.” He notices his thumb’s absent motion and stops. After a moment, he unhooks his pinky from her thumb and climbs her knuckles until their fingers are woven together. “So, Hogwarts.”

Katniss shrugs, but her pulse is racing faster than a Finnick’s racing broom. “Actually, it’s just a few miles that way.” She points vaguely in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

Peeta looks over his shoulder, but all they can see is a wall of green. “And it just so happens that no one’s ever seen it?”

She rolls her eyes. “If just anyone could wander in, it wouldn’t be a very good hidden school, would it?” His lips twitch, and she feels a strangely accomplished. “The founders put up protective enchantments to keep out Muggles. The headmaster reinforces them every year before start of term.”

She sometimes forgets how easily Peeta reads between the lines. It only takes him a minute to
untangle the unfamiliar words. “I take it Muggles aren’t creatures that lurk in the forest?”

“No.” She scrubs her free hand on her bare thigh. “That would be you.”

“Right.” Peeta frowns. He glances down at their joined hands, rubbing his thumb absently between her knuckles. She flexes her palm against the tree and wonders which memories he’s riffling through to put that look on his face.

“How long have you, y’know . . .”

“Been a witch? Always, I guess.” She tucks up one leg, leaning into him for balance. His hand tenses on hers, but he doesn’t move away. “I got my letter when I was eleven. Acceptance letter,” she clarifies off his look. “To Hogwarts.”

He nods, considering. After a minute, he exhales a laugh. “I was so depressed the first day of Primary 7 that my dad thought I had the flu.”

“What happened?” she asks curiously.

This time Peeta looks truly amused. She’d be relieved if it wasn’t at her expense.

“Katniss, I’ve had a thing for you since we were in preschool. You turned Buford Donaghue’s mouth blue for kissing Madge Undersee and making her cry.” He pauses, looking thoughtful. “Only I guess that wasn’t a prank, was it?”

She opens her mouth, not sure whether to address the swooping feeling making her blush or that day she faintly remembers from the preschool playground. Peeta sits beside her, sneaking glances as he mulls things over. Her fingernails pick at the loose bark beside her.

There’s just so much. How can she explain it all?

She catches his thumb, keeping his hand pressed firmly atop hers.

“I should’ve brought my wand,” she mutters. And guaranteed my spot in Azkaban.

His eyes fly to hers. “Your wand,” he repeats wonderingly.

“Yes,” she says. “My wand. You’ve seen it. I believe it introduced you to my trunk the other day.”

Peeta startles a laugh, clearly not expecting her glib reply. His blue eyes look almost feverish in the viridescent light, but there’s an edge of awe that’s impossible to ignore. He rubs his tailbone, playing along. “It helped acquaint me with the pond, too. I’ve probably gone barmy from those disease-ridden ducks.”

Her lips twitch, but she keeps a placid expression. “I’m sure Prim has a salve for that.”

His amusement fades. “Prim?” he repeats, and her blood freezes in her veins. “Is Prim-”

“No!” Katniss denies so loudly that a covey of birds bursts from a nearby tree. Heart pounding, she watches them dodge branches until they burst into the filtered light above the trees.

“Right.” Peeta nods shortly, eyes falling to the ground. His hand slips from hers, retreating to his lap. Katniss catches his wrist, breathing hard.

*I don’t deserve him.* The thought is visceral, inescapable. *He’s spent all day trusting me, and I lie to his face.*
But Prim! her mind balks. It’s one thing to give Peeta power over her. Giving anyone the ability to betray her sister is unthinkable.

Her fingers tighten on his arm. He watches her fingers flex, pulling back against his slight resistance.

Prim would want you to. In her mind’s eye she sees Prim and Peeta grinning at each other, eyes dancing with some secret mirth.

What had Prim said in her letter? Look after each other.

Slowly, Katniss fills her lungs. She holds the air until she feels she might burst, then exhales a single word. “Yes.”

The tension bleeds out of them, charging the air. “Thank you,” Peeta says so fervently that she ducks into his arms to escape his gaze. She slips on the log, but he catches her, arms supporting her until she’s steady. She swings her right leg around, straddling the tree for balance, and sinks into him.

She doesn’t know how long they sit on that log, hearts crashing together until they find the same beat. But when she pulls away Katniss feels so drained she can hardly find her feet. They pick their way back through the forest, not quite touching. She’s relieved when nothing more interesting than a squirrel scurries along the branches overhead. When they emerge under the apple trees, Peeta skirts her house and leads her to the front door.

Katniss sighs in relief. The thought of hiking all the way back to the bakery makes her want to hide in her bedroom and disappear under the covers.

She climbs the first step, then pauses, turning back to Peeta. “See you tomorrow?”

Late morning light dances down tiny, sparkling paths in his hair. He shakes his head, expression inscrutable. “I have a double.”

She can’t help feeling relieved. All she wants to do is sleep for a week.

“I can come by for lunch,” she offers anyway. Despite how little she actually wants to, rejection courses hotly through her when Peeta says no.

“Give me a few days to digest everything. Okay?” He smiles reassuringly, but his hand scrubs through his hair, making the curls stand up at odd angles. “Then we’ll . . .” He’s so rarely at a loss for words that when he fumbles, Katniss merely blinks. She bites her lip, waiting for him to recover. “I only work ‘til noon on Tuesday,” he finally offers.

She nods, giving him a tentative smile.

“We never made it to the meadow,” he adds, meeting the timid curve of her lips with a smile that’s warm and sincere. The world seems heavier and lighter all at once, looking at Peeta in the warm afternoon light.

Katniss hitches her smile higher. “You’ll like it,” she says confidently. Then, just to regain a little equilibrium, she orders, “Bring a blanket next time. That tree branch rubbed my legs raw.”

His eyes land on her thighs. Suddenly he flushes, eyes darting back to her face. He had drifted forward to hug her goodbye, but now he steps away with a sheepish grin. Katniss wonders if he actually thinks she cares about a few measly scratches.

Despite everything, songbirds flutter to life in her stomach.
Fifth Year

Chapter Notes

Wow, guys. Sorry about the length of this chapter. I'm getting to that point where the story tries to run away from me, and I don't have time for that shit, so I rope it in, and it digs in its heels, and . . . yeah. Things get a little out of control. *frantically stuffs headcanons back into the Room of Hidden Things* And to think these were meant to be snapshots. :D

A million thanks to my beta, deinde-prandium, who read this monster of a chapter a least three times. I couldn't do it without you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the grand tradition of Hogwarts Headmasters, Plutarch Heavensbee chooses a proficient rule breaker for the honor of House Prefect. It’s not until Johanna’s howler fills the rafters with cackling laughter that Katniss realizes her Prefect letter isn’t a hoax.

“Of course you made Heavensbee’s cut,” the red parchment wheezes. In the background, Katniss can hear Johanna’s brother complaining that she’s gone barmy. “The noble troublemaker who outwits every teacher but him.” Johanna chortles until the letter gleefully shreds itself, cutting short Holden Mason’s whining plea, “- play Quidditch now, ‘Hanna?”

Mrs. Everdeen rewards the letter with soft, gray dress robes. Katniss promptly dumps them back into the wrappings.

“Take these back,” she says briskly. “I don’t need them.”

“There might be occasion-” her mother starts, but one look from Katniss quells her. She sighs, shaking out the robes to refold them. In the dim evening light, the fabric looks like smoke billowing on bursts of air. “I’m just proud of you, dear.”

Katniss stifles a twinge of guilt. “How did you even get them?” she asks. The closest seamstress is Hazelle Hawthorne in Cardow, and busses don’t run direct. “Is there a weak spot in the enchantments around the Hob?”

Her mother draws herself up, her chin lifting. “I may be shut out of the market, Katniss, but the owl post works the same whether you’re a witch or not.”

Katniss frowns, watching the glow of the fire flicker across the fabric. She imagines slipping the robes over her head, watching them swish around her bare feet. She reaches out, fingers ghosting over an untucked edge before she realizes what she’s doing. She yanks back her hand as if burned.

“I’m not going to be Prefect, so it doesn’t matter,” she says shortly. Catching the blank resignation on her mother’s face, she tries to soften the blow. “Give them to Prim. They’ll look better on her, anyway.”

She expects a lecture from her sister, too, but Prim’s too swept up by the memory of her holiday to bother about Hogwarts. Katniss bites the inside of her cheek to keep her own summer news from
spilling out. It’s better for Prim — safer for Prim — but the copper in her mouth tastes like a lie, lingering sharply on her tongue.

After a careful examination of her sister’s gift for Peeta — “I promise, Katniss, it’s as Muggle as can be!” — Katniss plasters on an indulgent smile and accompanies Prim to the bakery. Peeta wraps Prim in a bearish hug, while she protests that, yes, she missed him, too, but if he doesn’t put her down he’ll never get his present. She proudly surrenders a paper-wrapped square with a big orange bow, which contains a book of French landscapes she got from a wizarding village near Rocamadour.

Katniss waits until Prim leaves to whisper, “If you let me borrow that first term, I’ll charm it back to life for you.”

His fingers fumble on the book, going tight and white to keep it from tumbling to the floor. Katniss bites her lip, forcing her feet to stay planted. After a stuttering pause where her heart thunders like a herd of centaurs, Peeta gives her a smile that’s quickly becoming familiar: a touch shy, faintly awed, with a burning sort of curiosity that makes her stomach churn pleasantly.

“If it means I get to see you before the holidays, I’m all for it.” He tucks the book into his apron’s front pocket, grinning as he returns to wiping down the counter.

Katniss ducks through the door after Prim, hoping he’ll miss the pink blooming on her cheeks. When he winks at her through the display window, she smiles back shyly.

“At least you know the Headmaster likes you,” he reasons when Katniss stomps into the bakery a few days later, scanning the cafe for prying eyes. She drops Heavensbee’s latest sales pitch onto the counter, scowling. Amusement tugs at the corners of Peeta’s lips, but he dutifully keeps a straight face. “He’ll have to choose someone new soon, won’t he?”

Someone new, she learns from Johanna, is Clove. After Katniss spends an afternoon complaining about the medieval torture Clove’s sure to implement as punishment for curfew, Prim snaps The Healer’s Helpmate shut. The hollow sound swallows her sister’s complaints. “Katniss, you’re the one who didn’t want it.”

It’s irritating to realize her sister is right. But she’d rather complain about Clove than consider that Heavensbee simply ran out of time. Prim’s carefully organized trunk is reminder enough that start-of-term is only a week away.

“But Clove?” she mutters, just to be ornery.

Prim huffs, resettling her book on her knees and rooting through the pages for the place she left off.

Katniss arrives at the bakery during the morning rush. Rye fetches Peeta for her with a dung-eating grin that would do Finnick proud.

“Working today?” she asks casually when Peeta appears, wet hair at odds with his worn debate tee and mud-spattered trainers. It’s clear he’s not on the clock, but it seems important to go through the motions.

He leans against his forearms on the display case, playing along. “Well, I’m hankering to chop
firewood today. Winter’s only a few months off.” She rolls her eyes and he grins, pushing off the counter. “But dad says I’m banished from the bakery until my best friend heads back to school tomorrow, so I guess you can have your way with me.”

Her smile falters. She feels like a third year again, wishing on every star in the sky that September 1st will never arrive. “Do you have plans?” she asks, running the flat of her nail over a threadbare hole in her bag.

Peeta rolls his eyes good naturedly. “I thought we just established that.”

He ignores Rye, who mutters, “You will if Mum finds you loitering in her shop front.”

“All yours,” Peeta assures her.

Despite herself, her lips pull up at the corners. “Good.” She grabs his arm, dragging him out the door before Rye’s prophecy can ruin the day for them. “We have plans.”

“We do?” Peeta asks, as if he’s not already dressed for a trek. “What lifelong assumptions are you tilting on their axis today?”

“The expectation that if you flash that smile, you’ll get all the answers you want.” It’s a flirtier response than she normally chances. The responding curl of his lips makes warmth spread through her chest.

“I’ll wear you down sooner or later,” he promises with a wink.

_Keep looking at me like that, _ Katniss thinks absently. _It won’t take long._

As if summoned by their good spirits, Haymitch Abernathy staggers around a corner. He nearly walks into a curbside pub sign when he catches sight of them. Katniss grabs Peeta’s hand and drags him around the bend before the old man can right himself. She doesn’t expect Haymitch to actually follow them — bigot or not, who she fancies is none of his damn business — but he careens down the street, his garbled shout swallowed by a passing car.

Peeta’s trainers squeak on the cobblestones as he hurries after her. “Katniss-?”

She hisses at him to be quiet, shoving him into the first shop she sees.

Effie Trinket is so startled by their sudden appearance that she nearly drops a bottle of perfume. She gasps when they flatten against the wall beside the window, looking little better than thieving goblins by the alarm in her brightly painted eyes.

Katniss winces. _Why did it have to be this shop?_

Effie opens her mouth, no doubt to lecture them on social graces, but Peeta quickly disarms her affront.

“Sorry, Effie.” He flashes his teeth at her. “You probably think we’re barbarians.” His smile becomes faintly embarrassed, like he’s somehow at fault. “It’s just . . . Haymitch is a little drunk today.”

Katniss snorts. _Like there’s a day he’s not._

The woman peers out the window, purple lips pursing in annoyance. “Oh, my dears,” she murmurs. “Stay as long as you need. Some people will only cause a _scene._” She tuts, shaking her head, and her elaborate updo sways like a wagging finger.
Katniss watches Haymitch’s shadow as he cups grimy hands on the window and peers inside.

“Well I never,” Effie exclaims loudly. The glass squeaks audibly as he drops his hands and stumbles away. She harrumphs, watching him fall against a window two shops down. Effie grabs a rag to scrub the smeared glass with practiced precision, but it’s clear she can do nothing without going outside and chancing an encounter with Haymitch.

“I should call the authorities,” she harrumphs, neatly folding the washrag. She smacks the smudge as if it’s the man himself. “Honestly, harassing children.”

Katniss doesn’t relax until Effie announces that Haymitch has staggered off down the street.

“Thanks, Effie,” Peeta says with the ease of practice. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.” He’s tall enough that he doesn’t have to strain to peck her on the cheek, even with her monstrous heels. Katniss frowns, feeling irrationally irritated at the small, pleased smile that graces Effie’s face.

Peeta catches her expression on the way out the door and shrugs. “She likes being appreciated.”

Katniss can’t exactly argue with that. Anyway, she’s pretty sure Peeta sees Effie Trinket as some kind of batty aunt. With an elaborate party every other week, she’s practically a live-in at the bakery. Besides, for all Katniss knows, the woman just saved her from a full criminal hearing before the Wizengamot. As they slip past the brightly colored storefront, Katniss surreptitiously scrubs the smudge with the sleeve of her shirt.

She had intended to take Peeta to her meadow today — between shifts at the bakery and his preoccupation with the contents of her trunk, he’s still never been — but running into Haymitch feels like a bad omen. Wordlessly, she resets their course for the park.

“So,” Peeta says when their feet trade cobblestones for pavement. “Imagine running into our good friend Haymitch today.” It’s a leading statement, and one he’s earned. That doesn’t make it any easier to answer.

Katniss chews her lip. It feels dishonest somehow, giving up Haymitch’s story. Then again, Haymitch is poking his wand into Peeta’s business. He might as well return the favor.

“Haymitch is . . .” She glances around. Apart from the shop boy having a smoke outside the grocer’s, they’re alone. “Well, you know .”

Peeta stops, looking at her incredulously. “Haymitch Abernathy is like you? Really?”

He has the sense to keep his voice down, but something in her stomach twists unpleasantly. This feels . . . different, somehow, than telling him about the year Prim wanted live fairies to decorate their Christmas tree. More real.

“Well, she thinks, in for a Knut, in for a Galleon.

She nods firmly. Peeta tilts his head in contemplation.

“Okay, that actually makes a lot of sense.”

She stiffens. He bumps her shoulder softly with his. “Come on, Katniss, he’s a famous recluse. If anyone’s hiding a sordid secret, it’s Haymitch.”

Any other day she’d be annoyed — magic isn’t sordid — but she hears the Hogwarts Express chugging on the tracks in her mind, counting down their time together.
“Right,” she says, squaring her shoulders. “So anyway, he’s got it into his head that . . . ”

Katniss swallows hard, looking up at him. Peeta’s faintly flushed from the heat, and her mind flits back to that first day of summer. The heat of his skin on hers. The hazy feeling of more, more, more that felt better than a Euphoria Elixir. She itches to kiss him then and there, Haymitch Abernathy be damned. But her boots weigh her down, heavy with the memory of crashing to the earth after she snogged him in that field. She drops her eyes, and they catch on a thick weal peeking out of his collar.

Her stomach bottoms out, and a low growl rumbles through her chest. “He’s a bloody bigot is all it is. He thinks you’re not good enough for me.”

Peeta laughs humorlessly. “He’s got me there.”

“Rubbish.” Katniss reaches up, tracing a line below his ear, right above the mark. Peeta shivers and she yanks her hand away, heart pounding. She ducks down the shortcut beside the drugstore, more to put some distance between them than because she’s worried about eavesdroppers.

“Some wizards think they’re better than Muggles,” she says as he trails her down the alley. “It’s bollocks. We fought a war over it ages ago, but some people are too thick to see sense.”

“A war?” It’s enough to distract Peeta from Haymitch’s unsettling personal interest in them. “How can you fight a war nobody knows about?”

Katniss shrugs, partly because she doesn’t know, but mostly because she suspects it involved more than a few Memory Charms. “We’re good at staying secret.”

She expects more questions. What she doesn’t expect is Peeta’s sudden, pleased smile. It simmers in her belly and bubbles through her ribcage like a cauldron left over a hearth fire.

“Don’t worry,” he says softly, “I know how to keep a secret.”

She slips her hand into his, squeezing it gratefully. And just like that, the heavy clouds Haymitch summoned dissipate in a beam of sunlight. “You’d better. You’re sorta stuck with me now.”

The air at Hogwarts seems heavier than usual, pressing down on Katniss whenever she’s alone. She blames O.W.L.s. Every time she turns a corner, she runs into another professor whose expression alone is enough to send her scampering towards the library.

“Complain to Chaff,” Johanna says one gray afternoon, popping a swarm of fudge flies into her mouth. “He’ll slip you a little something to relieve anxiety.”

Katniss isn’t sure whether she means a Draught of Peace, or something from his infamous hip flask. She’s pretty sure she doesn’t want to know.

“If you need a Calming Draught, you should visit me in the Hospital Wing,” Prim pipes up. Her bag of healing tomes is out of sight under the bleachers, but the barest complaint will have her flipping through The Healer’s Helpmate for the cure to her sister’s perceived ailment. “Master Aurelius is teaching me to measure doses.” From the distracted light in Prim’s eyes, Ravenclaw Quidditch tryouts don’t hold a candle to measuring lumpy potions drip by drip.
As for Katniss, her future had been determined the day she walked into the Hob, trembling in her overlarge boots.

“It’s a waste of time,” she complains. “O.W.L.s aren’t for months yet, and everyone’s studying like the Ministry is peering over their shoulders.”

Johanna’s glib reply is cut short by a blur of gold streaking toward them. The snitch screeches to a halt, buzzing merrily around their heads. A small, dark hand darts out of nowhere, grabbing the snitch as it flutters past Prim’s ear.

“You guys are pretty bad at paying attention.” Rue giggles, shaking her head at her friends, and zips back to the pitch, snitch in hand.

“How fast was that?” Prim asks, leaning forward until she’s in danger of falling off the bench. “Tryouts just started!”

Katniss presses her palms against the wooden slab, willing her heart to slow. She’s spent too long listening to Peeta stomp around town if Rue can sneak up on her like that.

“Bugger the time,” Johanna scoffs. “Finch never even saw the thing.”

To the Ravenclaw captain’s credit, she’d relinquishes her spot as seeker within the hour. Rue flits up to them after tryouts, blue robes in hand. As Johanna merrily abuses her for shortcomings no one else had even noticed, Katniss tucks Prim under her arm.

“I don’t know about you, little duck,” she says, “but this songbird was never meant to fly.”

Prim’s lips curve upward. “Dad used to call you that,” she murmurs. She looks to Katniss for confirmation. For a minute, those wide blue eyes make her look seven again. “His little songbird.”

For the first time in a long time, remembering doesn’t hurt. “Yeah,” Katniss agrees softly.

When their father died, Prim was still in primary school. She never heard his goodnatured teasing over her sorting. Never saw his pride when she joined her first school club.

Katniss clears her throat. “His favorite was Care of Magical Creatures.” She leads Prim away from their friends, who are caught up talking strategy anyway. “He and Professor Rooba went to school together.” She swallows hard, remembering how she’d shouted at the woman for trying to give her condolences.

Prim looks up at her, curious, so she presses on.

“He always claimed to be rubbish at Potions, but Mags called him the best Herbology student in his year. . .”

One pale September morning, Finch stops Katniss on her way to the Astronomy tower. Katniss has never actually met the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, though she’s sure they’ve shared a few classes. Finch seems to know Katniss, though. She carefully tucks a strand of fiery red hair behind
her ear, scanning for eavesdroppers on the narrow staircase.

“Gale Hawthorne earned a month’s detention with Madame Lyme for sneaking into the Forbidden Forest.” She speaks in a quick undertone, and looks not the least bit surprised when Katniss stiffens.

“What do I care?” Katniss’s voice isn’t quite steady. With all the chatty people in her life, you’d think she’d be a better liar.

“You probably don’t,” Finch says lightly. “Just sharing the daily gossip.”

Light footsteps whisper on stone and Finch hurries away. Katniss is prepared to do the same when Rue materializes out of the spiral staircase leading to Ravenclaw Tower.

“Hey, Katniss,” Rue chirps. “Isn’t it too early for Astronomy? The stars aren’t even out.”

“O.W.L.s.” Katniss’s groan is explanation enough. “We only get practicals twice a week.”

“I’m sure you’ll do great, though,” Rue encourages softly. It’s no wonder she and Prim are friends. They’re two Snargaluffs in a pod. “And hey!” She brightens. “At least you get Hogsmeade weekends.”

Katniss hasn’t attended a Hogsmeade weekend since her mother signed the permission form third year. But Rue and Prim are under a distinctly different impression, so she nods.

“Next year you and Prim can go,” she reminds her.

Rue affects a sigh. “A whole year.” But her brown eyes are bright as she waves goodbye and joins the handful of students heading to class.

Katniss tries not to ruminate on Finch’s gossip as Professor Twill lectures about volcanoes on the moon Io. What does it matter if the staff has their eye on the Forbidden Forest? She doesn’t really need it anymore. Prim’s at Hogwarts. Their mother’s herbal business keeps her fed when Katniss is away. And Peeta’s getting the hang of owls, even if the ruddy birds wind up flapping around Sae pub’s more often than not.

It doesn’t matter.

But when Professor Twill draws the curtains to cast a glittering star chart onto the ceiling, Katniss’s thoughts stay firmly planted on earth.

Though she tries to deny it, Katniss feels the loss of Dufftown keenly. She lasts until Michaelmas before her feet carry her toward the familiar statue of Gregory the Smarmy. But when she rounds the corner, she finds the passageway guarded by a empty suit of armor. She stakes out the corridor from a nearby alcove, watching unhappily as the tin can menaces its axe at any student who wanders by. The second day she camps out the passageway, Johanna appears out of nowhere and hauls her up the stairs.

“Is breadboy really worth an axe to the face, Everdeen?” she complains, stalking past the DADA classroom and stopping in front of a hunched statue. It’s a stone witch with a gnarled walking staff and only one eye.
“I wasn’t- ” Katniss starts, but Johanna cuts her off with a gesture.

“Yeah, yeah.” She rolls her eyes, digging out her wand. “This one’ll let you out in Honeydukes. After that, it’s on you.” She pauses, giving Katniss an appraising look. “And keep it between us, yeah?”

But when she waves her wand and mutters, “Dissendium,” nothing happens.

“Fucking Hawthorne,” Johanna grumbles under her breath, stuffing her wand back into her robes. “Come on, let’s get out of here before Atala wanders out.”

Katniss crosses her arms, irritated by yet another obstruction to seeing Peeta. “Keep it between us, huh?”

Johanna grabs her by the arm, shuffling her down the corridor. “When I break international law for a bloke I’m not even shagging, then we can talk.”

Katniss knows she should give it up, but the desire to get away creeps up her spine like an itch. She makes it as far as the Whomping Willow before Professor Cecelia walks by, whistling an absent tune that’s clearly a warning. That Saturday she suffers through a friendly Slytherin/Ravenclaw scrimmage until Clove wins game — and the honor of Cato’s tongue in her mouth — by conjuring a knife and spearing the Snitch’s wing to her broomstick. Katniss sneaks from the stands while Finch argues with Lyme about rulebooks and flesh memories. In the end it’s Professor Rooba and her pet Crups that make Katniss turn tail. The woman’s camped out by the trees, calmly knitting a sweater around a beast that lolls at her feet, mere days from whelping. Rooba pretends not to see Katniss lurking about, but her eyes never waver from the forest, even when green and silver fireworks light up the evening sky.

Two days before Halloween, Johanna catches Katniss hunkered behind a bookshelf on Protective Enchantments and laughs.

“None of your usual hiding places available, huh?” She jerks her head to indicate the shelf Katniss has ravaged. “You know you won’t need these until your N.E.W.T.s, right?”

Katniss huffs, disturbing a lock of hair that has escaped her braid. She swats at it ostentatiously, sneaking a worn tome off her lap. She almost manages to slip it under the shelf before her friend catches sight of it. Johanna’s amusement fades into an incredulous expression.

“What are you, brainless?” she snaps so loudly that the librarian shushes them from four aisles away. Johanna drops her voice. “You can’t possibly be stupid enough to try and sneak your baker’s boy into Hogwarts. Heavensbee might think you’re Harry Potter with tits, but the protective enchantments are older than the bloody plumbing.”

Katniss raises her chin, dropping Protecting Magic from the Menace of Muggles back onto her lap. “Don’t be stupid. The headmaster checks those barriers all the time.” Her fingers pick at the leather cover. She focuses on a yellowing page, trying to sound indifferent. “Now Hogsmeade- ”

“Merlin’s beard,” Johanna groans, sinking down the wall to sit beside Katniss on the floor. “You’re going to make me sick.”
Katniss glares at her, deliberately going back to the chapter on The International Statute of Secrecy. Not for the first time, she wishes she’d kept her mouth shut about Hawthorne’s detention. Somehow he and Johanna know each other, and once her friend’s interest was piqued, it didn’t take her long to suss out that Katniss’s irritation had nothing to do with losing a few Galleons at the Hob. She had the truth out of her so fast that Katniss wished she had the excuse of Veritaserum.

After a tense silence, Katniss begrudgingly admits, “Repello Muggletum should be easy.” Johanna kicks her legs up on a nearby stool, heedless, as always, of the indecent gap in her robes. She makes a carry on gesture, and against her better judgment, Katniss does. “I’ve just got to see if Hogsmeade has a Caterwauling Charm, or a tracking spell to alert the Ministry.”

She feels bereft at the thought of missing Halloween at home to visit Hogsmeade, but if she can get a read on those magical barriers . . .

Johanna snorts derisively, blindly grabbing a book off the shelf.

“And what happens when he shows up in those ridiculous Muggle clothes, huh, brainless?”

Katniss reminds herself — yet again — that her friend’s not as caustic as she likes to pretend.

“The House Elves drop off laundry before dawn,” she says. Sneaking into the boys dormitories won’t be half as hard as sneaking out past Clove, but Katniss isn’t worried. Clove may take the whole prefect thing far too seriously, but she was second choice for a reason. “None of the boys wake up until breakfast.”

“Woooow.” Her friend drags out the word, shaking her head. Katniss isn’t sure if she means to sound impressed or patronizing, but she manages an odd blend of the two. “You’ve really lost it, Everdeen. Are you sure your mad Muggle didn’t hit you with a Confundus Charm?”

Katniss flips to a new page, willing her face to remain unperturbed. By the wolfish grin Johanna sends her, she fails spectacularly.

“Note to self,” Johanna muses, tossing her unread book to the floor, “bake cheese buns, win Katniss.”

She leans back in her chair, grabbing a skinny volume from a low shelf. She flips through the thing like it’s a magazine, ignoring the scowl that sets smugglers in the Hob quivering.

Katniss decides then and there that Johanna will be far, far away when she attempts her gambit.

Katniss stares resolutely at the clothing balled up on the front seat of Levan Mellark’s pickup truck. Her face burns hotter than dragon fire. At least she can’t see Peeta’s. Or maybe it would be better if she could. Faces are safe. Faces are -

“Why’s mine different than yours?” The plain black robe muffles his voice as he tugs the garment over his head. She’s not sure who she stole it from, but she’s sure it’ll wind up back in the right trunk after laundry.

“We don’t want anyone to suspect you,” Katniss explains, tearing wary eyes from the worn leather seat. He shouldn’t be so blase about stripping down on the side of the road. It’s 2 bloody
His head pops out the top of the robe, revealing tangled curls and a crooked scarf. Her fingers itch to fix them, but her nerves work as well as an Arm-Locker Jinx. Johanna was right: this is completely barmy.

“If we run into any of my housemates, they’ll know you’re not in Slytherin,” she reminds him. It took her three tries to change the colors on Johanna’s spare scarf, and frankly a first year could have done a better job. If anyone notices, she’ll have say he got doused in a bottle of armadillo bile. “Half of them wouldn’t be caught dead talking to a Hufflepuff, though, so you’re probably safe.”

She expects him to take some offense at that, but he merely raises an eyebrow, ties the cloak around his neck, and roots around until he finds a pocket for his keys.

“Won’t the - uh - Huffapuffs have anything to say about it?”

Katniss snorts. A wisecrack about his pronunciation springs to her tongue, but she leaves it there. She hears Johanna’s voice in her head, glibly enumerating all the ways this can end with Katniss in prison and Peeta safely obliviated.

*And no one will notice when he doesn’t know his way around Spintwitches, eh, brainless?*

But for some reason, Katniss needs him there. Needs him to see her as she is, magic and all.

“People steer clear of me,” she says instead. “Trust me, no Hufflepuff will get close enough to notice something’s off.”

“No now I know that’s not true,” Peeta says so ardently that Katniss has to distract herself casting a Disillusionment Charm over the old bakery truck.

Peeta startles a laugh when it melts from view. Feeling unexpectedly bashful — she knows it’s N.E.W.T level magic, even if Peeta doesn’t — Katniss steels her nerves and slips her fingers through his. His laughter morphs into a heart-stopping grin that brings a defensive scowl to her face. Her cheeks go hot and splotchy.

“I don’t need you running off for an urgent appointment or suddenly recalling your fear of the Loch Ness Monster,” she says. He raises his eyebrows and she shakes her head, dragging him up the path that winds past Hogsmeade station. “You’d be surprised. Come on.”

They walk for nearly a mile, gloves loosely twined, Peeta chatting amiably, before his body stiffens and his grip turns painful. She stumbles to a stop beside him. Peeta reflexively shifts to steady her, but his eyes are fixed on a point in the distance. Squinting against the morning sun, Katniss spies peaked roofs jutting beyond the soft curve of a hill.

“What is it?” she asks.

Peeta blinks, swallowing hard. “You don’t see that?” he asks hoarsely.

Katniss shakes her head. “I see Dominic Maestro’s. The music shop my dad took me to when I turned four.” If she stands on tiptoe, she can make out the wrought-iron sign, stark against the pale smoke curling from The Three Broomsticks.

Her distraction works, a little.

“What did he play?” Peeta asks. His attention never wavers from that point beyond the hills.
“He sang.”

He nods vaguely. Katniss pulls him forward again, ignoring the pins and needles stabbing her fingers. He trudges along methodically, mechanically, as if she’s manipulating him with an Imperius Curse. Or a knife in the ribs. His muscles are tensed as if for battle, trapping her against him.

“What do you see?” she asks, moving her thumb over his knuckle. He might not feel it through their gloves, but she hopes it’s soothing anyway.

She’s spent all term studying the effects of protective enchantments on Muggles, but she never really considered what Peeta would experience. It always seemed a simple matter, leading him someplace unseen. Now, with his eyes hazed over and his mind struggling to keep up, putting one foot in front of the other seems like an insurmountable task.

“Peeta?”

It takes more than a minute for him to wrench his attention from the nightmare his mind has conjured. She repeats her question, squeezing his hand as best as she can.

“It’s a chasm,” he says finally. “Like an old mine collapsed. The ground’s swampy, dark and infected. A village sits on the edge, crumbling brick by brick, and—” He faces her suddenly, brows furrowed. “You really don’t see it?”

Katniss shakes her head.

Peeta smiles, a mockery of the grin she knows so well.

“Well it’s terrifying,” he says lightly. “Ravenous wolves the size of horses, and something I’m pretty sure is the swamp monster that lived under my bed when I was five.”

Her throat tightens. She feels the unexpected urge to pull him close, throw her arms around his neck, and thank him for trusting her.

Impulsively, she pries her hand free and balances her palm on his shoulder. Before she can doubt herself, she pushes onto her toes and ghosts a kiss to his cheek. Her lips tingle with the suggestion of heat. She lingers for a heartbeat, breath bouncing off his cheek and going cold before it finds her mouth again.

Peeta blinks, refocusing on her. It takes him a minute to work out what happened — or at least determine that he hadn’t conjured it in his head. Blushing, she retreats, linking their elbows to pull him along the narrow path.

“It probably escaped from Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes,” she says, trying to recall a casual atmosphere. “I wouldn’t put it past Madam Weasley to combine portable swamps with pygmy puffs and call them Bog Babies, or something.”

Peeta nods, fingers scrubbing through the fine hairs along his temple. She can tell he’s struggling to think, mind still caught by the Muggle Repelling Charm. “That’s . . . the joke shop?” he ventures.

“Yes.” His eyes flit toward her, but they’re pulled inexorably toward the skyline. Katniss finds herself babbling. “Roxanne works the floor on Hogsmeade days; you might meet her. Now and then her dad will nip in — he founded the shop last century — but he’s mostly retired. He’s got to be a hundred and thirty.”
“Is that normal?” he asks abruptly.

For a second she thinks he’s asking about Mr. Weasley. But when she glances at him, he’s frowning into the distance. She wonders if he even heard her.

“What?”

He shakes his head, clearing it. “Hiding behind hallucinations,” he says, looking over at her. “Dredging up fears to keep people away.”

She jerks her arm from his. That makes it sound horrible. Invasive. They have a right to protect themselves.

But suddenly Katniss remembers the fear in her mother’s eyes those first few months after her father’s death. Flinching when Katniss touched her, even knowing she couldn’t do magic at home. Going tight around the eyes when Katniss flipped through her father’s books. The hesitance in her smile when Prim received her letter, even years later.

What does it feel like, Katniss wonders, to know you’re powerless?

“Things were bad in the Dark Days,” she says stubbornly. “Witch trials, innocent people burned at the stake. Muggles hunting warlocks to steal their magic.” She takes a deep breath and slips her fingers back into the crook of his arm. “It’s easier to stay secret.” She clutches his arm, willing him to understand.

Peeta opens his mouth, then closes it. His eyes find the skyline, and he shakes his head. She’s not sure she wants to hear what he had to say.

“Didn’t think it worked that way,” he says finally, mouth quirking.

She can tell he’s trying to alleviate the tension, but she isn’t sure what he means.

“Stealing magic?” he clarifies, nudging her shoulder. “That sounds like something out of a sci-fi movie.”

Katniss scoffs. “Of course you can’t steal magic. But people want what they can’t have.”

“That’s not always a bad thing,” he says, covering her hand with his. Even through their gloves, warmth diffuses up her arm, tingling through her like a Hot-Air Charm. He grins. “Except maybe when it comes to you.”

She’s not sure what’s worse, the flush creeping up her nose, or the reply that springs to mind: Who says you can’t have me?

“Keep walking,” she says briskly, lengthening her stride so he has no choice but to do the same. “We’re wasting daylight.”

Katniss knows the exact moment they pass the barrier between Hogsmeade and the Muggle world. Peeta’s carefully controlled expression transforms into dumbfounded wonder. His mouth falls open; a strangled sound escapes his lips. The dazzling glow of a dozen storefronts reflects in his eyes, which are wider and bluer than she’s ever seen. She yanks him past the train station and under a shop’s awning, heart pounding frantically.

A hundred yards away, Professor Chaff walks straight into the doorframe of The Hogs Head.

He’s looking at Peeta, she thinks.
Adrenaline thrills through her, strengthened by a tinge of fear. She maneuvers Peeta so his back’s to the street, but the Potions professor never looks away as he rights himself and eases through the door.

*He’s not looking at Peeta*, she realizes suddenly. *He’s looking at me.*

Katniss becomes aware of an aching in her cheeks. Her teeth sting, exposed to the biting chill.

*Stop it*, she orders herself. *You look like a nutter.* But no matter how hard she tries, she can’t force the smile off her face.

*Peeta is here. In Hogsmeade.* She knows it’s completely mental, but the world around her tilts and locks suddenly into place.

“Has this always been here?” he breathes. His eyes dart around, hoarding every cobblestone from the dingy train platform to the distant Shrieking Shack.

She scrubs her gloves across the thick fabric of her robes, stifling the excitement bubbling in her chest. It feels like the first day of Hogwarts all over again.

“Established in the eleventh century,” she says blithely. Her teeth ache as her smile softens, lips leeching away the cold. “My dad used to bring me,” she admits.

Her eyes find the music shop, two stores down. She’d loved hearing her father sing to the wind chimes in the window, humming along as they tinkled back a merry tune.

She shakes her head, refocusing on Peeta. “And I brought Prim once. To buy her Hogwarts things.”

A smile spreads across his face, soft and wondering, as if bewitched into place. There’s nothing behind her but the hairdresser’s shop, but she peeks over her shoulder to make sure. Behind a flyer for *The Amazing Color-Changing Hair Potion*, a blue-haired wizard chatters at the back of someone’s head. A pair of scissors hovers, snipping in tandem with the ones in his hand.

“We’re not wasting money on a haircut.” Katniss warns, turning back to Peeta, who’s still smiling at her.

His eyes shift, widening briefly. “Er, no,” he agrees. “I’d rather not get stabbed today, thanks.” The scissors snip a dark lock, narrowly avoiding the customer’s ear. Peeta scratches his own ear, pulling a face in commiseration.

She rolls her eyes. “They’re charmed to avoid nicks, you know.”

“And the kid in that chair is too scared to sneeze, yeah?” Peeta raises an eyebrow at her and she rolls her eyes. He follows close behind as she slips into the flow of students in the street.

He’s already familiar with the concept of owl post, so they visit the post office first. He maintains a casual expression as she pens a quick “hello” to Prim, even when the delivery owl catches his knuckle in its sharp beak. They dart into Spintwitches and out again in a matter of minutes. The potions shop she avoids like the plague. The owner frequents the Hob, and the black market is worse than the Grand Staircase portraits when it comes to gossip.

“Keep your eyes in your head,” Katniss whispers as they duck around a severely listing tower of pots outside the cauldron shop, which is closed for holiday. “You’re supposed to be used to this, remember?”
“Right,” Peeta says wryly. “Yeah, no problem. Just an everyday trip to a magical village.” His eyes fall on a Fanged Geranium snapping in the window at Dogweed and Deathcap, and he shakes his head in bemusement. “Don’t know what all the fuss is about.”

“We can go to the bakery if it would make you more comfortable,” Katniss teases. She can’t help but laugh when Peeta’s eyes light up.

“You have a bakery?”

She tugs on Peeta’s sleeve, pulling him toward the swarm of students outside of Honeydukes.

“Candy shop, technically. And we’re only going in if you promise not to goggle at the Chocolate Frogs.”

Despite Peeta’s surprising ability to camouflage himself among the crowd, his eyes nearly bug out of his head when Katniss tugs him into Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Even she has to admit it’s overwhelming. Between the cacophony of milling students and all manner of unidentified objects exploding overhead, she’s tempted to duck right back out.

“Brainless!” a voice hollers above the din. Katniss looks up, but there’s nothing to see except dirty soles passing each other on the spiral staircase.

A fresh wave of students streams in through the door, shoving Peeta into the throng. Katniss has no choice but to dart after him. She snags his wrist in a firm grip, veering as close to the wall as she can manage. A whizbang zooms above their heads, crackling dangerously. Peeta ducks just in time to avoid catching his hair on fire.

“Brainless!” Johanna shoves past a group of third years clustered by the stairs. Armloads of pygmy puffs skatter, rolling in every direction across the scuffed floor. Johanna ignores the pandemonium, kicking aside a fluffball that strays too close to her boot. She plants herself in front of Peeta and leans against the shelf, grinning wolfishly. Peeta steps back, looking to Katniss for direction.

“Well fuck me sideways,” Johanna says, “you actually pulled it off.”

Katniss goes rigid. Her eyes dart around the shop, scanning for eavesdroppers. Peeta looks more than a little confused, but he can read a situation almost as well as Finnick. He squares his shoulders, slides smoothly between the girls, and flashes a friendly smile.

“I don’t think we’ve met.” Beneath the charm, there’s a hint of challenge in his eyes. “I’m Peeta.”

“He’s got guts,” Johanna says, eyeing him appreciatively. “Good. The way Katniss talks, I took you for some kind of milksop.”

He frowns, and Katniss wedges herself between them, glaring at her friend.

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“Lay off,” she hisses, glancing meaningfully at the third years, who have roped Madam Weasley into charming the pygmy puffs back into their cages.

Johanna rolls her eyes, pushing off the shelf. She wanders into the fray and ducks under a sign announcing, Tricks to make your enemies implode!

Peeta raises a questioning brow, waiting for Katniss to take the lead. Huffing, she follows Johanna across the shop. She owes her for keeping mum about Peeta, if nothing else.

When they find Johanna, she’s turning a jar of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder idly in her
hands. Katniss decides it’s best to intervene before her friend winds up with detention for illicit substances. Again.

“Peeta, this is Johanna,” she introduces reluctantly. “Johanna - ”

“Katniss’s walking Confundus Charm,” her friend finishes, shoving the jar back onto the shelf. She sticks out her hand. Katniss grinds her teeth when Peeta shakes it.

“He’s not- ” She clamps her jaw shut when she sees the amusement in Johanna’s eyes.

Peeta looks baffled. “What’s- ” he begins, then gives up, shaking his head. “Nevermind.” He leans towards Katniss, voice low. “So she . . .?” He tilts his head meaningfully toward Johanna.

Katniss jerks a nod. “Yeah, she’s in.”

Johanna sighs ostentatiously. “If you’re done with your little lover’s spat . . .”

Before Katniss can protest, a group of seventh years stumble down the aisle, shoving each other and laughing. Johanna sets off in the opposite direction, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Katniss follows. She does (rather reluctantly), keeping a firm grip on Peeta’s sleeve. They’re brewing a volatile potion, here, and the cauldron could spring a leak at any second.

“Oh, untwist your knickers, Everdeen,” Johanna scoffs. “I can keep my mouth shut.”

“Is that where Katniss gets it?” Peeta jokes, nudging Katniss in the ribs. “Some days I talk myself hoarse and she never opens her mouth.”

Katniss frowns, crossing her arms.

Johanna raises a suggestive eyebrow, glancing over her shoulder as she turns the corner. “The way I hear it-”

A whistle pierces the air, echoed loudly two dozen times over. Katniss’s stomach drops, pitching wildly at the keening sound. Her hands fumble at Peeta’s sleeves, frantic to push him to safety. He digs in his heels, braced for danger. Behind Johanna, every Sneakoscope on the shelf has gone haywire, spinning madly in their wooden trays. Peeta stumbles as Katniss presses into him, hoping to block the spell’s radar until they’re out of range.

“Who bloody set ‘em off now?” Roxanne Weasley pushes through the crowd, wand held aloft. Annoyance and drying purple slime streak her dark face.

Half the shop’s occupants have turned to stare at them. Katniss looks around, desperate for a shelf of Exploding Dungbombs or Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. Nothing. There’s no way through the din. No escape that won’t end with them locked in the storeroom, waiting for an Auror to cart them off to the Ministry.


Katniss gives her a murderous look, and Johanna throws up her arms in exasperation.

“All right, all right. Prim promised me 3 Sickles if I followed you around Hogsmeade and told her when you snuck off to snog.” She shrugs, every inch of her unapologetic. “She’s a second year. Gotta get her thrills somehow.”

She says it so easily that Katniss almost believes her. If Prim knew about Peeta. If Johanna cared one whit about Katniss’s love life. But there’s no doubt in her mind that if Johanna walks away,
“Ugh, seriously?” her voice sounds strained, high and affected. Residual anger lends her act a modicum of credence. If she says any more she’ll bungle it for all of them, so she grabs a confused Peeta by the hand and pulls him towards the door.

Johanna shakes her head and moves away from the Sneakoscopes that, one by one, come careening to a stop. Heart pounding furiously, Katniss steers Peeta toward Tomes and Scrolls, which never has more than a few students rooting through the shelves.

“Are you gonna tell me about that alarm?” Peeta asks under his breath. Katniss’s heart has stopped thrumming in her throat, but she gives the handful of other students a wide berth. “I’m pretty sure that was almost a disaster.”

She winces, chewing the inside of her cheek. ‘Disaster’ is a bit of an understatement.

“They’re Sneakoscopes,” she says finally. “They go off when someone’s being dodgy.” There’s no need to add, Like sneaking a Muggle into a wizarding village.

“Right.” Though she’s sure he has half a dozen questions, Peeta accepts her explanation without comment. Perhaps he senses that she’s too on-edge for an interrogation.

“So,” he says instead, “what’s your favorite book?”

The last of her nerves drop to the dusty floor of the dim-lit shop.

“One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi,” she answers automatically. Itching for something to do, she drags him over to the Herbology section. After finding the book on the shelf, she scrubs her palms down her robes, watching him thumb through it.

“Wow.” He snorts a laugh, looking over the pages to cock an eyebrow at her. “Your favorite book is the one that makes Leaping Toadstools sound dull.”

“It’s useful,” Katniss says, snatching it back from him. “And Leaping Toadstools are dull when you spend half a day stuffing them into sacks.”

“Yes,” Peeta agrees wryly. “That sounds much less interesting than kneading dough all day.”

She rolls her eyes, following him down an aisle marked Healing.

“We should get something for Prim,” he says, grabbing a random book off the shelf and turning the cover towards her. It’s Healing at Home with Herbs. “I bet she’d like a souvenir.”

“She has that one,” Katniss says. A handful of coins clink together in her pocket; nowhere near enough for a gleaming, leather-bound tome to replace Grandpa Everdeen’s old Herbology books.

“How about this one?” He trades it for Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions. “I brought a few pounds.”

“Sure,” Katniss says flatly. “We’ll just stroll back to the post and draw attention to ourselves at the currency exchange.”


Her stomach swoops, but not unpleasantly. “By next year she’ll have read every healing book in
print,” she says.

A group of students start down their aisle, so Katniss hurries Peeta across the shop. It doesn’t take him long to find his favorite section.

“This is incredible,” he breathes, fingers tracing the complicated spell. On the opposite page, a dog leaps in sloppy circles, trying to catch a butterfly between its teeth. “The spells are layered in like frosting, building off of each other until you have-”

“Portraits nattering at you from the stairwells,” Katniss grumbles, but she’s smiling, too. “And I wouldn’t recommend frosting an oil painting.”

“Speak for yourself!” cries an indignant boy in a gleaming silver frame. “Hey mister, if you paint me a cake-”

Katniss starts. She’d barely noticed the kid watching them from above. She hadn’t given the portrait a second thought.

If he blabs to shopkeeper . . .

She tears through the last five minutes in her head, trying to remember if they’d said anything incriminating. Before she can do anything drastic — like hit the painting with a Severing Charm — she’s jolted out of her panic by Peeta slinging an arm around her shoulder. His smile is remarkably unaffected for someone talking to his first enchanted portrait.

“Give me a few years,” he jokes. She hopes she’s the only one who hears the strain in his voice. “The way I mix colors, you’d probably wind up with a block of Crisco.”

He shrugs self-deprecatingly, unbalancing her, and Katniss throws up a hand to steady herself. It lands on his stomach. Her heart stutters as the comforting warmth of him sinks into her palm.

“Crisco?” the portrait repeats, scrunching his nose. “What’s Crisco?”

“Muggles bake with it,” pipes up a girl Katniss recognizes from Johanna’s dormitory. She’s watching them over her glasses, clearly trying to work something out.

Peeta’s hip is pressed against Katniss’s, trapping her wand at her side. She tries to ease away, but he’s not getting the hint.

“Move,” she hisses. The other girl’s brows climb into her bangs.

Instead, Peeta tucks Katniss close, chuckling into her hair. “You’re just mad that I’m better at Muggle baking than you are at cooking spells.”

Amusement flits across the sixth year’s face, and Katniss feels a rush of relief. Bonelessly, she sinks into him. There’s something almost magical about the way Peeta can talk himself out of any situation.

She cranes her neck, pretending to glare at him. “Don’t be a Lockhart about it. I could wipe the floor with you in DADA.”

Peeta’s eyes go from sure to imploring. Katniss wants to kick herself. She’s wondering if she can get to her wand after all when Peeta suddenly grins, leaning down to pat her stomach.

“But I get to live near the kitchens.”
A jolt shoots through her, starting low in her abdomen and gaining intensity as it streaks past her heart. It’s an effort stay pressed against him, but her defensive scowl makes the charade believable, at least. The girl’s friends call her over, saving Katniss from a stuttering response.

Breath leaves her in a rush. She feels Peeta sag in relief.

“How did you know about the kitchens?” she whispers. Glancing over her shoulder, she scoots away from the petulant portrait. She should probably disentangle herself now that the other kids are gone.

Once we’re out of the shop. The girl could still be watching.

She steers Peeta out the door, boots crunching on snow. It’s pure survival that has her burrowing her fingers up his sleeve. Her gloves are in her pocket, but his wrist thaws her fingers before they have a chance to freeze.

Peeta wraps his other arm around her, effectively encasing her in a bubble of heat.

He finally answers once they’re well into the street, away from prying ears. “When Prim got — sorted?” He looks at Katniss, who nods in confirmation. “— I think she wrote a letter to everyone she knew. You’d be in my house, Peeta, I just know you would,” he teases affectionately. “’We’re right by the kitchens!’”

Katniss chooses not to mention that the locations of individual dormitories is supposed to be a secret.

“Guess she was right,” she says instead, tucking the scarf up under his chin. In the pale winter light, you’d barely notice she’d flubbed the colors. “You’ve got Hufflepuff written all over you.”

“Eh, I don’t know.” Peeta runs his thumb along her scarf, right where it meets her skin. Her breath hitches embarrassingly, and it has nothing to do with his icy hands.

Snowflakes sparkle faintly in Peeta’s eyelashes. She even hadn’t realized it was snowing.

“I think Slytherins have a pretty good view,” he says softly.

“Yeah,” she whispers hoarsely. She swallows and tries again. “The lake-”

Amused exasperation fill his eyes, and Katniss wonders if he means what she hopes he did, after all.

“Peeta?” A shrill voice pierces their little bubble of warmth. Tensing, they swivel towards the sound. Peeta’s arm falls from Katniss’s shoulders as he, ridiculously, tries to maneuver her behind him. She darts around him, reaching for her wand.

“Peeta Mellark?” The speaker is a chubby, blonde Hufflepuff Katniss recognizes from years of shared classes. She doesn’t know her name.

Peeta, it seems, does.

“Dells?”

Dells rushes past Katniss and throw her arms around Peeta’s neck. Peeta, looking like he’s been struck in the head with a bludger, sweeps her into a hug that dangles her feet off the ground.

Katniss clutches ineffectually at her wand. It feels brittle in her fist.
“Peeta,” she hisses.

Around them, witches and wizards pause curiously. She presses a hand square into his back and shoves, causing him to stumble. Dells catches her feet, blinking around Peeta’s shoulder at Katniss.

“Katniss,” she greets enthusiastically, paying no mind to the girl she’d abandoned under an awning, whose eyes are flashing like she’s stumbled onto the gossip of the year. Peeta lets go of the pasty blonde, eyeing the handful of onlookers loitering in the street.

“Where can we go?” he whispers, snagging one of Dells’s hands and one of Katniss’s. She almost shakes him off, but hiding him is more important. She yanks him after her, pettily hoping that it hurts.

Madam Puddifoot’s isn’t exactly empty, but the couples are too wrapped up in each other to pay any mind to the trio in the corner. When a graying witch ambles over to greet them, Dells quickly orders a pot of tea and a platter of pumpkin tarts.

“Delly,” Peeta says once the serving witch disappears into the kitchen. “How could you not tell me?”

“Tell you? Peeta,” the girl breathes, caught somewhere between awed and frightened, “what are you doing here?”

“Will someone tell me what’s going on?” Katniss snaps, unable to take it any longer. They both look up as if they’d forgotten her entirely.

Peeta recovers first. “Katniss, this is my cousin, Delly Cartwright.”

Katniss jerks her head in acknowledgement. She’s not sure what she expected, but cousin was definitely not it. Delly smiles, blue eyes bright, and Katniss feels stupid for not noticing the resemblance.

“Dells,” Peeta adds, “I guess you know Katniss.”

“Oh, not really.” Delly waves a hand. “We have a few classes together. But it’s so nice to see you, Katniss.” She squeezes Katniss’s hand, then turns to her cousin, suddenly serious. “But Peeta, how are you here? You’re not— Oh, you would have told me if you were, and— ” Her eyes flick to his scarf, and her confusion grows.

In a quick undertone, Peeta explains the situation. To hear him tell it he’d practically browbeaten Katniss into the trip after catching her doing magic in town. No matter how artfully he weaves his tale, the holes would be obvious to anyone who’s ever held a wand. She tries to protest once or twice, but he waves her off. Somehow, he thinks his version of events will protect her if everything goes awry. It would be sweet if it weren’t so irritating.

Delly’s eyes soften as he speaks. She reaches across the table to grasp his hand, shooting Katniss a look that’s somehow both knowing and sympathetic. “This is so risky, Peeta,” she says when he’s done.

Peeta nods, squeezing Delly’s hand. He looks to Katniss for confirmation. “Katniss said she might get in trouble at school—”

Delly shakes her head, cutting him off. “Not just school, Peeta. If the Ministry finds out, Katniss could face a full criminal hearing. Even after they erase your memory.”
She says it so matter of factly, it’s clear she thinks she’s merely refreshing his memory. Katniss swallows back bile. She’d purposely underplayed the ramifications, knowing Peeta would never agree if she told him what was at stake.

“The Ministry?” he asks flatly. He pulls his hand away, jamming two fingers through the handle of his teacup and clutching it tightly in both hands.

Delly nods worriedly. “They take breaches of The Statute of Secrecy really seriously,” she says. She smooths her robes on her lap, eyes darting to Katniss, then back to her cousin. “I could talk to Mum. Aunt Elsbet knows, so maybe- ”

“Wait, my mother knows?” His teacup rattles as he jerks his hands free. It lands off-kilter on the tiny plate. “My mother knows about magic,” he repeats, as if saying it again might make sense of the words.

Delly reaches over to fix Peeta’s teacup, quickly mopping up the spill. Her hands retreat to break apart the half-eaten tart on her plate, as if the right answer might be buried in the filling.

“Delly,” Peeta implores. His fingers grip the edge of the table like it’s his sanity.

“She’s not a Squib,” Delly says finally. “Not really.”

It’s not funny — nothing about it is funny — but a laugh wheezes past Katniss’s clenched teeth. The madness of the last hour finally catches up with her, and she finds herself nearly hyperventilating as she tries to keep herself in check.

Mrs. Mellark, the woman who hurls, ‘witch,’ at her like a curse word, is a Squib.

Peeta cuts sharp eyes on her, and the hysteria bleeds away, leaving hollow nausea in its place. Delly continues with nary a pause, either forgiving her callousness or choosing to ignore it.

“Gran was a witch, but you know Grandpa Aldous worked in a factory. Even Gran’s parents were half-and-half, according to Mum. It’s- ” Delly sighs, tossing the pastry crumbs back onto her plate. “Our bloodline doesn’t have a lot of magic left,” she admits.

As the silence stretches, Katniss adds her own awkward explanation. “A Squib’s someone born into a magical family that can’t do magic. Some stay in wizarding communities, but mostly they try to assimilate with Muggles. It’s . . . ” she trails off.

With the way most families talk about — or rather, don’t talk about — Squibs, it’s remarkable that Peeta even met his grandparents. She bites her lip, feeling even guiltier for her reaction.

“It’s pretty stigmatized,” she finishes lamely.

There’s a muscle ticking in Peeta’s jaw. He watches the couples at nearby tables like the answers to his questions might lie somewhere between their clasped hands. She can tell he’s casting back into his memory, viewing his life through a new lens. It’s clear he doesn’t like what he sees.

When he finally speaks, his voice is tight. “So when we were kids and Mum switched me when I told her our dough dolls came to life . . . ?”

Delly’s face crumples. “I wanted to tell you, Peeta! But Mum said we had to make up a story, so she rigged the dolls up with some fishing line, and . . . and . . . ” She reaches toward him, but he shies away. Tears shine in her eyes, but they stay earnestly fixed on her cousin. “Peeta, it’s the law . . .”
Her words echo in Katniss’s head, making her queasy. *The law, the law, the law.*

Peeta’s fingers clench on the table. Then he heaves a sigh, shoulders sagging. “I know, Dells. You don’t have to apologize.”

Delly reaches over, and this time Peeta doesn’t pull away. “I’ll talk to her with you, tell her I-”

“No!” Katniss interrupts, panicked.

Delly and Peeta swivel to face her, and she shrinks back in her chair. It’s not fair of her to shoehorn her way into their family business. Not when the whole mess is her fault to begin with.

But apparently fair isn’t in her nature.

She squares her shoulders and leans forward, intent. “Peeta, your mum will call the Ministry on me. You know she will. They’ll erase your memory and-” She takes a halting breath. It’s bad enough without the *and.*

Delly grabs Katniss’s hand in what she imagines is a show of solidarity. Katniss’s hand spasms in what she hopes is a grateful squeeze.

Peeta stares back at her, face inscrutable. That muscle keeps ticking in his jaw. It’s like there’s a string tying it to Katniss’s heart, yanking painfully with every minute shift.

“Lev and Rye can’t know,” Delly says. “Or Uncle Farl. I want to tell them Peeta, I do,” she says before he can protest, “but that will put us in a hot cauldron with the Ministry for sure.”

He curses, scrubbing his hands through his hair. His fingers leave pale streaks on the skin at his temples. Katniss watches them bleed red, fade, and return to their normal hue.

“Right,” he says, looking none too pleased. “Nothing for it.”

When his eyes meet Katniss’s, his smile is swift and mirthless. “At least we know why Mum hates you now.”

Katniss only hopes that she’s the only one. Between the disaster last June and the mess they’re still crawling out of, Peeta could easily never talk to her again.

“Pretty lousy first date,” she jokes halfheartedly.

Delly drops her hand in shock, sitting back in her chair. “Oh, Peeta! I’m so sorry!” She presses a palm to her heart, face contrite. “If I’d have known . . .”

Against all odds, Peeta’s lips twitch. He snortles, mouth pressed flat. Before long he’s laughing, a sound deep in his chest that seems to release years of tension before he’s done.

Katniss crosses her arms and scowls, sure he’s laughing at her. Delly’s hands flutter in her lap, but self-preservation must finally kick in, because she makes no move to interrupt.

“Yeah,” Peeta says at last, sliding his hand across the table. “You sure know how to pick ‘em, Katniss.”

She stares at his palm, open and inviting. It’s an effort to unclench her fists, but when she places her hand in his, heart fluttering like mad, she feels oddly at peace.

*This isn’t over,* she realizes dimly. *The world’s about to change.*
But she pushes that thought aside for another time. For now, she lets her traitorous lips spread into a smile.

“Next time,” she promises, “We’re doing something normal.”

Chapter End Notes

I got off track responding to comments these last few months, but I'm determined to do better. And regardless, I cherish every word.

End Notes

Feedback is always appreciated!

Just getting back into writing, so, y'know, apologies. All mistakes are entirely my own.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!