Waltz Solitaire

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Summary

"Three hostages. Three bargaining chips." In the hands of the Capitol, Johanna, Annie, and Peeta begin to unravel, each to their own unique tune. Written for the March, 2014 Caeser's Palace Forum monthly oneshot contest.

Notes

This was written for the Caeser's Palace Forum monthly challenge. The prompt was, "I spend my night dancing with my own shadow; And it holds me and it never lets me go." Extremely dark. Trigger warnings for images of torture.

See the end of the work for more notes

I spend my night dancing with my own shadow; and it holds me and it never lets me go

Waltz Solitaire
i. adagio

Johanna’s first and last glimpse of Annie was her shrieking, writhing body as it was dragged by the hair down the corridor that spanned the length of the cellblock.

Johanna pressed her face against the door. “Hey!” After an unfortunate gouging incident, they sentenced her to the padded, four-walled cell that contained only a keyhole window the size of her palm. “Hey, what is she doing here! She doesn’t know anything!” Her voice howled down the hallway. “Are you idiots even listening to me?” She thrashed and banged and bloodied every knuckle. “Annie! Annie! Leave her alone!” But Annie’s weave of dark hair was lost to her sight.

She stopped abruptly, chest heaving, when she heard the creak of a door opening, the clatter of the same one closing, Annie’s shouts muffled behind layers of steel and concrete, and the heavy tread of approaching boot heels.

One pair halted their march in front of Johanna’s little window. He reached an arm through and grabbed her by the throat. “We told you before: no more outbursts,” the peacekeeper said on a hard squeeze, and Johanna swore she saw a toothy grin widen behind the tinted helmet. “You’ll disturb the other prisoners.”

He released her. Johanna stumbled back into her cell. They hadn’t padded the floor, and the last sound Johanna heard was the cracking of her skull.

Black blossoms loomed across her vision. They sprouted over the bare bulb hanging limply from a hook in the high ceiling, boiling the room in unremitting light, and she sighed at the comfort, the familiarity of a bit of darkness as she filtered in and out of consciousness.

Groggily, she raised her hand at one point and counted on her fingertips – him, me, and Annie makes three. Three hostages. Three bargaining chips – though if Johanna were honest (and she was always horrifically honest, wielded the truth as she did the brutal edge of her axe) there was no one back in Thirteen weeping their eyes out over the capture of poor Johanna Mason, kicking down doors demanding her safe retrieval. And why should they? She was an accessory that no one wanted to wear for too long, thrown out onto the storage heap like last season’s castoffs. Maybe an eternity ago someone looked at her and saw timeless value, but Dad was gone, dust, ancient history. Lying peacefully under the young roots of a spruce planted mere years ago by a tear-streaked teenage girl, he’d be spared everything he wasn’t during the Seventy-First Hunger Games.

Slowly falling, fading again into blessed shadows, the thought brought her great relief.

A small, shrouded part of Annie knew this was coming, knew of the hands that would come for her, force her into bonds and blindfolds and cart her a thousand miles away, toss her shivering mass into a bright, naked cell that left no room for cowering in shadows, even in the far off corner where she huddled for half an hour, half a day, half a week – time was something of an elusive concept for Annie. She could never seem to remember where she placed her minutes and hours.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

But after a time, an infinitesimal, interminable amount of time, she made out what sounded like words drifting from the adjoining cell.

“Annie?”
A soothing male voice slipped like a lover’s note between the bars. Annie crawled forward, hands and knees sliding across the cement grey floor, till her forehead rested against the cold metal.

“How –?”

“Johanna was screaming your name when they first brought you in.”

“Oh.” Johanna is here. Then she laughed, a hysterical little laugh that rattled the small prison. Finnick is not. Terror waged a silent war with reason. It lost by a slim margin, and Annie’s heartbeat steadied. My name is Annie Cresta. I am imprisoned by the Capitol. Her breathing regulated. And Finnick is not. Communication no longer seemed an impossibility. “How is she?”

“Johanna?”

“Yes.”

“Sleeping, I think.” A substantial pause. “I can’t really tell, actually. They’ve got her pretty well locked up. I can’t see her, but sometimes I can hear…” Whatever he sometimes heard trailed off into a choke. Annie knew better than to press for details – it’s where the devil lives, after all, and didn’t she already have a lifetime supply of demons? “Why did they bring you here?” he asked.

“Probably because of Finnick – Finnick Odair. He’s a friend of mine.”

“I know Finnick. We were in the Quarter Quell together. I’m Peeta, by the way.” She heard the smile as he said his name, the reflex to making a pleasant introduction. Crouched in some Capitol sub-basement, Annie imagined for them an introduction that could be counted as pleasant. Bumping into him on a train or perhaps a visit to District Twelve in Autumn, a swirl of changing color and Finnick at her side.

Her voice drained down to a whisper. “Do you know if he’s all right?”

“I– ” Another long pause. “I don’t know anything.” His voice was so chillingly quiet Annie had to wedge her ear between the bars. “They haven’t told me a single thing,” he said more loudly, but this time nothing about him smiled.

Annie backed away from the bars and formed herself into a tight ball, knees drawn up, forehead down, chin tucked in. Long knotted locks fell like a net over her face and shoulders, cordoning off the invasive white lights that seemed to charge forth from everywhere. She rocked back and forth, fiercely rubbed the welting skin on her arms. She wore a thin linen day dress and it was unimaginably cold in there, cold and bright, as if the room were carved from a single block of ice.

“He saved my life, you know.”

Annie’s head snapped up. She blinked away the fog. “Who? Finnick?”

“Yeah.”

Annie smiled. “Mine too.” She decided she liked this Peeta. His little pitter-patter voice reminded her of showers on a hot day, confetti on a cake. “I’ve seen you before, on television,” she said. “I mean – I didn’t watch your games, but I watched your tour.” Her voice lifted. “I think what you and Katniss have is very special.”

“It’s not… it’s not what everyone thinks it is.”

“No?”

“No.” He paused again. Annie could hear him calculating in the spaces. Then he confidently told
her, “Definitely not.”

Annie unwound her limbs and scrambled forward. “But you love her, right? And she loves you?” He didn’t reply. Her knuckles blanched with the tight grip on the bars. “Of course she does!” For suddenly nothing in her life, up to and including its continued existence, mattered except that Peeta know this, it was imperative that Peeta should know this. “Finnick thinks she's just pretending, but I know better.”

She heard him sniff once. "Yeah?"

“I can always tell when someone's pretending.” Like golden smiles televised to a thousand rabid hearts, a message meant only for one. “They like to tell us it’s all a game. But no one’s rolling a die. They want to make our fate, but this is our life, Peeta, and we can’t forget what’s real. Can’t let them take it away.” Don’t let this glacial light bleach out the memories, make us question the taste of skin and salt at sunset, the way the moon rises over the ocean and what a terrible way to die.

Annie bent her face into her lap and sobbed.

“Hey, hey.” She heard Peeta scooting closer. “Hey Annie, remember Finnick? Remember how he saved my life? You said he saved yours, too, and I think he’ll do it again. I don’t think he would rest until you were safe again.” He whispered, “We’ll be alright, you know?”

Annie covered her eyes and laughed. She laughed like a little sprite, laughter and more laughter like a rainfall of brightly colored gems. They plummet to the floor, and shatter.

“No. No we won’t.”

Peeta never saw or heard from Annie Cresta again.

His lids began to droop and he lay down on the floor, his head pillowed uncomfortably under his right arm. He closed his eyes against the blinding white, allowed the rest of his senses to be gently lulled by sporadic bursts of fay laughter.

Then one minute he jerked awake to a fatal silence. “Annie?”

No answer. No laughter. Annie was gone. Annie was gone and he didn’t know where they had taken her, or what they were doing to her.

Peeta closed his eyes. He rubbed his temples. His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton. Being awake felt unnatural, as if his slumber had been concocted, and he wondered about the few drinks of benign tasting water he’d accepted when they’d first brought him to this place.

But with a little time he became reacquainted with conciseness. And if he listened intentionally he could make out the steady hum of fluorescent that never abated, the occasional growl or expletive permeating the barrier between him and Johanna. Somewhere beyond his sight a guard shifted.

“Where’s Annie?” The shifting stopped. “What are you doing to Johanna?”

He heard the feather whisper of an automatic door open, then close. The guard had abdicated his watch to the cameras slotted into every inconspicuous corner, their movements small and quiet enough to provide a facsimile of privacy.
Peeta got up and began to pace. His clothes were clean and his skin largely unmarked; they’d kept him surprisingly untouched from when they first scooped him out of the arena – how long ago? It must be many hours by now. Maybe a full day. Maybe a full day of stewing in comfort for an ulterior purpose that Peeta could only ponder and dread, a full day until an angular woman lacking any shred of armor was escorted to his cell, peered inside with such a detached, clinical appraisal that Peeta feared his final hour had come.

She marked something on her touch screen, nodded once. His cage was opened. Two pairs of arms hoisted him onto his feet and the tip of a rifle was pressed into his back.

“Move.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Move.”

They forced him through a series of carbon copy hallways and straight into the opened door of an idling car with blacked out windows.

The next thing of note which Peeta saw was the flagging wig of Caesar Flickerman.

At least four technicians hovered around him, puffing and primping, evolving the aging man into the caricature Peeta has watched from his screen at home hundreds of times over. Despite their multitude of efforts, Caesar retained a sallow appearance, and bore a weatheredness that didn’t match his glimmering, sequined jacket.

His smile was unchanged. “Peeta! There you are! As neat and tidy as ever.” He brushed invisible specks from Peeta’s shoulders. “I’m assuming they’ve prepped you.”

*You’re to issue a message publicly aligning yourself with the Capitol and discrediting the Mockingjay and her efforts with the resistance.* “Barely.”

“Well.” His high, throttling laughter was also unchanged. “You’re a natural. You’ll do fine, just fine.”

He did just fine.

Speechwriters, preachers, the politicos that vie for each sliver of Capitol power could learn a lot from Peeta’s even-keeled tenor, the way he kneads each syllable with unassuming surety. Described as the type of person who could have the whole world eating out his hand with a few dozen words, he let that earnest, heartfelt hope dangle from his eyes like a sweet morsel, and did just fine.

Afterwards they shuffled him back to the car where he hugged himself, planted his head between his knees and dared to break the regulation silence. “Will she listen? Will they listen?” He trembled from head to toe.

His hard-lined escort pushed her glasses up her nose. “If they don’t, we will be forced to take appropriate action.”

“What will you do?” he asked, a whispered plea.

“The same thing we did last time. Raze the entirety of District Thirteen and its environs to the ground.” Her mouth lifted with a smile that contained no mirth. “Hopefully with everyone in it.”

But Peeta decided he couldn’t despair just yet. He was bred to play the long game and had a
natural capacity for hope, carried it around by the armful. So he thought of Katniss and of Haymitch. Of Finnick and Plutarch. The faceless proprietors of District Thirteen who were keeping her safe and sound, just like they promised.

He tried not to think of the word doomed.

Him and Annie and Johanna. And Katniss. Katniss. Katniss, and all of Panem. The whole world an ocean of consuming fire that lit up the sky for days on end, no peace, no rest, no respite from the perpetual inferno that will eventually catch up with her and all of them.

And it was so bright behind his eyes that Peeta never closed them.

**ii. andante**

In previous lives Johanna had played in no less than two Games of Hunger, and yet she has never known hunger like this. The kind that gnawed her from the inside, the silent horror when her fingernails begin to look appetizing, to say nothing of what remains of her thigh.

“We’re going to ask you a series of questions, Miss Mason.”

Have they even invented a word for self-cannibalization? And she’s not asking in some attempt at macabre irony, because, really, it’s not a stretch; they were practically cooking her alive as it was. I mean, why was it always so damn bright? Joanna looked but could not find a place to hide from the persistent light, for in the Capitol’s bottomless capacity for sadism, it seemed they’ve ratcheted the wattage up to celestial proportions, her body stiff as a board, every pore screaming, sockets burned to crisps and the eyes within them seiching like molten pools.

With the motion of one finger and a barely audible click, all her torment ended.

“Just a simple flick of a switch, Miss Mason.” Miss Mason. Who do they think they’re interrogating, some doe eyed virgin? As if the Capitol hadn’t taken care of the minor issue of her innocence years ago. “That was eighty volts. In a moment you’ll know what one hundred feels like. Just one little switch, Miss Mason.”

“Rot in hell.”

“Just one little –”

Searing light spliced through blood and bone like a seam-ripper, tearing apart the fabric of her body. Teeth chattering, she chomped down, nearly biting her own tongue into two, easy to swallow portions. But that wouldn’t bode well for future interrogations, now would it? So they break for five, stitch her precisely back together, then clamp her back down and douse her with a fresh round of what feels like scalding water.

“Anything you’d like to tell us now, Miss Mason?”

“Not a word. Not a single damn word.”

“A pity.” His hand moved towards the little switch.

“Wait.”
His hand hovered. “Yes? Do you remember something?”

She bared her teeth. “You’ll be the first one I kill when I get out.”

He hit the switch and she burst back into flames.

Annie slept.

And when she opened her eyes it was because her lids had been peeled back for her, taped wide open, couldn’t turn her sight from the monitors hovering above and to either side, couldn’t move her limbs for the tight, binding cords, couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d rather be dead, even with Finnick, perhaps because of Finnick and –

“He’s dead, Miss Cresta. We killed him. Do you know how?” Instant triple zoom on an image of Finnick, high definition, his head on a pike. “So why don’t you stop this foolish resistance and tell us everything?”

She laughed in their faces.

Volume at full blast, her most grotesque nightmares an endless reel. The highlights: Reef’s spurting head rolling down a hill in slow motion, a wide pan of Finnick and his dripping trident poised over an assortment of punctured, mutilated bodies (including hers), all capped off with a loop of her head bobbing like a dead insect in a sea of icy waters fresh from the snow caps, and well-seasoned with the blood of her enemies.

Annie shivered. The images blurred and she somehow tripped into them, felt the freezing water braising her skin, her extremities numbing from the cold. She gulped down the brine and smelled the stench of blood and vomit. Real or not real? She couldn’t tell if this was all an elaborate play on her nerve endings or if they’ve gone the whole nine yards and spilled gallons of water and gore down her face.

“Tell us everything you know and we can end this!”

She’d gladly tell them everything, she promised, but a minute too late, and only after they siphon the water out of lungs. After a quick revival, a mad sputtering that they please let me die from a throat that feels scorched by acid, she began to spill.

But what a shame that she poured out nothing but nonsense.

“He wanted to go on a trip around the world. So he bought a boat. Haymitch chose the curtains. Then they sailed away, and I haven’t seen them since.”

“Is that supposed to be some sort of code?” She laughed. She was silenced by a hand slamming onto a table. “But what about the rebellion? What are they planning?”

She laughed again. How could she not? She felt sorry for them. “They plan on crushing you, stupid.” Because while she might be poor and mad and pitiful, she was not the stupid one. Not stupid enough soak in the many details of this hastily cooked up rebellion that floated around their home, Finnick on the phone, Finnick writing letters, Finnick whispering in the shadows with Mags. No one should ever underestimate Annie’s abilities at not noticing. She’s quite adept and well practiced. On her best days she can not notice anything for hours.

This was not one of her best days. “Very well. Since you refuse to cooperate...”

“Don’t know. Don’t know. Nothing nothingnothing, stop –!”
The shadows descended and Annie felt grateful. It was safer here in the diminishing images, surf, spray, the smile that once broke every heart in Panem.

Annie slept, and hoped this time they would not wake her.

“This will feel familiar to you.”

Peeta thought he meant the pain, until a needle was inserted into his arm and the electric rush of chemicals shocked his bloodstream into disarray.

They laced up the ties of his straight jacket. “For your own protection.” Which was quite thoughtful of them, because lately he’d been having the strangest impulses. Like running himself repeatedly into a wall or chewing his cheek until he craved the taste of his own blood.

But once the crucial first few doses were administered his body grew accustomed to the venom and its hellish effects. Slowly but surely it began to take. Biting his fingernails down to nubs, Peeta even decided that it wasn’t wholly bad. Oftentimes everything glowed. And it was a beautiful kind of light, angelic. Azure and soft, with hues of shade that beckoned him. Rest for the weary. So one day he took a ginger step towards the halo.

That’s when they began pumping lies into his head. But Peeta wouldn’t turn, knew nothing could erase the indelible – Katniss he loved, the Capitol he hated.

The girl on fire will burn everything in her path. Including you.

“Katniss fights for everyone’s liberation, including mine.”

But what do you really know about Katniss Everdeen?

Peeta tried to remember. But his memories were fuzzy and seemed bent out of shape.

“She’s my partner. She saved my life.”

Did she?

“Yes. She kept me alive in the arena.”

She kept herself alive, most assuredly. By any means necessary. Images leaked into his brain. Katniss kissing him. Katniss kicking a beehive onto his head. Katniss holding his hand in front of millions. Katniss offering him a handful of poisoned berries and telling him to eat up. Are you truly her partner, or merely her pawn? Look at yourself, Peeta; you’re not the boy on fire. You’re not anything but the boy with the bread.

“The one who always gets burned.....” Katniss, fire, the girl on fire, burning him up hair by hair, inch by inch, till he was nothing but ash and a tool for the enemy. No. No. They were lying to him. Their mouths foamed with deceit and a thread-like voice pleaded with him not to forget.

“Katniss is alive. I got everything I wanted.”

Except for everything you didn’t.

It made a staggering amount of sense. How many times had that pretty smile lied to him, kissed his lips while planning out his murder? Whose bed was she sleeping in tonight, begging to chase the nightmares away? Peeta backed away from the glow into a dark corner where Katniss couldn’t
find him, where Katniss Everdeen was the grossest of all liars and a heinous beasts, and in his dwindling lucid moments he would wonder how they managed to make an enemy out of light, to convince him that the shadows were his friends.

One day Peeta stopped wondering.

He was sitting calmly on the floor when the door to his cell swung wide open.

“You're wanted for another interview.”

Peeta twitched. “Tell me what you want me to say.”

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**iii. allegro**

Weeks and weeks of repetition, recycled days gone by, and then in two seconds three things happened at once.

Doors open.

Alarms on.

Lights out.

Joanna jolted upright. She shook off her jittery slumber. *This is it this is it this is it this is it* The room had been spinning for days and she felt backwards and inside out, but *this was it* so she dragged herself up, physically convulsed with the effort to stagger a few feet forward and splatter onto the floor.

Someone rushed into her room. This person proceeded to lift her by the arms, tilt her head back for a quick inspection, and yell over his shoulder, “It’s not Peeta!”

Johanna laughed. Johanna tried to laugh. She thought: maybe they’ll just leave me here to rot. She doubted Katniss’ mental well-being depended on her. But if they were going to leave one of them behind for not being Peeta, then they damn well better get –

“Annie,” she barely managed to croak out, and tried to recall the last time she had used her voice for anything but screaming.

The man’s face darted behind him. “Where?”

She pointed over his shoulder, out her cell door, gestured towards the right wing of the corridor. “I think….I don’t…”

She collapsed. Gale passed her off to the waiting arms of another soldier. “Get her out of here. I’m going after the others.”

The lights flickered on. Failsafes and counter-measures were kicking in. Gale trooped without a hitch. Dread prickled his arms. It was not a feeling he normally associated with himself, but with *seconds* left to make the extraction –

Harris hurried from the opposite direction, brushed past him carrying a bundle of motionless, fragile human.
“Got Cresta! Find Mellark!”

_and Peeta makes three_. Three hostages. Three evacuees. And fate would dictate that Peeta’s rescue would be down to him.

Gale walked forward with his eyes through the scope. He peeked around a corner. All clear. He swung himself around; at the end of the hall was a dark cell. The only cell not bathed in light.

Gale’s breath was heavy and loud in his ears. He stopped before the door and it opened with a creak.

Peeta flinched when the lights came on. He sat unchained on a chair in the middle of the room, his hands resting peacefully in his lap. Face blank, flecks of dried blood matted the hair at his temple, speckled his chin like a boy needing more practice at shaving.

Smears of darkness colored the skin under his eyes, shadows dancing within.

He looked at Gale with a serene smile. “Where’s Katniss?”

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**End Notes**

Well, if you've made it to the end, I salute you. This fic is extremely out of my comfort level, but I had the idea and just decided to run with it. I don't normally do stuff this dark or even enjoy reading it, and tbh by the time I was nearing the end I was so disturbed I didn't even want to finish writing it.

Anyway, thanks for reading!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!