

## THE ACCEPTANCE TESTS

Characters

**Katarina**, late teens, sarcastic but caring.

**Mom**, Katarina's mother, forties.

**Crystal**, also late teens, sardonic and defiant.

**Clerk**, a thick sheet of politeness over brutal apathy.

**Kaya**, Katarina's sister, fourteen.

Act I, Scene 1

We open in an office: CLERK sits behind a counter, watching a monitor that is hidden from us and occasionally typing into it. The front of the desk reads "Citizen Processing Station" in big black text, with smaller text below reading "You are welcome here. You belong." The front of the desk is covered in brochures: "Information about the Acceptance Tests," "Rules for Citizen Applicants," "Responsibilities and Privileges of Citizenship," etc, with smiling happy families on the front. There are a few chairs to side, empty. The atmosphere is slightly futuristic but far too normal to feel dystopian.

KATARINA stands in a spotlight downstage right, hyperventilating. She wears black pants and a fitted white button-down with a badge that reads "Applicant 80418" with "KATARINA" written below. She grips her hand into her loose hair and tries to catch her breath. Eventually her breathing does slow, measured and rhythmic. She ties back her hair and smiles nervously. She suddenly seems to see the audience and quickly walks out of the spotlight. Full lights up.

KATARINA walks over to the desk.

KATARINA

Hi.

CLERK

(Turning away from the monitor.)

Hello. How are you?

KATARINA

(Nervous laughter.)

A little anxious, to be honest.

CLERK

(Pleasantly.)

Well, let's see if you have reason to be. 80418?

(The CLERK turns to her computer and types for a few minutes. She nods to herself as she clicks and types. KATARINA forces herself to look forward but fidgets with loose strands in her hair. Finally the clerk reaches into the drawer and hands Katarina a badge.)

CLERK (cont.)

Alright, clip this and you should be all set. Stage Three of your tests will begin at 18:00 hours on the dot.

KATARINA

So I passed?

CLERK

Your score for the second phase is excellent. I'm sure as soon as you pass Stage Three you'll make a valuable citizen.

KATARINA

Stage One was a little close.

CLERK

I wouldn't let that overly concern you. You're young, and boot camp should take care of any remaining discrepancies.

KATARINA

(Wry.)

Assuming I get through Stage 3.

CLERK

(Smiling.)

Anyone who really wants to can get through Stage 3.

KATARINA

What, you just wish hard enough and you're through? All it takes is a little pixie dust?

CLERK

Something like that.

KATARINA

I hope you're not--I mean--thanks for the advice/

CLERK

/Your mother passed.

KATARINA

Stage One?

CLERK

Stage Three.

KATARINA

So she's a citizen?

CLERK

You're currently scheduled to celebrate confirmation together. Would you like to see her?

KATARINA

I can see her?

(The clerk presses a pager. MOM runs from stage left and embraces KATARINA. They both start crying.)

KATARINA

I can't believe you're here--oh my god--I can't--I mean congratulations/

MOM

/I'm here, baby. I'm finally here. I'm here.

CLERK

There's a private waiting area just over there. Your conversation will be monitored, of course. Remember that no discussion of Stage Three is permitted.

(KATARINA and MOM cross to couches Stage Left. They sit. The CLERK looks up from their monitor to smile. KATARINA cries into MOM's shoulder.)

MOM

I'm here now. I'm here. And you're so close. So close.

KATARINA

When they separated us, I almost thought--I mean I was so afraid we'd never--Momma!

MOM

What matters is here, baby. I'm here now. And I won't leave you again.

KATARINA

Momma you passed! You did it!

MOM

And you will too.

(She strokes her hand through KATARINA's hair, but her tone hardens.)

Katarina, I/

KATARINA

/How's Kaya? Have you seen her yet?

MOM

They told me there was some kind of processing error. She's been delayed.

KATARINA

But she's gonna be fine, right? We're all gonna be fine.

MOM

Yes. Yes we will. But Katarina, I need you to listen to me. Promise me you're listening.

KATARINA

Of course, Mom.

MOM

During Stage Three of your tests/

KATARINA

/Mom, you can't tell me anything about Stage Three/

(MOM grips her by the shoulders.)

MOM

Katarina. You must pass Stage Three.

KATARINA

I mean, I totally was on my own for three months spending every single second preparing for these exams just so I could get your hopes up and then not pass/

MOM

/This isn't a joke. You cannot fail Stage Three.

KATARINA

Let me worry about Stage Three, okay? Can't we just celebrate you for a sec and not worry about this?

(On her glare.)

I'll do anything in my power not to fail. I swear. I know we can't go back.

MOM

No. We can't.

KATARINA

I can see it now. We're together, at a little table, and there's a candle, or maybe we'll even have electricity, eating roasted chicken and buttery potatoes, and you'll gossip about the affair your best friend is having at work, and Kaya will tell us about the miserable rich people in the old books she reads at school, and I'll be crocheting a new hat for winter, but not because we don't have one but just because I like the color--it'll be the blue of the sky after sunset but before the colors disappear. And except for your chatter and the neighbors' kids upstairs and the dog on the other side of the wall it'll be quiet. And sure, every now and then we'll go and fight for them, but when we come back the only crack will be the eggs against the pan, the only boom will be the fireworks on holidays, and we'll sit and laugh at the children and the dogs and the cats and the turtles and whatever else our crazy neighbors keep. And sometimes we'll remember home, and sometimes we'll even miss it, and we'll be grateful that we knew that place when it was still a place and grateful that we made it out alive.

MOM

Yes, baby. That's exactly how it will be. As long as you don't get so busy crocheting that you burn the kitchen and nearly the house.

KATARINA

You shouldn't have told me every single detail of salmonella poisoning before the first time I cooked a chicken!

MOM

I always think it's better to know the risks beforehand.

(Pause.)

You swear to me you'll pass?

KATARINA

On my life.

MOM

I guess I can't ask for anything more. Just believe me when I say I can't do this without you. I don't want to be here if you're not. So whatever happens: think of me. Waiting here for you.

KATARINA

Whatever it takes for us to get a chance, Mom. For you, for Kaya.

MOM

For our family to be together. To be safe.

KATARINA

Whatever it takes.

(Blackout.)

Act I, Scene 2

KATARINA stands in the same downstage right spotlight as before, looking out into the audience.

CLERK (V.O.)

Once again, congratulations on making it to Stage 3 of your Acceptance Tests. The test will begin as soon as you enter the adjacent room. You have thirty minutes, although faster times will reflect better on your application and may improve your chances of a satisfactory placement. If for any reason you wish to quit your tests, repeat the word "Fail" loudly and clearly three times, and you will be removed from the testing facility. We do warn that failure of this stage will result not only in your permanent expulsion, but the removal of your tongue for the security and privacy of these examinations. If you would have changed your mind about entering this stage, please state so now.

(Pause.)

KATARINA

Uh, sorry if this isn't allowed or something, but may I know any more details about the task before I commit?

CLERK

Unfortunately no additional details are available at this point.

KATARINA

Alright, then, uh, I'll proceed.

CLERK

The timer will begin when you enter the adjacent room.

KATARINA

Are there any other instructions?

CLERK

The task should be self-evident, but I will be available to respond at any point if the need arises. Good luck.

KATARINA

Uh, thanks.

(She looks around for any other sort of guidance and then steps out of the spotlight. Lights up. There is a table center stage with CRYSTAL tied to it and gagged. There is a gun on the table. KATARINA starts. CRYSTAL looks but, being gagged, doesn't say anything. KATARINA takes a step forward but stops herself.)

KATARINA

Fail. Fail.

(With a breath, she walks over to the table and picks up the gun. She puts it down again. She picks it up, and points it. She walks forward and presses it to CRYSTAL's head. She drops it on the floor. It clatters but doesn't go off. She kicks it across the room. She looks at CRYSTAL. She unties the gag.)

CRYSTAL

'Sup.

(Pause.)

That thing is loaded, you should really be more careful with it.

(Pause.)

I mean, are you really going to leave it on the ground? You could trip or something. Wouldn't want you to get hurt. Not when you're so close.

KATARINA

I'm supposed to shoot you.

CRYSTAL

Yeah, I was starting to worry you wouldn't figure it out.

KATARINA

Yay for me.

CRYSTAL

You shouldn't have taken the gag off. It'll just make it harder.

KATARINA

Only if you talk.

CRYSTAL

I'll shut up if you want. But then it'll get like super awkward in here, and honestly, I don't want to die in the middle of an awkward non-conversation. Like, in top twenty ways I don't want to die, that's probably, like, fourteen.

KATARINA

I'll keep it in mind.

(Pause.)

I don't want to shoot you.

CRYSTAL

I mean, if we're being perfectly honest, I'm not crazy about being shot. I was gonna do sleeping pills, but at least this is supposed to be quick. Do you know that when they used to guillotine people, it would take, like, 10 minutes to die? Like someone slapped Charlotte Corday's cheek after they cut off her head and she blushed?

KATARINA

That's quite disturbing.



CRYSTAL

I know right?

(Pause.)

CRYSTAL

God, now this is awkward. Ask me why I have glitter in my hair or something. Everyone does.

KATARINA

Why do you have glitter in your hair?

CRYSTAL

Because my name is Crystal.

(Pause.)

Look, I thought it was edgy when I was a tween and then people gave me so much shit about it that I just kept doing it to spite them.

(Pause.)

It's really hard to keep this conversation going by myself.

KATARINA

Sorry. I'm just trying to decide whether to shoot you or not.

CRYSTAL

Fair. Do you wanna make a pros and cons list? I'll help.

KATARINA

I feel like you're biased.

CRYSTAL

It wouldn't be the first time I've made one.

KATARINA

For your life?

CRYSTAL

Pro: You're a citizen. Congratulations.

KATARINA

Con: I live with the guilt of literally murdering another human being who has done absolutely nothing wrong to me.

CRYSTAL

Pro: You save whoever comes here next from the agonizing torture of having a conversation with me.

KATARINA

Con: You never see your family, or anyone who loved you, ever again.

CRYSTAL

No one loves me. Pro: They won't put you in my position when you leave the room.

KATARINA

They said they'd cut out my tongue.

CRYSTAL

Guess you didn't read all the way through your terms and conditions.

KATARINA

Con: I live in a society of murderers.

CRYSTAL

Isn't "murderers" a bit dramatic? More like "citizens whose greatest concern is for the greater good"?

KATARINA

Why are they letting you tell me this?

(Looking out into the audience.)

Why don't you come in and stop her?

CRYSTAL

Well, for one thing, you don't have to believe me. If you kill me, you'll have to keep it a secret or you'll lose your citizenship. And if you don't, then you're already/

(She gestures a sliced throat.)

KATARINA

Thanks. I'm so reassured.

(Pause.)

What if it's a trick? What if I pass if I don't kill you? Like, I'm demonstrating my ability to sacrifice for others or something.

CRYSTAL

I mean sure, you can believe that if you want. It's your life.

KATARINA

How do you know that's not it?

CRYSTAL

Because I'm a citizen.

KATARINA

I thought the tests were only for us.

CRYSTAL

Our kids have to take them too. When they turn seventeen. It's this whole big thing. You're an adult, you can legally drink, you can legally fuck, you can be legally mandated to kill people/

KATARINA

/How long did you know?

CRYSTAL

Oh, it's just as secret for us. I only figured it out when my sister failed. My mom had a breakdown and killed herself with sleeping pills. It was pretty easy to make her tell me the truth before she died. Of course I didn't know she was dying. And she desperately wanted someone to know.

KATARINA

How old were you?

CRYSTAL

Twelve.

KATARINA

You've been suicidal since you were twelve?

CRYSTAL

It's not suicide if someone else pulls the trigger.

KATARINA

Crystal.

CRYSTAL

I would give you a support hug but I'm kinda tied up here.

(KATARINA unties her.)

CRYSTAL

Do you really wanna do that?

(She runs over and grabs the gun off the floor. She points it at KATARINA.)

They'd probably let me go if I did it. Redemption or something.

(She points it at herself.)

I could make your job easier. Dunno if it would count though.

KATARINA

Put it down.

CRYSTAL

You won't survive here with that kind of attitude.

KATARINA

We're not doing so hot on the survival account, are we?

CRYSTAL

I'd give us an F.

(Pause.)

Do you wanna fuck?

KATARINA

You're kidding.

CRYSTAL

If we're gonna be fucked anyway/

KATARINA

/Seriously? I still have to kill you.

CRYSTAL

Yeah I know.

KATARINA

And they're watching everything I do.

CRYSTAL

Yep.

KATARINA

(Looking out.)

You want to make porn for your murderers?

CRYSTAL

God, you're dark.

KATARINA

I'm just trying to understand the situation.

CRYSTAL

Look. If you don't kill me the next person who comes through here will, and they might not even be as hot.

KATARINA

I mean/

CRYSTAL

/We wouldn't just be fucking each other. We'd be fucking the system too.

KATARINA

And that's why they call it Stage Three?

CRYSTAL

We could take it to Stage Five. With Roman numerals.

(CRYSTAL starts kissing KATARINA.)

CRYSTAL

Is this ok?

KATARINA

Nothing is ok.

CRYSTAL

This moment can be. What happens after is not now. I only care about now.

(Pause.)

That's how I get through it. Waiting for it to end.

(Pause.)

I guess that's how we all get through it.

(Pause.)

Shoot me then. What are you waiting for? Take this moment with me or kill me. Don't torture me with the suspense.

(KATARINA starts kissing her. Blackout.)

Act I, Scene 3

KATARINA and CRYSTAL sit side by side in front of the table, facing out, disheveled, close but not quite intimate. They sit for a few moments in awkward silence.

CRYSTAL

Did you like that?

KATARINA

It was nice.

CRYSTAL

Nice? Just/

KATARINA

/It was distracting.

CRYSTAL

I'll take that.

(Pause.)

It was your first time, right?

KATARINA

It's been a weird day.

CRYSTAL

No shit.

(Pause. She brushes back a strand of KATARINA's loosened ponytail, tender. Their eyes meet. KATARINA turns away)

Well, it gives you something to remember me by.

(Pause.)

CLERK (V.O.)

You have ten minutes remaining to complete the current portion of your exam.

CRYSTAL

So now what?

KATARINA

You're asking me?

CRYSTAL

It's your choice.

KATARINA

It's your life.

CRYSTAL

Our lives.

(Pause.)

KATARINA

My family needs me. My mom needs me.

(Pause.)

My mom shot someone.

CRYSTAL

Everyone shot someone.

KATARINA

Someone else's child.

CRYSTAL

She probably told herself she was doing it for you.

KATARINA

So now I'm responsible for two lives.

CRYSTAL

Three, if you count your own.

KATARINA

I have a sister too. God, I have a little sister.

(Pause.)

I can't let her do this.

CRYSTAL

(A little more bitter than before.)

Then shoot me and tell her to go back.

KATARINA

Go back, and get shot trying to buy groceries? Get raped going to school? Become some crack dealer's little slave?

(Pause.)

My dad got a fever on the way here and died. Until today, I hadn't seen my mom for months. My sister left her education just as she was entering high school. And it's the same. Everywhere it's the same. You have everything here. People don't starve or shoot each other on the streets. You don't walk out your door wondering who's gonna come down the road and take your sister. So I don't get it. I don't get why they'd do this here.

CRYSTAL

It started as a military exercise. Like, proving absolute loyalty, or maybe just that you could really kill someone else when it came down to it, some shit like that. Prisoners of war, I guess, were the targets. Proved you would make a really soldier. And then we must have got more scared. They made it sound like the outside just kept getting worse and worse. And so we expanded it. When shit hits the fan everyone's a soldier. The outside--your world--regressed to a fucking Hobbesian state of nature and I guess we were fighting like shit not to do the same. So



you kill someone, see them bleed out before you, realize that'll happen to you if you ever try to leave, do your military service, kill some more, and run like hell back to your secure little prison.

KATARINA

Then why let us take it too?

CRYSTAL

So you can fail and be targets. Or so some high-as-the-sky drug dealer can pass and distribute to us. Or so you don't try to break in. Or so those of you who are like us--those of you who are the cream of the crop of natural selection, the I-am-all-I-give-a-fuck-about survivors--could join the life you belong to. I don't know. This was all Ruby's theory. She wrote it down in the notebooks Mom hid under her pillows. Mom never read them. She just liked having Ruby's handwriting near.

(Pause.)

So did I.

(Pause.)

It's okay. That you still want it.

KATARINA

We aren't still talking about sex?

CRYSTAL

God you're an idiot. No, we're talking about life. It's okay that you want to live. It's natural. I'm the one who's fucked up. Waiting here for you to shoot me. Not even fighting. Not even wanting to. It's okay that you want to shoot me.

KATARINA

You know I don't.

CRYSTAL

You want to survive, and survival always carries costs.

KATARINA

It doesn't have to be like this.

(To audience.)

It doesn't.

CRYSTAL

(Stroking her along the cheek.)

Today it does.

(Pause.)

What's your name? I was gonna have this really cute moment and say it all melancholy but I don't think you ever told me.

KATARINA

It's Katarina.

CRYSTAL

(With the same tender stroke.)

Katarina. I want you to live.

(Pause.)

And not just because I hate my miserable life. I'd still try to live it, if it wasn't gonna cost someone. I want you to live because I think you're beautiful and beautiful things shouldn't be flushed away like shit.

(They embrace, but KATARINA pulls away again.)

KATARINA

You were in my position once, weren't you? Probably not even that long ago.

CRYSTAL

As you said before. I knew going in.

KATARINA

What did you do? Just say "fail" three times?

CRYSTAL

(Laughing.)

And make it that easy for them? Hell no. I shot the camera, shot the door, started to shoot the guards who came in to stop me. They were wearing Kevlar, of course. And the guns don't have that many bullets. But I shot that place up as good as I could considering the circumstances.

KATARINA

You're amazing.

CRYSTAL

No. I'm just dumb.

CLERK (V.O.)

You have five minutes remaining to complete the current portion of your exam.

CRYSTAL

Wow. I know she just gave the ten-minute warning like five minutes ago, but this is really putting things in perspective. Like, in five minutes my life will be over. Isn't that kinda weird?

KATARINA

Yeah. Yeah, it is.

(KATARINA walks over and picks up the gun.)

KATARINA

So I guess this is it.

CRYSTAL

It's been really great getting to know you and everything. I would send you a friend request, or write or something, but you know.

KATARINA

Yeah.

(Pause.)

Do you wanna close your eyes?

CRYSTAL

Would that make it easier for you?

KATARINA

Yeah.

(Pause.)

Where should I do it?

CRYSTAL

Somewhere you won't miss.

KATARINA

Back of the head?

CRYSTAL

Gross. But efficient.

(KATARINA walks around behind CRYSTAL and puts the gun to her head.  
CRYSTAL's  
eyes are closed, but she reaches up to grab KATARINA's hand.)

CRYSTAL

When I squeeze.

KATARINA

Wait.

(To audience.)

You can stop this right now. You can ring an alarm, open the door. Or come up here. C'mon, come on to this stage you've created. Get out of that chair and take this goddamn metal out of my hands.

(She comes forward to appeal.)

Please. Please just come in here. Stop this. You don't have to just watch. You can change this, right here, right now. Please come up here.

(She continues trying to appeal to the audience. On the off chance that someone actually comes onstage, the CLERK can come in and escort them off. Otherwise, continue as below.)

CRYSTAL

Katarina. They won't. You know they won't. Please just do it.

KATARINA

Should I count or something?

CRYSTAL

No.

KATARINA

Alright. Are...are you ready?

CRYSTAL

Yeah.

KATARINA

Alright.

(To audience.)

And you're just gonna watch. You're really just gonna watch.

(She pauses a beat, then shoots. Blackout.)

Act I, Scene 3

Same setup as scene one. KAYA comes in, nervous but more collected than Katarina was.

KAYA

Hi. I'm here for the results from Stage Two.

CLERK

81481? Give me just one moment.

(KATARINA and MOM run in from stage left.)

KATARINA

Kaya!

KAYA

Mom! Kat! Oh my god, oh my god!

(They embrace.)

CLERK

Congratulations. You did excellent on Stage Two. Just clip this pin, and you'll start Stage Three at 18:00 hours. You two may sit over there if you would like. Please remember not to discuss any of the events of Stage Three.

KAYA

Did you do it, Kat? Are you/?

KATARINA

/Yeah. I am.

KAYA

Oh my god, congratulations! I'm so proud! We're actually gonna make it, aren't we? We're gonna be safe. I just have to pass.

(Pause.)

I can pass, right?

MOM

Of course you can sweetheart.

(Pause. KATARINA turns away from them.)

KAYA

Kat?

KATARINA

It's up to you, Kaya.

MOM

She will pass.

KAYA

If it's up to me, of course I will.

KATARINA

It's not as easy as you think.

MOM

But she can. She will. She has to.

KAYA

What's wrong?

MOM

Promise me you'll pass.

KATARINA

Kaya. I'll love you no matter what you do.

KAYA

I don't understand. Don't you want me to pass, Kat?

(CRYSTAL saunters in, dressed in white.)

CRYSTAL

Don't you want her to pass, Kat?

(KATARINA looks back and forth between the two.)

KATARINA

One way or another we all do.

(Blackout.)