Nothing Owed for a Gift

by midnighteverlark

Summary

Lately, Merchants have taken to flirting with unwitting Seam folk as a joke, sometimes going so far as to ask them out on a date. I've even heard of a couple instances of a Merchant asking someone from the Seam to marry them, and then laughing hysterically when the poor recipient says 'yes'. So, when Peeta Mellark approaches me after the reaping, red with nerves and pushing his lips together as if he's trying very hard not to do something like laugh, I'm immediately wary. Peeta can't possibly be asking me to marry him for real. ... right?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Even if Madge hadn't warned me, I would have been prepared for it. I hear the gossip in the hob and on the streets, and a few times I even witness it. Merchants have taken to flirting with unwitting Seam folk as a joke, sometimes going so far as to ask them out on a date. I've even heard of a couple instances of a Merchant asking someone from the Seam to marry them, and then laughing hysterically when the poor recipient says 'yes'. So, when Peeta Mellark approaches me after the reaping, red with nerves and pushing his lips together as if he's trying very hard not to do something
like laugh, I'm immediately wary.

"Katniss," he greets, a bit stiffly.

"Peeta," I reply with a nod, making to take Prim's hand and tug her into the dissipating crowd.

"I," he starts, halting me with a quick gesture. His eyes flick to Prim, who blinks up at him curiously. Tears of relief linger on her lashes; this reaping was her third, but the horror of it affected her just as badly as if it was her first time again. I suppose it never really fades. This year was my last, and with twenty-eight strips of paper with my name on them, the odds were decidedly not in my favor. But the name Effie Trinket drew from the reaping bowl was that of Phacelia Punt, a Seam girl so malnourished she looks much less than her fifteen years. Not me. Somehow, I made it through all six years. Now I just have to worry about Prim.

Peeta shifts his gaze back to me, bringing my thoughts to the present. "Katniss," he starts again.

"Yes?"

He takes a breath. "My brothers are both apprenticed to their wives' family businesses. I'm inheriting the bakery, now that I'm past the reapings."

"Congratulations," I say. Where is he going with this?

Those blue eyes, which found mine through sheets of rain that day behind the bakery and which I've caught fixed on me in the school hallways many times, now find my own once more. Peeta's chin moves, as if he's chewing on his words, before he says, "Will you marry me?"

My heart sinks even as Prim's head whips around to face me, her eyes huge and hopeful. She thinks he's being sincere. I know better. I know what he's doing. And though I've prepared myself for this kind of trick, I never expected it to come from Peeta — Peeta, who slips sugar cookies to children for free when his mother isn't looking; who danced with Leevy Rosewood last Harvest Festival when he heard that she was afraid no one would want to because of her crooked leg; who took a beating just to give a starving stranger a loaf of bread. Somehow, it feels like a betrayal. I don't know him, not really, but I always thought he was kind. And now he's asking for my hand as a prank.

My moment of silence has him talking again, jabbering on haltingly as he peers up at me from underneath his eyelashes. "I'd be good to you, I promise — and your mother and sister, they could come live in the bakery if they wanted, there's room — and you wouldn't have to be hungry ever again —"

That does it. "That's cruel, you know," I cut in, cursing the barest whisper of strain that wobbles in my voice.

He blinks, stuttering. "W-what?"

"It's cruel," I repeat. "Proposing to someone as a joke. I know you townies think it's funny, since we Seam folk can't rightly say no in case it's a chance to improve our family's chance at survival. But it's not funny."

He's gone from red to white now, his eyes nearly as big as Prim's. He tries to say something, but I'm not done.

"You're lucky it's me you asked, and not someone gullible. You could have broken someone's heart, you know. Just last week someone asked Bristel out on a dare, and the poor girl wouldn't leave her house for a week once she found out he had been playing with her."
"But –" Peeta gasps, and I turn away abruptly. It hurts more every moment, and though I thought I was prepared, I'm beginning to understand why Bristel hid herself away. I just want to go home and forget this.

But I can't leave quite yet, not with one last comment rattling around in my mouth, begging to be released. I look over my shoulder, just for an instant, and my voice breaks hideously when I say, "I thought you were kinder than this, Peeta."

He makes a sort of choking noise as I pull Prim away, and I know he's trying not to laugh. My cheeks burn. Here I was thinking I'd stand up to the prank with shoulders straight and pride intact, and then I go and let my voice crack like I'm about to burst into tears – which I'm not, mind you, it's just the powdery dirt flung up from the road that's getting in my eye.

"Katniss," Prim starts, but I shake my head.

"Don't, Prim."

"But Katniss, what if he was really –"

"He wasn't."

"But what if?"

"Townies don't marry people from the Seam, Prim. They just think it's amusing to dangle favorable marriages in front of us and then snatch them away again if we take the bait."

She's quiet for a moment, and out of the corner of my eye I catch her twisting her head around, as if searching for Peeta back where we left him. I'm sure he's not there anymore. He's probably off with his friends or brothers by now, no doubt sniggering about how the stupid Seam girl got all choked up. Heat wells in my eyes, blurring my vision, and my nose feels as if it's swelling. But I'm not crying. It's the dust. It bothers my eyes. And my nose. It's just the dust.

"Mom did," Prim says quietly.

"Huh?" I turn away with the pretense of following the path of an orange butterfly, one sleeve coming up to sponge away a trail of liquid from my cheek. I despised these long sleeves with I started out just an hour ago, shoving them up my arms in an attempt to cool myself, but now I'm glad of them. It's easier to wipe away tears – rainwater, it's just a raindrop – with cloth than with bare skin.

"Mom did," Prim insists, more firmly this time. "She left town for Dad."

"Mom was the exception, not the rule. And anyway, she wasn't in line to inherit a business."

The part about inheriting the bakery, at least, I know to be true. I've heard Merchant girls giggling over it since May, all of them hoping to win over Peeta's gentle heart and, in doing so, win themselves a home in the bakery. I can certainly understand why. The bakery is one of the most profitable businesses in Twelve, alongside the General Store. Marrying Peeta would mean living the finest life Merchant money can buy. Fresh, hot water for every bath and soft, full quilts on every bed. Peppermints and candied plums from the sweet shop. Shoes and clothes bought new from a store, never worn by anyone before you. Pretty gifts every holiday and three meals every single day and always, always the sleepy heat of the ovens, warming shop and home both through the bitter winter months. And Peeta. A gentle, golden husband who would never have to descend belowground just to scrape a living from the earth.

Another raindrop splashes onto the sleek material of my dress and I rub it away before it can soak in.
This is Mom's dress, one of her treasures from her days before the Seam. I won't, can't ruin it with snot or saltwater.

You don't need any of that, I tell myself fiercely. You don't even want any of that. A Merchant life isn't for you. You get arrows and pond tubers and blood under your fingernails and coal dust. And that's enough.

I keep my face turned away from Prim, and by the time we locate our mother and make our way home I've mostly composed myself. I hate myself for caring, because I don't – not really. I attribute my reaction to the shock. Peeta has always seemed so sweet. To see him do something so mean was upsetting. I suppose his brothers put him up to it. The middle brother – what's his name? Something with an L? – is infamous for his pranks. Thankfully, I'm two years behind him in school, so I wasn't there to witness the time he led Mr. Crick's prized cow up the school steps and straight into the principal's office. Nor was I present for what the student body has collectively christened "The Great Desk Heist." I still don't know how he managed to get that many desks up onto the roof. Yes, it was probably him that dared Peeta to do it, and I just happened to be the nearest, easiest target. I didn't see either of the eldest Mellark brothers at the time, but then again, they could have been hiding, waiting to pop out and mock my reaction.

This, I decide, is the most likely explanation. It doesn't completely soothe the mortified burning in my chest, but it helps, and by the time we're sitting down to a celebratory dinner of roasted duck and wild greens, the incident is barely a shadow in the back of my mind.

I nearly step on the package. I wouldn't even have seen it if Buttercup hadn't dashed past my ankles to sniff at it curiously. I nudge the cat away with the toe of one boot, ignoring his affronted growls, and scoop up the bundle in my hands. Warmth seeps through the crackling brown paper and into my fingers. Whoever left this on the doorstep must have done so mere minutes ago, if not seconds.

Tucking the package against my chest, I sprint down the splintering porch steps and past the wilting herb garden, pulling up short at the road. I crane my neck in every direction, but there's no sign of life anywhere. No footsteps, no muffled laughter, nothing but the yowling cat, who has caught up to me and is standing on his back paws to drag his tongue across a corner of the paper sack. I don't blame him. Whatever is in there smells heavenly. Warm and zesty and yeasty, like cheese and fresh bread.

Oh, no.

I retreat back inside the house, opening the package with wriggling fingers the moment I reach the table. There, cushioned by balls of crumpled paper, are three perfect buns, lightly toasted and bursting with creamy herbed cheese.

My rummaging dislodges a scrap of paper and it flutters to the floor. I pluck it from under a chair and flip it over to find a single line of writing in careful cursive: Katniss – I really do want to marry you, if you'll have me. –Peeta.

He's devoted, I'll give him that. But if he wants to give me free food for a prank, far be it from me to stop him.

I give my mother and Prim each a cheese bun for breakfast, wrapping my own up in paper again so I can take it with me into the woods and eat it there.

I bypass the bakery in the afternoon, instead trading my squirrels to the seamstress's husband for a pair of hair ribbons for Prim.
Two days later, I open the door to find another package. This one contains a handful of tiny frosted cookies, each decorated painstakingly with either a katniss flower, a primrose blossom or violets – my mother's namesake. The note reads, I never meant to trick you. P.S – You know you're welcome at the bakery anytime, whatever your answer is.

I give a snort. After all this he still expects me to do business with him. Unbelievable.

"Are you sure he's joking, Katniss?" Prim ventures. "I think he would have given it up by now if he was. Maybe you should talk to him."

"Yes, Prim, I'm sure. He's probably having a grand time seeing how long it'll take before I give in, and then he can have his laugh."

"But just talk to him!"

"Talking to him would only encourage him. Just ignore it."

The next morning I receive a fine pair of ivory leather gloves, supple and expertly sewn. The kind that my family could never afford in a million years. Despite myself, I tug one on, flexing my fingers experimentally. The fit is near-perfect, as is the material; the leather is soft against my calloused fingers, delicate enough to yield to my every movement with ease but thick enough to protect my hands from briars and the harsh snap of a bowstring.

This note is longer, urging me to exchange the gloves for a better fit if they don't suit me and insisting once again that he truly does seek my hand. It ends with a post-script: If you can, please come by the bakery. I'd like to talk to you.

It occurs to me, as I refold the note with gloved fingers, that these gifts may be a sort of apology. Peeta may be attempting to make amends for trying to trick me – but then, why keep up the lie in the notes? And why summon me to the bakery?

I won't go, I decide. Not until this has died down, whatever this is.

I'm keeping the gloves, though. After all, a gift is a gift no matter how insincere the sentiment behind it, and my old ones are more patches than leather by now. I'm only accepting them out of practicality, not because I can't stop picturing Peeta standing in the leatherworker's shop, trying to match a pair of ivory leather gloves to the size of my hands.

Nearly a week passes, and I start to think it might be over, that Peeta has given up whatever game he's been playing. And then I return from hunting and Prim is practically vibrating out of her skin, a box clutched in her arms.

"I went to milk Lady and it was there when I came back," she says in a rush, practically shoving it into my hands. "Go on!"

I pick apart the decorative twine bow with a strange heaviness in my chest and pop open the box, tipping its contents out onto the kitchen table. Something long and wrapped in more brown paper clatters onto the scarred wood with a metallic jangle. My breath catches at a bright sliver of silver. Carefully, I peel back the paper.

"A knife?" Prim says dejectedly. "I thought it was gonna be a necklace."

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"A knife?" Prim says dejectedly. "I thought it was gonna be a necklace."
"A dagger," I correct in a whisper. And not just a dagger – not something dull and crude, like Greasy Sae keeps on her counter to chop up blocks of meat, but a weapon straight out of a fairytale. The handle is polished bone, elegantly curved to fit neatly into a palm and carved with curls of ivy and starry blossoms. The sheath, leather like my gloves but black as night and embroidered to match the handle, has shifted just far enough to bare a strip of gleaming silver. Almost without meaning to, I slide the blade free from the sheath and touch it to the pad of one finger. The faintest whisper of pressure and blood begins to bead. It's already sharp. Sharper than any of my own battered hunting knives. Sharp enough to slip easily through flesh and fur and fat. My fingers tighten around the handle.

I can't imagine how much this must have cost, both in money and trouble. Bakers don't generally have need of daggers, especially ones as beautifully crafted as this one. Peeta must have had to pull a few strings to get his hands on it – no, to get it into my hands. Perhaps he enlisted the help of his aunt, the butcher. I've only traded with her a couple times, but she seems decent enough. Gruff and a bit lewd at times, but honest. And she practically gave me Prim's goat.

A butcher choosing a handsome dagger for herself would arouse much less suspicion than a baker would.

"Please go to him, Katniss," Prim begs.

And, for the first time, I say, "Maybe," instead of, "No." Maybe I will talk to him. Maybe Peeta has meant well all this time. Maybe he really –

But no, I can't let myself think like that. Hope is a tricky thing. If I start hoping I might not be able to stop, and then the hurt will be that much worse if, no, when it ends badly.

So, when the sun kisses the mountaintops and brilliant orange-gold light floods the district, I take my game bag and jog the two miles to the butcher shop.

Rooba's eyes scrunch with mischief as soon as she sees me at her back door. "Well now," she drawls. "What brings you here, girl?"

"In the mood for rabbit?" I reply lightly.

One of her brows quirks – I rarely do my trading past lunch time, and she knows it – but she takes her coin purse from her belt anyway.

"Five coins," she says, and I nod. You don't haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, but it's a fair price.

The exchange is made and I put a hand on the doorframe to keep her from closing it. "One more thing," I say, and she turns back to me with a quizzical frown. I pull the dagger from where it's sheathed at my hip and lay it flat on my palm. "Do you recognize this?"

"Now why would I recognize a thing like that?" she says, and then she closes the door. Just before it shuts, I swear I see her wink at me.

"This has to stop," I repeat to myself under my breath.

It's been three days since I received the dagger, and this morning the whole district reported to the town square for mandatory viewing of the Games. They haven't started yet, but the interviews are coming up in a few days and the Capitol people are in a tizzy over some minor drama apparently unfolding within the tribute center. Someone stole someone else's knife, death threats were made, a
punch or two were thrown, and now everyone onscreen needs to share their opinion about it for some reason. Not five minutes after we returned home, footsteps crunched up the porch steps. A knock on the door was followed by hurried rustling, as if our caller was dashing away again, and by the time I wrenched open the door there was no one there. Only a basket bigger around than Prim's arms could reach, stuffed with presents.

"This has to stop," I say again, and this time Prim hears me.

"Why?" she cries.

"Because," I snap back, "He's spending entirely too much time and energy and money on this. Do you know how much I'm going to owe him by the time all of this is over?"

"You don't owe people for gifts, Katniss," Prim scoffs, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

We sit down at the kitchen table again, and this time, Mom drifts out of the bedroom to see what all the fuss is about. Then, of course, I have to explain everything to her while Prim waits as impatiently as is humanly possible.

"Well," my mother says at last, folding herself into a chair, "Let's see it, then."

She's showing much more restraint than my little sister, but I can tell she's hopeful – excited, even. She thinks marrying into a Merchant family is a splendid idea, and though I try to explain that Peeta doesn't really mean it, she just lifts an eyebrow at me and waves a hand at the heap of gifts.

Sighing, I dig into the basket.

First I lift out a bouquet of meadow flowers. Top-heavy gaillardias and echinaceas, yellow daisies, purple asters and bright, fluffy dandelions. My mother silently gets up to fetch a jar to arrange them in. Next there's a wheel of cheese the size of my fist, enveloped in fragrant, butter-yellow wax. Then three tall white candles wrapped in parchment paper, like Merchant girls set in their windows at night. A little jar of candied rose petals and violets decorated with a slim red ribbon. An orange, round and heavy and vivid as a little sun in the coal-gray gloom of our kitchen. This I hand immediately to Prim, and she goes to work on the peel with careful fingers. That peel is worth as much as the fruit itself. On the few occasions when we could afford such a treat, my mother has dried the peel and ground it into a powder for flavoring.

The basket yields yet more, and we share the orange as I extract present after present. Prim feeds me plump wedges of the sunny fruit so I won't get my own fingers sticky with the juice.

Out comes a tightly rolled bundle of fir-green linen. I shake it out, expecting only a length of fabric, but it's a tunic, loose and comfortable, mid-thigh length. Designed to be worn over trousers. It's not a dress, and for that I am grateful. Does Peeta know I dislike dresses? Could he have guessed somehow and, accordingly, sought out a tunic instead? Or was it coincidence?

Maybe, I think, folding the tunic with shivering fingers and draping it over the back of a chair. Maybe.

I'm getting to the bottom of the basket now, which is good, because I feel like if I have to unwrap too many more gifts I might do something stupid, like cry. Nestled in one corner is a rattling paper sack tied off with twine. I open it to find a rainbow of hard candies from the sweet shop, all pressed into different shapes and dusted with powdered sugar. I can't help but pop one in my mouth before handing the rest to Prim. It's green and leaf-shaped, and the taste of mint saturates my mouth the moment it touches my tongue. Next to it is a slab of good, fresh meat on a little tray, armored in tin
foil and packed in a nest of ice chips to keep it chilled. My mother gives a gasp of delight as I set it on the table.

"Pork," she says reverently after lifting the shell of foil. She then whisks it away, pulling herbs and spices from the cupboards in a kind of elated frenzy.

The last of the gifts are a dense cake of lavender soap stamped with lacy patterns, a card of silver hairpins topped with blood-red glass beads, and a framed charcoal drawing of the sunset over the mountains. My fingertips stroke the glass that protects the drawing, but the rest of me is frozen. Somewhere between the tunic and the hairpins, my heart started to flutter in the cage of my ribs, squeezing hard and fast as a drum. He must have spent so much money. Even a Merchant can't afford this many precious gifts all at once, which either means he's been saving for a long time – months or maybe even years – or he's been collecting gifts for even longer, storing them away somewhere in preparation for this day. This is much more than a prank. This is... I can't say what it is. But maybe... Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he meant what he said. Maybe he really was asking me to marry him. But that doesn't make any sense at all. Why me, a Seam girl he's barely ever spoken to before?

For one sickening moment, I think that I might be Plan B, or even Plan C. Maybe Peeta meant to marry some sweet, pretty girl from town, but she turned him down. Maybe these lavish gifts were never meant to end up in my hands, but someone else's. Maybe I was the second or third or even fourth choice. The contingency plan. If all else failed, at least I wasn't likely to say no, what with the prospect of marrying into wealth. Somehow, this stings more than when I thought he was toying with me.

But then I look again, taking in the spread of presents. It's possible they were meant for someone else, but somehow that doesn't feel right. The gloves, the dagger, the dandelions, the tunic. The other gifts could have potentially been bought for another, but these... These feel personal. I know they're for me. They must be. What Merchant girl wants a weapon and hunting gloves? What Merchant girl has need of a new tunic? What Merchant girl prefers weed-flowers over the roses and lilies sold in the General Store?

"Look," Prim says. She dips one small, pale hand into the basket. "There's a note at the bottom."

*Katniss – I was going to give them to you one at a time, but I couldn't wait. Please talk to me, Katniss. You don't have to say yes – you don't even have to believe me – just let me explain. –Peeta.*

"What does it say?" my mother asks as she pounds away at the slab of pork with a tenderizing mallet.

I quickly fold the note and stuff it in my pocket, somehow unwilling to share the words I can't quite make sense of just yet. "He just says he wants to talk to me."

"You think?" Prim deadpans with an entirely too teenager-ish eye roll.

"We'll invite him over for dinner," my mother says, nodding like that's the end of it, and I jump up.

"No. No, no, no. Look, I'll – I'll just head over there right now and..."

*And what?* I ask myself. *And tell him you never meant to marry? That he's crazy for wooing you, of all people, when he could have had anyone? That even if he wasn't joking, he's wasted his time?*

I glance at the table, overflowing with courtship presents befitting a queen. "And talk to him," I decide.
My mother begged me to wear a dress and put my hair up, but I wouldn't have it. She already made me wait until I had bathed and washed my hair. I wasn't about to go marching across the district in a dress on top of all that.

"It's not like I'm about to marry him," I snapped at last, and Prim cried, "You're not? Oh, but Katniss!"

I wouldn't budge, though, and at last they grudgingly let me go on the condition that I let Prim weave the flowers from the bouquet into my braid.

Now, as I approach the bakery's back door, I catch myself gnawing on the corner of a fingernail. I never should have come here. What if I was right all along, and I'll show up at his doorstep only to face peals of laughter from his brothers and a muttered apology from Peeta himself? And then again, what if he's been sincere all this time? Would he greet me like a proper sweetheart, catching me to him in a fond hug and maybe even pressing a kiss to some part of my face? I shiver in the muggy summer air at the thought of Peeta's lips on my cheek, my temple, the corner of my mouth.

Stop it, I chastise myself. *You're here to sort this out, not to daydream about impossible scenarios like a little girl.*

I've reached the door.

I knock. Firmly, three times, like I'm just here to do business as usual. And really, I am. Just business. Just clearing something up. Just –

The door opens with a familiar creak, and I'm staring up at Peeta's equally startled eyes, and everything I was going to say has suddenly evaporated from my mind.

He gives a ragged, breathy laugh, and it's almost enough to send me ducking for the shadows, but then he says, "You came."

I nod, trying desperately to remember what it was I needed to say.

Peeta's eyes follow the line of my braid where it dangles over my shoulder, and the next thing I know his fingers are dragging down the plait, ghosting across petals and stems. Then, just as quickly, he withdraws.

"S-sorry," he says, reddening. "I just didn't expect to see you. I didn't expect you to come so soon."

"I can come back," I offer faintly, but he's already shaking his head.

"No, no. Come in, please."

Come in? Into the bakery? I mean, it's not the strangest of things, but I really hadn't expected it. I've been counting on a three minute conversation on the back step, not a long talk at a kitchen table. I'm not prepared for this. I can't do this.

But Peeta has stepped back to allow me through the door, and those blue eyes are entirely too much like Prim's when she really wants something, and, and… Damn it.

I follow him in.

The Mellarks' kitchen is bigger than some Seam houses. Counters and cupboards of dark, worn wood line every wall save one, where no less than three ovens crouch on clawed iron feet. Herbs hang in pungent sprigs from the cross beams overhead, sharing the space with ropes of onions and
baskets of apples and oranges and who knows what else. At the far end of the room, a whitewashed staircase vanishes up into the second level, where their living space must be. I don't realize how long I've been standing in the kitchen doorway, just gaping, until Peeta pulls out a chair for me.

I open my mouth to say, "You don't have to do that," but he's already asking if I'd like any tea. "Sure," I mumble, easing into the proffered seat.

I sit stiffly while Peeta sets a kettle on one corner of the active oven. At last he comes and settles opposite me, that earnest gaze seeking out my own.

"I'm sorry about how all this started," he says before I can start off on my own spiel. "I should have been more careful about what I said. I knew some people played tricks like that, but I…" His hands inch over the table, coming to a stop just in front of my fingertips. "I would never do that. To anyone."

His expression is so pleading that I have to look away, focusing instead on his hands. They lie palms-up on the table, as if he's silently coaxing me to lace my fingers with his. Should I? Is that what's expected of this kind of conversation?

At last I manage to say, "I know. I mean, you don't seem like the kind of person who would. You're kind." And then my eyes flicker from doorway to doorway as I realize just how quiet the rest of the house is. "Is anyone else home?"

"No. My brothers are living with their wives' families and my parents are out on errands for the afternoon."

I allow a breath to spill over my lips. That makes it easier, then. I don't think I could have said everything that needs to be said if I knew others were nearby, listening. Peeta draws a shallow breath of his own, like he's about to say something else, but I cut in before he can. "Thank you, for all the…" I gesture vaguely to the blossoms woven into my braid. "And… everything. But –"

"Did you like them?" he asks eagerly.

"Yes," I say, much too enthusiastically. Then I backpedal, taking my tone down a few notches. "I mean, yes, they're all very lovely. But –"

"The clothes fit?"

"Yes, but –"

"You liked the –?"

"Peeta, let me finish. I promise you, I liked all the presents."

His flush deepens momentarily from pink to red. "Sorry."

I realize a smile has tugged up the corners of my mouth, and I take a moment to smooth my expression before going on. "I can't accept them. The gifts. They're too much, I… I can't possibly repay you."

Peeta gives a small, sad smile. "They're gifts, Katniss. You don't pay people back for gifts."

I huff. "That's what my sister said."

"Your sister is right."
"Well, I'm sure she'll be thrilled to hear you agree."

The kettle gives a sputtering hoot, which crescendos to a shrill scream as Peeta gets up to fetch cups and tea leaves. I take the opportunity to watch him while his back is turned. How am I going to say no to him? He seems so hopeful, so anxious to please me; it'll be hard to turn him down. I should say it right now, I should have said it long ago, but the words get stuck in my esophagus and won't pass my throat.

I think again about what marrying a Merchant would mean, and not just for me. For Prim. And, I suppose, for my mother too. If I agreed to marry Peeta, Prim would be guaranteed a future free of the threat of starvation. Whether or not my family would come to live in the bakery as well, they would at least be well-supplied with food and coal for the winter. I would be able to afford new school shoes for Prim, real ones that nobody has owned before, and even a satchel to carry her books in. My mother could shop in the market with her head held high, paying with coins at the counter instead of bartering her remedies in the back. And really, Peeta himself isn't too bad, either. Unless there's some hidden cruel streak within him that hasn't shown itself in the six years I've been keeping track of him, I doubt he'd ever treat a woman badly. I never planned on marrying, but if I ever did, I could do much worse. Peeta has a good heart. Anyone can see that. He's gentle and merry and strong.

But what if he wants children? something inside me whispers. And then, another whisper answers, So what if he does? Merchant children don't need tesserae. Merchant children don't get reaped. Which isn't strictly true. It's happened in the past. But eight slips of paper out of thousands… Those are better odds than I've ever faced. If I made it through, why not them?

Peeta sets a mug in front of me and I jump. I was so lost in thought I didn't even see him approach.

"Was I a fallback?" I say, surprising myself with the words.

He sits down and pushes the sugar pot towards me without taking any for himself. "What?"

I toss my head, trying to pass the comment off as casual. "I can't have been your first choice. You don't really know me, and besides, it's not like my family has much to offer." I punctuate the sentence with a sip of tea, which scalds my lips and numbs the tip of my tongue.

He blinks. "You were my first choice."

"Why?"

I thought it would be a simple question, but Peeta waits a good long time before answering. At last, he says, "Because I fell in love with you."

He pauses like he's waiting for a reply, but my mind is stuck on his last words. In love. With you. These words in that order, directed at me, don't make any sense. Peeta and I know one another, but not well. We've been partnered in school a few times, and over the past few years we've occasionally chatted while trading, but that's all. We were never friends, much less anything more. Either I misheard or Peeta misspoke.

"I don't understand," I say. I'm finding it difficult to look him straight in the face, so instead my gaze wanders down his flour-dusted arms. His sleeves have been rolled up to the elbows, baring pale, freckled skin. I wonder, with my pulse throbbing in my temples and fingertips, if he would hold me with those arms the way my father used to hold my mother. Fiercely and tenderly all at once. And suddenly a deep, sweet ache unfurls between my lungs, rippling outward through my chest and into my limbs, and I find myself feeling rather alone on this side of the table. Some childish impulse is telling me to get up and round the table to sit next to Peeta.
And what? I ask myself dryly, *Snuggle up to him like a sleepy wolf pup and tuck your nose against his throat?*

Yes, the ache answers, and I take a bracing gulp of tea to drive it away.

"I've had a crush on you ever since I can remember," Peeta says, his voice quiet but steady and sure. My lips part to protest, but he flicks up a hand. "Please, let me finish. If I don't get this out now, I might never." He takes a moment to collect his thoughts. "We were five. You had a plaid dress and your hair… it was in two braids instead of one. My father pointed you out while we were waiting to line up."

"Your father? Why?" I ask.

"He said, 'See that little girl? I wanted to marry her mother, but she ran off with a coal miner.'"

"What? You're making that up!" I exclaim.

"No, true story," Peeta says. "And I said, 'A coal miner? Why did she want a coal miner if she could've had you?' And he said, 'Because when he sings...even the birds stop to listen.'"

"That's true. They do. I mean, they did," I say. I'm stunned. At first I thought Peeta might be spinning some pretty but false tale to, I don't know, impress me maybe, but now I don't think so. How would he know about my father's voice if he was making it up?

"So that day, in music assembly, the teacher asked who knew the valley song. Your hand shot right up in the air. She put you up on a stool and had you sing it for us. And I swear, every bird outside the windows fell silent," Peeta says.

"Oh, please," I say, trying to laugh, but the sound won't come. It gets stuck in my throat, all balled up with that "no" I've stopped trying to spit out.

"No, it happened. And right when your song ended, I knew – just like your mother – I was a goner." Peeta smiles as soon as he's done talking, his shoulders rising and then settling again as if a literal weight has been lifted from them. "That's why. That's why you and not someone else."

I make the mistake of meeting his gaze head-on. Trepidation shows in his red cheeks and restless hands, but his eyes are clear. Determined. Open. What hits me hardest, though, is the soft shimmer of something I can't quite name. Something overwhelmingly familiar. Something I've only ever seen in my father's eyes, before he died, or my mother's eyes, before she tried to follow him.

"That's not love, it's infatuation," I manage shakily. "They're different."

"Can't it be both?" He flashes a shy grin, sliding his hands across the table again. This time, I allow him to gather up my own. His hands are steady, whereas mine are cold and trembling, and he begins to rub his thumb against my skin. The little dose of warmth and friction both helps to soothe that deep-seated ache and redoubles it. "And anyway, I think we'd work well together. We already know we make a good team, and I'd do anything you need to make you happy here, and the rest... We can figure out the rest as we go."

My resistance is crumbling exponentially, my carefully constructed walls sloughing away from my heart and mind and leaving them raw and hypersensitive, unused to this vulnerability after years of shutting out the very idea of love or marriage. It's all too much, and too soon, and I feel as if a stinging thorn of hope is curling into my chest, piercing further with every moment. It hurts, but somehow it's a pain I want. I'm scared, but it's not the kind of fear I'm used to. For once, I'm not afraid of losing something, but of gaining it.
"You don't have to answer right now," Peeta is saying. "I don't want you to say yes because you feel like you have to. You don't have to say yes at all. I just wanted… I just needed you to know."

"I can't bake," I offer weakly.

"I can teach you. And anyway, it's not like we wouldn't have any help. My parents would still work here even when they moved into their own house."

Ah, yes, I forgot. In the Seam, the groom's family must make room for the bride in their house, and everyone in the family shares the same space. In town, the richest families sometimes own two buildings – one shop with an apartment on the upper level and one regular house somewhere near the town square, into which the groom's parents might move once their son brings his wife to live with him above the family shop. If the grapevine is correct, Peeta's grandparents and a couple of his uncles live in the Mellark's second house now. If he marries, they'll have to make room for his parents.

"I'm not very good at housework," I go on, somehow determined that he know all my shortcomings so that – what? So that he has a reason to change his mind? I don't want him to back out, or at least I don't think I do, but some wary part of me is scrambling to give him every opportunity.

"Good thing I am."

"I don't know if I want children."

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it. There's plenty of time."

"I have nothing to offer you. No business. No dowry."

"You have you. That's all I want."

I'm running out of legitimate arguments, so at last I huff and sputter and spit out, "But I'm not even that pretty!"

"Agree to disagree."

I stare at him and he stares right back, and I know I've lost. Or maybe I've won. Either way, my resolve is all but gone.

I never thought I wanted to marry. But I'm selfish, and I might never get this chance again, and somehow I can't bear to get up and walk away. Because if I walk away, I'll undoubtedly have time to think all of this over, and if I start thinking about it I'll over think it, and then I'll end up talking myself out of it. Because I do want this. It's that simple. I want this. I want Peeta. I want strong, gentle hands and sunshine-colored curls and a loyal adoration carried over from childhood. A comfortable bed and a large, warm body to share it with. Always enough food for Prim and enough extra money for my mother to buy herself the little trinkets she so loves. Right at this moment, I don't care if this turns out to be a bad idea, and I don't want to care. For once I want to be reckless. For once I want to hope.

"I'll marry you," I say, and it comes out in a whisper so quiet I doubt he hears me. But then his head snaps up and his eyes are shining with disbelief, and I say it again. "I'll marry you."

He's rounded the table and caught me up out of my chair before I know what's happening. Then I'm pressed against his apron, flour rubbing off on my cheek and his broken gasps of laughter reverberating through my whole body. He sets me down, abruptly, like he didn't realize what he was doing, but his hands remain on my hips. "Thank you," he says, and I realize he's crying under the
laughter. He draws me closer again with every word, snuggling me against him. "Thank you, thank you."

I'm still trying to fully register what I just did, and I'm half-drunk off the heat of the ovens and the cinnamon-dill scent that radiates from Peeta in dizzying waves, so all I can do is rest my temple against his shoulder and curl my fingers into his shirt. One of his hands moves to my lower back, rubbing in slow, powerful circles right where tension has knotted the muscles. I haven't been held like this since before I can remember. Since my father died, maybe. A shudder of contentment rushes up my spine unbidden.

I lift my head to ask him what his parents will think of this, but the question dies on my lips when I realize how close we are. His eyes, crinkled in a wide grin, roam freely over my face. Then the smile fades, settling into something calmer, something softer but no less intense, and he swallows.

"I –" His nose nudges against my own before he pulls back, sucking in a breath. "I really want to kiss you, Katniss."

And then, because that sweet, sharp ache has manifested in my lips and because I'm still lightheaded and foolishly happy and giddy with how much just changed, I throw my reluctance to the wind and give an eager nod. I rise up on my tiptoes to reach him, which makes him chuckle, and then our faces collide clumsily and both of us are chuckling. The second time we're more careful, and our mouths successfully touch without ramming anyone's nose into anyone else's cheek.

I barely have time to take in the sensations of warmth and pressure and a whisper of wetness before Peeta pulls back just far enough to mumble my name and dives straight back in again, and… Well. It's not amazingly awe-inspiring or life-changing or anything, but it's nice. Really nice. Reassuringly solid and calming and pleasurable, even, and… Mm. I could get used to this.

My mouth relaxes into the kiss, parting just enough for my bottom lip to slide between both of Peeta's, and he takes to this development with vigor. I give a faint, "Mmph," as he begins to suck at my lower lip, worrying it between his teeth. Some deeply ingrained instinct keeps me pressed against him, urging my hands to the back of his head and my hips against his thighs.

My calves burn from keeping me up on tiptoes so long by the time Peeta gives me one last suckle and leans away.

"I can't believe this is real," he says.

"Me either, honestly."

But the surreal feeling is draining away, bit by bit, and the awareness of what's happening hits me in fits and bursts. I'm going to marry. I'm going to marry Peeta. It's all so bizarre I can barely convince myself it's not some incredibly detailed fever dream. Me, Katniss Everdeen, the Seam girl who poaches for a living and perpetually has blood under her fingernails, marry one of the most prosperous Merchants in town? How did this happen?

"When?" I murmur in a daze as Peeta rains exuberant kisses over my cheeks, nose and forehead.

"Tomorrow. Today!" he cries lightly, then sobered and steps back to look at me properly. "Or anytime. Soon, though. I…" He ducks his head and gives a sheepish smile. "Call me silly, but I'm afraid if we wait too long this all might disappear, like a dream. I'll turn around and you'll be gone."

He can't seem to keep his hands away from me for more than a few seconds at a time, and every touch draws my attention like a lodestone. A nudge at my side, a thumb at my cheekbone, an arm
around my waist, a warm belly brushing my own. He seems enamored of my braid, especially, stroking the tail and touching every flower from tie to scalp. These small displays of affection are fascinating and entirely foreign, and the strangeness of it all nearly overrides the little throbs of pleasure. Nearly, but not quite. I think, if I wasn't so distracted by the newness, I might be frightened by how much I enjoy it.

And, like Peeta, I'm afraid of waiting too long lest everything fall through my fingers and leave me in the same place I was before. Cold and frail and resigned to a life of watching my little sister grow up and get married and leave me alone with my closed-off mother. This morning I was content with that life, but now… Now that I've had a glimpse of something better, I'm not sure I could make myself go back. Not without forever regretting the chance I passed up.

"Tonight," I say. "Let's toast tonight."

"Oh," Peeta breathes, "Are you sure?"

I shrug. "Why wait? Unless there's anything you need to do first."

There isn't, if the jubilant embrace I receive is anything to go by.

When I return home with another basket in my arms – because Peeta wouldn't hear of sending me away without first presenting me with at least fifteen pounds of baked goods – my mother and sister are sitting at the kitchen table, exactly where I left them.

"Well?" Prim demands, springing up to interrogate me. "What did he say? What did you say? What's that?"

She lifts the basket from my arms, stumbling under the weight, and goes about gutting it at the table. My mother eyes me keenly as Prim exclaims over flaky, golden pastries and tiny pies baked in quarter pint jars. Can she tell? Does she know what's happened just by looking at my face? Do the prints of Peeta's lips show as much as I still feel them?

I move to the nearest chair with stilted movements and drop into it. Either Prim or my mother has collected my presents and packed them all away in the basket again. All but the pork, which is marinating in a soupy concoction of herbs, oil, chopped wild onions and even a precious portion of the red wine my mother keeps for medicinal purposes. The fruity tang of the alcohol drifts across the table as Prim pounces on me, pressing for answers.

"Well?" she squeals. "Does he want to marry you? He does, doesn't he? Oh, please say you will, Katniss! He's so nice and handsome."

My mother and I both look at her and she flushes.

"What? He is."

I agree, of course, but not out loud. Instead I force myself to meet my mother's eyes and say, "I need to borrow a dress. Preferably that ivory one."

"When?" she says anxiously. "Are you going on a date?"

"No," I say, and she deflates. "To a toasting, actually. Tonight."

Prim gives a delighted scream.
Prim helps me into the simple cream-colored dress. It's made from light, sturdy cotton, and my mother begs me to wear something fancier, but I refuse. I also refuse the ridiculous dainty shoes she tries to stuff my feet into. The dress is long enough that no one will know I have my hunting boots on underneath. I do, at least, allow her to pin my braid up around my head in a crown, using the silver hairpins and taking care not to disturb the blossoms, and to dab my pulse points with lavender and pine essential oil.

At one point, when Prim dances out the door to tell her goat the good news, my mother pulls me aside and says, "Do you love him?"

I evade, "I think I could, easily." It isn't a lie. I don't say that I think I might be falling already, and that it scares me more than anything else that's happened, but my mother seems to know without me verbalizing it. She searches my eyes, nods, and drops a kiss on my hairline before moving away to check the pork.

At seven o'clock, we set out for town. I feel silly, traipsing across the district in what's very obviously toasting attire, and I swear every pair of eyes within a half-mile radius turns towards me as I pass. That feeling evaporates as soon as we near the bakery and Peeta comes bounding out like an excitable puppy, dressed smartly in a white dress shirt, fawn-brown slacks and a matching vest, only slightly patched. Hand-me-downs from his brothers or father, most likely. He clasps me to him without hesitation and kisses me soundly. By the time we part, my sister is giggling and Mrs. Mellark is clucking in disapproval from the doorway. Peeta ignores his mother and goes instead to my own, shaking her hand before offering Prim a hug.

Peeta's father, meanwhile, has stepped forward to greet me. His wife hangs back with her arms crossed, looking like she bit into a lemon.

"Katniss," he says, reaching out to touch my shoulder. "Welcome." He leaves it at that, but I think I know what he means. Mr. Mellark has never been an especially talkative man, and it appears that this is no exception.

There are more people here than I thought there would be. I thought only my mother and Prim and maybe Mr. and Mrs. Mellark would accompany us to the Justice Building, but it seems Peeta has invited both his brothers, and they in turn brought their wives. I shrink under their stares, though the oldest Mrs. Mellark's is the only truly hostile one. Even Rooba has shown up, though she only stays long enough to congratulate us, make a suggestive comment about our wedding night and remind me she still expects rabbits every two weeks. Then she leaves without a second glance. I wonder if her abrupt departure has anything to do with the way Peeta's mother glared at her before retreating into the house.

Peeta's middle brother – I still can't remember his name, and I hope it doesn't come back to bite me – guides his heavily pregnant wife over and insists I put my hands on her belly to feel the baby kicking. The eldest brother then thumps me on the back and tells me that he's always wanted a little sister.

"Careful," I warn with an unsure smile, "They're not as sweet as people say they are."

"Hey!" Prim protests, much to his amusement.

My mother blushingly presents Peeta's father with the block of pork, which has been marinated and grilled to perfection and arranged on a bed of greens. Technically, she's supposed to hand it to the groom's mother, but Mrs. Mellark has long since departed to, allegedly, pack a few more things before she's "kicked out of her own home." Both of the brothers advise us to ignore her. Once the pork has been stored away in their kitchen, Peeta takes my arm and we move in a herd to the Justice
"You're still sure?" he whispers into my hair, even as his fingers tighten slightly around my waist.

I nod in confirmation. The reality of the situation is finally dawning on me, but it doesn't make me question my decision. Rather, it reinforces it. I really am doing this. The thought sends a wave of emotion through me, unnamable but strong enough to make me press my face into Peeta's shoulder as we walk.

The Justice Building is relatively quiet, with just a few other people waiting in line to sign up for tessera or legally change residences. Our families chat while we wait, but Peeta himself chooses to gaze silently at me with awestruck eyes. He hasn't taken his arm from around my waist this whole time, and though the weight is still jarringly unfamiliar, it's also warm and, dare I say it, pleasant. Just before we reach the front of the line, an elderly woman toddles up to us and pats us both on the cheek, babbling indecipherably. Then she gives us each a paper cone of honey-roasted almonds, which she's obviously been selling from her apron pockets.

"Fee, fee!" she insists when we try to pay. "Fee fo' ta lovely couple."

The Capitol representative behind the counter barely glances at us before intoning, "Congratulations," and pushing half a dozen papers at us. He then measures both our ring fingers and rummages in a back room for a moment before returning to drop two standard-issue wedding bands into our palms.

Peeta scribbles his signature with hasty care on every paper before sliding them to me. Four times I sign *Katniss Everdeen*, and then, twice, *Katniss Mellark*. My fingers are unaccustomed to forming Peeta's surname – mine, now – and the first M comes out a bit lopsided. Once I'm done, Peeta picks up my hand and carefully extends the ring finger, crowning it with the dull band of metal as if it was encrusted with the most precious jewels in the Capitol. I shouldn't be surprised when he lifts my hand to his mouth and kisses the place where metal encircles flesh, but the gesture still sends my head twisting aside in bashful pleasure. One of Peeta's brothers chortles at my shyness, and the laughter ruffles me. So, when it comes my turn to place Peeta's ring on his own finger, I do so with my back straight and my eyes steady. There. Let them laugh now.

We make it halfway back to the bakery before Peeta can't contain himself anymore and scoops me right up off the ground, holding me with one arm under my knees and the other at my upper back. "My wife," he whispers, resting his head on my own. "Katniss, you're my wife."

"And you're my husband," I say, more to convince myself of the fact than anything else. The words cause him to hold me even tighter, maybe fracturing a rib or two, but I don't mind.

Prim skips to catch up with us, taking one of my hands as Peeta carries me, and his brothers roll their eyes and nudge him teasingly, and I find myself thinking, *This is all right. This is good.* Not what I ever expected for myself, but good. Better, even. Cautiously, I let my head settle on his collar bone. The scents of cinnamon and dill are still there, but now also there's a hint of something muskier and spicier. Real cologne, maybe, brought out for the special occasion.

The sun is sinking into the peaks by the time we arrive back at the bakery, but the air retains the muggy heat of the day, so we remain on the porch for dinner. I watch the shadows play among the leaves of an old, gnarled apple tree in the back yard as we alternate bites of pork, garden greens and light, fluffy rolls drizzled with butter and honey. The two other young Mellark wives – strange to think we share the same name when we have practically nothing else in common – adopt me into their pack fairly quickly, even trying to whisper "tips" to me about my wedding night. Once I make it clear I'm not interested, they settle for complimenting me on my "catch" instead.
"Peeta's just a gem," the pregnant one says, grinning like it's some great secret. "Don't you worry that pretty little head of yours. He'll treat you right."

Once the dinner plates are whisked away, I think we're done. But of course we're not. Silly me – have I forgotten already that I married a baker? Peeta pries himself from my side long enough to run inside and emerge moments later holding a cake. It's not big, but it is unmistakably a wedding cake, crafted with utmost care. Two modest tiers. Frothy billows of frosted sagittaria blossoms – *katniss* blossoms – and bunches of evening primrose blooms. Pine needles painted onto butter cream, complete with tiny birds nesting in the icing branches. Peeta must have spent the whole day on this, from the moment I left the bakery. Suddenly, I wonder if we shouldn't have waited a day so he wouldn't have had to rush, but then I think, *No, if I gave him another day the cake would have been as tall as Prim.*

I can't make myself take a knife to this lovely creation, so Peeta is the one that cuts the first slice. The inside isn't off-white, as I had expected, but a swirling combination of butter yellow, pale cream and deep, rich brown. When I look to Peeta in confusion, he says, "I didn't know what flavor was your favorite, so I mixed the three most popular." Then he spears a forkful and holds it to my lips. "What do you think?"

This is only the third cake I've ever tasted in my life, the first two being small, dense, molasses-sweetened logs baked in Seam ovens. They don't even compare to the real thing. This… The only thing I can compare this to is a muffin, if the muffin was spongy enough to melt away without even chewing and as sweet as honeysuckle. I forget to answer Peeta's question, but judging by the way he laughs as I steal the fork and, with it, another mouthful, I'd say he gets the message anyway.

After that, everything runs into a heady blur of crumbling, sugary frosting and mourning dove coos and fireflies and blue evening shadows, and before I know it, Peeta has picked me up again to carry me across the doorway and our families are singing the traditional toasting song. Prim's voice is high and breathy amongst the Mellarks' robust, surprisingly tuneful tones, and my mother's alto inflections ring out alongside it. My sister gives me a happy little hop-wave combination in the moment I catch her eye, and then the door shuts behind us and the last verse is muffled.

The living room is located directly above the front room of the shop, so the windows face out onto the town square. Peeta throws these windows open wide as soon as he sets me down on a faded but elegant sofa and a cool breeze sweeps through the room, washing away the moist heat within moments. Then he returns and we kneel together in front of the fireplace.

Tomorrow Prim and my mother will return to help me transfer my belongings to the bakery – my new home, I realize once again – but for now, we are alone. It's a startling concept, one that ignites a damp heat low in my belly, and I find myself watching Peeta closely as he constructs a neat teepee of twigs in the grate. How did I get here? When I woke up today I was poor and without so much as a sweetheart, and content that way. Now, not twenty four hours later, I'm wealthier than I ever imagined and married to the boy that saved my life as a child.

Together we build the fire, and together we tear into the loaf of bread Peeta baked for this express purpose. It's a sweet bread, thick with nuts and raisins and cinnamon and –

"Oh," I whisper, "This is –"

I look to Peeta for confirmation, but he just tilts his head quizzically.

"This is the same bread. The same kind you gave me that day in the rain. I never seem to get over owing you for that," I add, my thumb rubbing over one corner of the loaf.
He blinks a few times, and then understanding flares up in his eyes. "The bread? What? From when we were kids? I think we can let that go. I mean, you did just marry me."

"But you didn't know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it's the first gift that's always the hardest to pay back."

He shakes his head with a smile. "I told you, you don't pay back gifts." And then, because I must look unconvinced, "Here. Want to pay me back for the bread? You can feed me this." He presses the rest of the loaf into my hands before turning and starting the fire with one efficient match swipe.

We feed logs into the brick maw, and then, once the fire is burning hot, we stab toasting forks into two thick slices of nut bread and hold them close to the flames until the crusts curl and the edges turn golden brown. And then, ever so gently, we turn and offer each other the slices. The scent of ash and fire lingers in my nose as I sink my teeth into the taste that brought me back to life six years ago, and I've barely swallowed before Peeta pushes aside the forks and fits his mouth to mine. The heavy heat that sits low in my belly only worsens as my lips part and our tongues touch for the first time. I taste bread and sugar and well-seasoned pork on him, and it fans the spark into a flame. I thought I was something of an expert on hunger, but this is an entirely new kind. And so, while Peeta presses me back into the carpet and whispers proclamations of love against my lips, I sigh into his mouth and indulge in it.

End Notes

I don't usually write one-shots, so I don't really know how this turned out. So, if you have time, a review would be greatly appreciated/helpful. Thanks friends. :) Hope you enjoyed.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!