Salt on the Rocks

by Opacity

Summary

The three times Peeta saw the ocean... and the one time he didn't.

Notes

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

This and anything I write HG related really belongs to GreenWool. Without her, they wouldn't exist.
The first time was during the victory tour and totally by chance.

By the time the train arrived he was in his element: handsome, charming, gracious. There was a throng of people waiting to meet them and as he stepped off the train, Katniss in his arms, he didn’t flinch. Not when her body turned to stone as he touched her, not when Haymitch belched in his ear on the ride to the square, not when Effie screeched endlessly about being on time.

Although finally, with his largest smile and in his cheeriest voice he said, “What are they going to do if we’re late? Shoot us?”

Everyone was silent then. He didn’t stop smiling.

The crowds in Four were charged and dangerous; the cheering sounded more like oncoming thunder than rounds of applause. He kept looking, expecting lightning to strike. Then he turned to Katniss and realized it was her. She was the lightning and these dark and angry people where the thunder in her wake. What did that make him, he thought? The rain? The speech rolled off his tongue like silver beads of mercury. The crowd cheered as he raised Katniss’ arm in the air; with their arms up they made an uneven W. That’s right, his face said, because we’re winners. But when the crowd pushed forward to swarm the stage, he couldn’t remember what it was they had won.

When they walked off the stage, Katniss reached over to him and whispered something about dinner in his ear. He felt her hesitate and then nuzzle his neck gently right as a camera flashed at them. Only then did he have to fight the flinch, fight the urge to push her far far away from him. He didn’t. Instead he imagined a paintbrush loaded with blue, white and yellow paint smearing sky across an empty canvas and his smile reached his eyes. Yes, Katniss. Dinner at seven.

Every day she looked thinner and paler. Her prep team did well, hiding the circles under her eyes and Cinna was doing textile acrobats with swaths and drapery to hide her shrinking waist line. On camera she was still stunning. But he can count her vertebrae when they danced and that seemed criminal considering the amount of food thrown at them each day. President Snow demanded an impossible love story, the people wanted some kind of rebel leader, but no one seemed to actually see her, tired and pushing herself to the edges of her existence. He was determined to guard her, feed her, and make sure she slept. Keep her alive.

But it wasn’t without personal cost. The decay he felt seemed to bubble up in him like toxic waste. He’d started to feel it on his skin, in his mouth, seeping from his eyeballs. For so long, loving Katniss was the one thing that was right, the thing that made his existence worthwhile. And now, daily he made a mockery of it, dragged it through the sewers. It made it hard to look at himself in the mirror. He considered every day any manner of ways to keep his self-hatred at bay long
enough to make it through this tour and then...And then what? What happened after this was over?

And oh how he lied. He had always been a good liar (it aided his survival at home) but now it was becoming so frequent he had to remind himself there were times to tell the truth. Like at night when he was holding a shaking Katniss and she asked if he was scared. He had almost said no. But he knew he should never lie to her. If they started lying to each other, then he knew his sanity would unravel.

But during the day he ignored the lies and tried to bury the loathing. He hid the candles and lighters, took the light bulbs out of the lamps, and focused on pumping the sewage in his soul further below the surface so he could focus on being calm and alert. He felt like Katniss was a target on all sides and since he was unable to accomplish the one fucking task he had, and die to keep her alive, he focused on protecting her to the best of his capabilities.

However by the time they reached the gala he was struggling. Katniss was dressed in mist and water, courtesy of Cinna. He was suited up in black and grey. Next her, solid and strong, he looked like the rock for her wave to crash on. But right when they entered, a young girl ran up to him and handed him a shell. He didn’t know if it was the color of her eyes or the length of her hair but suddenly he saw the girl from Eight. The one he had euthanized and then held while she bled to death. His vision swam and for a moment he was sure blood was dripping down the child’s neck, but then Katniss brushed his arm and he snapped back into the focus. The girl was fine and he was going crazy.

He tried to concentrate on the feel of Katniss’ spine under his hand, but then he had to let her dance with people he didn’t trust. And suddenly he was surrounded by men and women who pawed on him, and told him he was hilarious and gorgeous, while they whispered things in his ear that made his skin crawl. He wanted to be charming and gregarious, but he was worried he was a moment away from vomiting all over the floor.

That’s when he heard it.

A boom. Like a cannon far far away.

In that moment, the floor seemed made of water. It was Haymitch that caught him, yanked him up by the shoulder. “Easy with the champagne, lover boy,” he said smugly. But when he looked at Peeta’s face he became reticent, pushing him forward and out of one of the gilded glass doors.

“Catch your breath,” he muttered quietly. Peeta stood over a rail, his head leaning forward. He didn’t vomit, but it took a moment for his head to stop spinning. And the booming, it was still there.
“What is that sound?” he whispered, looking up at Haymitch. “It sounds like more cannons. There can’t be more cannons, right?”

Understanding dawned on Haymitch’s face and he grabbed Peeta’s elbow. They were surrounded by partygoers, milling around like bees in a hive, and Haymitch quickly exaggerated his drunken antics so people wouldn’t watch them. It never ceased to amaze Peeta how people ignored someone who looked like they needed help. It took them ten minutes to get through the crowd to the back of the gala hall where the banquet was being held. The sound got louder and clearer until they were standing on a deck, ten feet off the ground, looking over what Peeta thought must be heaven.

“It’s just the ocean,” grumbled Haymitch. “You get ten minutes, so be fast. If you’re missing longer than that I’m not gonna be able to stop the Peacekeepers from showing up with guns. Get it out of your system, then get back here.”

Peeta stared forward unblinking and didn’t even look back at Haymitch.

“Get Katniss,” he ordered.

But Haymitch shook his head. “Nope. Can’t have both of you gone. Remember, ten minutes. Don’t worry about the girl, I’ll watch her.”

And then he was gone. It took Peeta three seconds to haul himself over the edge of the rail and hit the sand.

The ocean in all its glory spread out before him in waves of black ink. The wind was high and made his hair askew almost immediately. He saw birds dipping and swooping on the surface of the water, occasionally shrieking before wheeling away. They weren’t melodious like the birds in Twelve, but something about their call tugged at him deeply. And the boom, the sound that was too much like the canons announcing death in the games, was all encompassing here. Loud and imposing, it seemed to threaten their ridiculous gala while the birds laughed shrilly at how they were all nothing but a carnival of homemade horrors.

It told him to look and see and smell.

This was reality.

He’d never seen something without an end before.

Shoes and socks removed, he wandered through the sand like a child in a mythical world. Dirt never felt as clean as the earth beneath his feet. And it sparkled! In the moon’s glow, the sand shimmered like Katniss’ dress. Now that he was close to it, the waves were too melodious to
sound like canons. They gurgled and slurped and hissed in between the great crashes and he wanted - needed - to get closer to that sound. And then his feet were in water so cold it burned and the ocean was so loud that finally, finally, he couldn’t hear his own thoughts and he imagined maybe the salt water can wash away some of the slime that was oozing out of his pores. It was all so big and loud and infinite, and he was so very very small. Maybe he’d found a place that can drown out his problems, a body of water big enough to wash away his sins? The very idea of ever being clean again made him laugh, but he couldn’t hear it over the water.

It was so comforting not to be able to hear his own voice.

He imagined for a moment, the water rising up and drowning them all, like when the Gamekeepers released the dam in Annie Cresta’s arena. He wondered, if the ocean just decided to rise up and swallow them, what exactly could anyone do? How could anyone feel powerful next to something like this? How could anyone feel significant?

He knew if he went into the water he’d drown, and his time was running out anyway. He imagined being able to swim and what it would feel like to churn through those icy waters and never look back. He wondered if Katniss knew how to …

And for the first time since his name was drawn from the Reaping bowl he was glad she wasn’t with him.

He was sure she could swim, or if she couldn’t, she’d be able to figure it out. And then she’d see this endlessness and dart so far away he’d lose her forever. She’d never look back. Never conserve energy for the trip home. He imagined himself left behind with his lies and Haymitch’s vomit. His chest seemed to collapse in on itself as he imagined her floating away on the back of the waves.

In the end they were taken on an official tour of the beach. They were dressed in white and told to hold hands as they walked with the water barely washing over their feet, a crowd of photographers shoving cameras at them and hordes of people watching. They weren’t allowed to get into the water. Even then Katniss stared out at the sea longingly, and Peeta felt a stab of guilt at how glad he was she couldn’t be him on the beach that night.
What kind of person was he, if upon finding the chance to offer her freedom, he didn’t?

He stared at the sea, looking for answers, but the waves offered no reply.
As he stood on his podium, the ocean stretched around him on all sides, reflecting light in his eyes and making him disoriented. There was nothing comforting about the deceptively still waters licking his feet. He looked out at the unbearably calm ocean, and remembered the untamable passionate beast he saw in Four. Of course, in the arena, the ocean would be quiet and submissive. Snow probably loved the idea of controlling the sea.

Around him other victors were positioning themselves, presumably to dive into the water.

Convenient, if you knew how to swim. Which he didn’t.

He was locked in a death trap. Again.

Katniss, he was sure, didn’t have this problem. She would likely be leaping towards the shore the moment the gong sounded, while he was stuck on a metal plate without a clue of what to do. Unless of course, someone swam over and tried to kill him, in which case he’d be dead in the water.

In that moment he hated his life.

Something exploded and he watched as a tribute walked off the podium before the countdown ended. The sudden death jolted him back to reality. He realized he could feel sorry for himself later; right now he needed to figure out how to get to wherever the rest of the arena was and find Katniss. The Cornucopia appeared in front of him, almost suspended, with spokes around it leading out to the tributes. The spokes divided to end in the metal plates the tributes were standing on; the woman from Ten was next to him. He looked down to see what he was wearing. Was there anything he could do with the belt? The countdown ended and the woman dove into the water. Great. Was he the only one who couldn’t swim?

Carefully he sat down on the podium and eased his legs into the water.

The drop was fast and terrifying. He was stunned by how quickly his body sank and his head
dropped underwater. The moment when his air was cut off and his vision blurred was the scariest thing he had felt in ages. Memories of flailing in a bathtub flashed past him and were gone, as hands still on the podium, he forced himself up gasping. When his vision cleared and he blearily saw tributes dying at the Cornucopia, he realized Katniss could be there and he had no way to protect her. Again, with his inability to complete one fucking task. He wondered if he was deluding himself by thinking he could be of any use to her. If she was in the thick of battle and he was stuck in the middle of the ocean, how exactly was he being helpful? He imagined his mother watching this, laughing hysterically.

He pulled himself out of the water onto the podium and looked around again. He thought he saw an arrow flying through the air and then a dark head. Katniss. Finnick, it seemed, was next to her and a moment later he saw what could be his trident thrust forward.

Well at least someone was there for her, he thought bitterly.

The battle at the Cornucopia seemed to be dying down and he still stood there on his little metal plate shuffling his feet listlessly. Standing there was so humiliating. He wondered if he could ease into the water and inch along the spokes until he reached the Cornucopia. Possibly, but once he was there, he still had no way to actually reach the shore. He began to worry, like he always did when Katniss wasn’t directly in his line of vision. She was so strong. So resourceful. But still human and capable of being injured, back stabbed or killed. He needed to be there, be sure she was alright. But as he stood on his podium feeling more and more helpless, he wondered if he wasn’t just a liability to her. He considered for a moment the possibility that she’d just leave him out there. She would have in the first arena. How embarrassing would that have been, he thought. He would have had to shuffle on this plate until he finally got fed up and tried to swim. Then he would have drowned and that would have been the end of it. A day in the life of Peeta Mellark.

What did he have to lose? Maybe he should just…

He was about to try sliding into the water again when he saw someone who must be Finnick dive in the waves and start swimming towards him.

Great, he observed irritably. Someone was coming to his rescue.

Or to kill him.

As this possibility jumped to his mind he realized he was completely unarmed. Excellent. Against one of the most popular victors in recent memory, he had nothing but his weight and his bare hands. The podium was metal and if he was knocked into the water his best shot would be to try and slam Finnick’s head into the plate. If the carnage around the Cornucopia was any indication, it appeared dead bodies floated. Worst case scenario, if he were to kill Finnick quickly maybe he could use the body for buoyancy. Without warning, his vision began to swim. He wondered when it had become so easy to envision killing someone. He looked out at the figure he believed to be Katniss standing on the beach alone. With frigid awareness, he realized, yes, if Finnick stood between him and Katniss, he would kill him. He accepted that reality with equal parts calm and disgust, but buried the meaning of it deep inside for a day when he could indulge in self reflection.

Back to the task at hand, he analyzed his opponent. Finnick was taller than he was, so his best bet was getting behind him and locking him in a rear naked choke. Then he figured he could use the inevitable flailing to knock the man’s head against the plate. He was ready when Finnick appeared about five feet away, the victor smiling amiably like they were at a party and not about to try and kill each other.

“You’re turning red out there, my man, you should get into the water,” said Finnick conversationally.
Peeta’s eyes narrowed. “I’m sure you’ll put me there soon enough. Let’s cut the chit chat and get this over with.”

Finnick threw his head back with a peal of laughter.

“Not here to kill you, just to reunite you and your dearly beloved.”

“Right, I’m sure you are. If we’re gonna do this I’m not going to make it easy for you, so make a move,” he said dismissively. He couldn’t get into much of a stance on the little metal plate. He considered just diving into the water at Finnick but he figured that would end poorly.

“My friend, I’d like to live today and the best way to do that is to have Ms Everdeen’s arrows covering me. But she requires you as part of that deal, so as much as I like gazing up at your glowing body, consider getting in the water and letting me get you back to the person you’re interested in.”

Then he raised his arm and showed off the bracelet Haymitch was wearing earlier, now dangling off his wrist. Goddamn Haymitch. How typical for him to make some kind of alliance without telling them. Katniss didn’t know, did she?

“Whaddya say, Golden Boy? Katniss is waiting.”

He locked eyes with Finnick, his face hard and angry in the glinting sun. Slowly he lowered himself into the water and a moment later Finnick was there letting him ease onto his back. With no hesitation he slid his arm around Finnick’s neck, the inside of his elbow pressing into the victor’s wide pipe. With his wrist trapped tightly in the crook of his other elbow he pulled back only slightly, just enough to make Finnick uncomfortable.

“Try anything and I’ll take you down with me,” he growled.

Finnick laughed robustly. “You’re a might less charming in real life Peeta. You and Katniss are a prickly pair aren’t you? Come on, let’s get you back to Ms Everdeen, before she shoots me in the water.”

It didn’t take long to reach the shore and he had never been so happy to see solid ground. He looked back only once to see the ocean rolling haplessly against to the sand. How had he ever found any comfort there?

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

It seemed his role in these games was to hold people while they died.

After extending the neck wound on the girl from Eight, he rocked her gently while she bled all over him, her eyes wide with terror. He had whispered to her while she had sputtered and gurgled, telling her to close her eyes, that she was safe and no one could hurt her again. In minutes she had stopped twitching and then the cannon had sounded.

He liked to think he accepted the first corpse on his hands with dignity.

Now he was in the salt water holding the dying body of the Morphling from Six, who was also bleeding all over him. He was telling her about his paint box at home so she would look at him and not the gaping hole in her chest. He tried to paint pictures with his words and give her colors
like the flowers he had painted all over her face in the training room. She had whispered to him that she just wanted pretty colors in her life again, while he camouflaged her in psychedelic plumes. As he spoke to her he tried to distract himself from the feeling of her body dying by thinking about the sea. He didn’t know what it made him feel, this mutt of Snow’s creation. On the first day he thought it would be his grave, then after the toxic gas it was his salvation. Now he felt the sting of the water in the cuts that littered his body while the ocean became a funeral pyre for the woman in his arms.

How did he get here? What penance did he have to pay to never be here again?

The scene around him was enchanting and horrific, like the arena was purposely made to take beautiful things and make them distorted and ugly. He looked out at the gently rocking waves, and let stuttering anger wash over him. Then his gaze fell back to the Morphling and he just felt cold. There was a life that was slipping away from him and it was more important than the riddles of the sea. He watched her gaunt face smile up at him, her bony fingers dripping in blood, smearing something on his face. She looked like a living skull.

And then like a dead one.

Her limbs went limp and her hand fell away from Katniss who scrambled to get on the shore. But he held onto her a little longer, then gently let her body float out on the waves, lighter now, from the liters of blood that had left her body. He watched as she floated away on the waves to be retrieved by a hovercraft. A cannon boomed in the distance.

The waves rose, curled and fell like a hand waving good bye.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

He was alone- at the complete mercy of a beast that was indifferent to his survival.

Chapter Notes

So: This isn’t exactly ‘happy’, but I think it’s an important paradigm shift.

I own nothing.

This is dedicated to the amazing Greenwool (in fact, don’t read any further unless you’ve stopped by her page and seen what real writing is like) who not only inspired this work, but was kind enough to beta as well.

Finally, he asked Dr Aurelius for swimming lessons.

After Katniss was sent back to District Twelve without him (under what he was sure would be the stellar guidance of Haymitch) he decided he was tired of his personal limitations keeping them apart. So he spent hours undergoing psychotherapy and sifting through memories; trying to separate shiny, from painful, from real. Dr Aurelius told him he needed to learn to control his body’s response to fear so that it wouldn’t trigger episodes, but Peeta decided it would be faster to just fear nothing at all. He demanded endless horrific simulations to desensitize his nervous system, until the nightmares became so terrible the good doctor put a stop to it. He told Peeta there was not going to be a ‘fast’ way to undo the damage of prolonged torture and if he ever wanted to be fit enough to see Katniss again he needed to take it one day at a time.

He spent four days kicking and screaming in his padded cell.

Next, he tried working out and sparing daily. There was a part of his brain that was constantly preparing for another arena. When President Coin suggested a final Hungers Games, he didn’t believe they would ever truly be finished. He didn’t trust anyone anymore, and when Katniss said she agreed to another round of the Games, he felt like everything he had ever known about her, about anyone, was a lie. Then when she shot Coin, he remembered Haymitch saying he ‘stood
with the Mockingjay’. They were doing it again: having secret conversations that he was excluded from because he was too weak, stupid or crazy to understand.

Well fine. Maybe he didn’t understand.

So he set out to learn their language. He read book after book on military strategy, played chess every night with whoever was available, and read manuscripts written by generals over the last fifty years on the philosophies of population control and how to start and stop wars. He trained relentlessly, turning his wrestling knowledge into ultimate defense. He imagined himself as a sentinel trained to see every possible enemy and defend against it. He wrestled simulation attackers until shadows had him jumping into fighting stances. After he became so paranoid that he holed himself up in his room and refused to let anyone within a ten-foot radius, Dr Aurelius calmly dropped a silver parachute of devastation on him.

What did Katniss want from him?

Almost nonchalantly, he pointed out that despite Peeta’s obvious lack of military knowledge or skill, Katniss had willingly chosen him as her partner and ally in not one, but two arenas. It seemed, before he started trying to kill her at least, she always chose him- was the only person, in fact, who chose him even when she had stronger, more skilled companions around her. Even in the Battle for the Capitol, she could have left him but didn’t. So was it really necessary for him to become this better, stronger person for her? Was that what she wanted?

The doctor suggested that since the path to becoming said warrior was clearly causing him severe physical and mental distress, he should be very sure it was going to take him to the destination he wanted.

And since Katniss wasn’t there to tell them what she wanted, had Peeta ever thought about what he wanted? For himself?

It was like the time Prim had dosed him with morphling while he watched images of Katniss flicker across a screen. For days, he sat in silence.

Realization began to separate in his mind like sediment settling in a glass someone had finally stopped shaking. Haymitch and Katniss may have had some kind of connection that he never would. Hell, Gale probably would fit right in with them. But one thing was for sure, it seemed everyone was only interested in seeing what Katniss could do. No one, not Haymitch, not Gale, not Coin and certainly not Katniss herself ever stopped to think about what she should do. Like, was it wise to ask a seventeen year old to be on the battlefield, leading a rebellion when she could barely feed herself? Or whether her shooting someone while she was falling apart after Prim’s
death, suffering from third degree burns and hopped up on pain pills was a good idea. And now she was with only Haymitch? His idea of fine literally only required her to be breathing.

But since he couldn’t be with her right then, he was going to make damn sure when he got back, nothing was ever going to keep him from her again.

Unless she wanted it of course. Always a distinct possibility.

But somehow that didn’t seem terrible. As long as he could be there if she wanted him.

So when he stopped training, stopped pushing himself to the extreme limits of his physical and mental endurance, and decided to ask for help, it was in the form of swimming lessons. If he was ever stuck out in the ocean again he would not wait for someone to bring him to her.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

He was at the point where he could feel the episodes coming on and tried to ride them out with deep breathing or breaking furniture, when Dr Aurelius brought up the idea of mourning. Peeta had repeatedly watched people die, either by his hands or someone else’s, and apparently grieving was a part of the ‘healing process’. The doctor understood that the death of his family might have been hard, but he suspected the murders might actually have been more traumatic.

So Peeta was supposed to grieve.

They tried therapies involving letting go and forgiveness but Peeta became so enraged that the exercises ended quickly.

“That’s the PROBLEM! We keep telling ourselves it’s ok and we had no choice and then seventy-five years later we’re sending twelve year olds to the slaughter!! IT IS NOT FUCKING ALRIGHT!!”

After that they stopped discussing forgiveness but stuck with mourning and saying good-bye. For weeks Peeta drew green eyes over and over again before they realized the eyes belonged to the girl from Eight. Finally he was able to draw her face, eyes wide and terrified, blood seeping from the wound in her neck, hair matted to her forehead. Once he was satisfied with the image, Dr Aurelius got permission for them to travel to Eight, and, guarded by soldiers with guns and nurses with syringes, the two of them burnt the drawings of her and then released the ashes over a sea of
golden wheat. Then Peeta’s knees buckled and he screamed so loud, birds took to the air.

He didn’t speak for a week, but that was mostly because he lost his voice. He slept for days.

They did this over and over. For Cato, the Morphling, Brutus, Mitchell.

That’s how he ended up on the beach in Four again, sitting on the sand, staring at the sea with a box of Finnick’s paper ashes by his side.

No one knew he was here. Whenever he did these ‘farewell trips’, they blocked off the area under the pretense of military exercises. So he sat alone, save for his usual entourage of soldiers and nurses. The beach was very different now. The clean up effort in Four focused on the inner city and the port areas, so recreational beaches like one they were on, were still littered with abandoned tanks and artillery shells that clung to the shore like rusty skeletons crawling out of the sea. The effect was disturbing, but not enough to ruin that wild beauty the ocean invoked.

The waves were not as high as they were during the Victory Tour, but they were nothing like the eerie stillness of the Quarter Quell either. The birds (seagulls, he has learned) were everywhere and continued to shriek relentlessly. He couldn’t decide if they were laughing or sobbing at him.

Finnick was special to him in a way he was never been able to explain to anyone. ‘He didn’t make me feel crazy,’ he told Dr Aurelius, but that felt inadequate. Finnick had loved Annie despite her ‘mental fragility’, and when Peeta had swung between protective and overbearing to raging lunatic, Finnick’s response was to smile sincerely and pat him on the back, even if he had Peeta in an arm bar. There was something in that smile that grounded him. Everyone else was waiting for him to ‘get better’. But Finnick just seemed happy he was alive. He didn’t care if Peeta was crazy.

Finnick had died smiling so he could live.

He had been through this over and over, tried to understand it, to reconcile it in his mind. That he should live instead of the man with a wife and a baby. He could feel despair rising in him like the tide. He looked at the box, at the ashes he was supposed to release, but he couldn’t, not yet. Instead he walked into the ocean deeper and deeper, until he could no longer keep his head above the water. And then he swam forward; eyes and mouth shut tight, fighting the current that wanted to bring him back to the shore. It was cold, but only briefly. Then he was overwhelmed by sea and salt and silence. When he broke the surface for air, the gulls and the waves astounded him, but then he was down again, making neat strokes forwards, surrounded by blackness with nothing but the strain of his muscles and the burn in his lungs reminding him that he was still alive.
He was alone- at the complete mercy of a beast that was indifferent to his survival.

When he began to tire he let himself surface and look around, only to see water on every side. Behind him the beach lay winking in the sun, Dr Aurelius and company standing like stick figures in the sand. Otherwise there was only salt water all around. He realized if he cried here, no one would see or hear him and his tears and sweat wouldn’t mean anything to the ocean.

He felt empty and meaningless.

Thank god.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

...And the one time he didn't.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Own nothing. This belongs to Greenwool whose works will literally change your life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It isn’t until he sees a map while unloading school supplies for the Community Home that he remembers there is a world outside of Twelve.

Katniss’ decade long ‘district arrest’ ended years ago, but they have never left Twelve - or even considered it - as far as he knows. Now he wonders, why not? It eats at him for weeks, making him silent and moody. Katniss once asks if something is bothering him, but doesn’t push when he says no. For her part, the cold and miserable winter prevents her from wandering deep into the woods where she is happiest, keeping her trapped in all the areas where she once hunted with Gale. It takes all of her will not to sink below the surface of her own dejection; she doesn’t have the energy to go fishing in his thoughts as well.

Winter reminds Peeta of his brothers, both of whom had birthdays in this season. As a distraction, he uses the skills he acquired during the Rebuilding to start designing an extension to the community home. But despite his long hours at the drawing board and Katniss’ disappearances into the woods, silence starts to permeate their lives, chilling them even when they are locked in each other’s arms. Sometimes it seems Twelve is overrun with the souls they’ve lost, and he thinks, what if they just went away?

The idea takes root and flourishes in his mind. He realizes that before now the timing was never right. Initially they were both so fragile that an unnecessary change in routine or environment seemed irresponsible. There was also the fact that they were highly recognizable and not universally loved. There remained those that viewed him as a Capitol elitist despite President Paylor’s early media campaign to dispel this myth. Also, there were groups who suffered greatly from the war and blamed the MockingJay for their problems. Free media allowed for the proliferation of some of these ideas; it’s something they were aware of, though the two of them never watched the news. In the early days after the rebellion, Gale had been in the media almost constantly and it had taken Katniss only three weeks to destroy the television screen.

It had not been replaced.
He still worries about the media frenzy going somewhere in Panem may cause, though he supposes they could both travel under military protection. But when he starts to think about where to go, he begins to doubt there is a place they could travel to and still be happy. Three, where Beetee is in wheelchair after a suicide attempt following the debacle with the civilian bombings in the Capitol? Seven, where Johanna is currently getting treatment for her morphling addiction? Four? Between Finnick and Katniss’ mother, neither of them can think of that place without shuddering. But now the idea of leaving will not let him be. He watches as Katniss gets paler and thinner, and he starts having flashbacks of the Victory Tour. No place feels safe, no land is untouched by the hurricane of their past.

Then, as he stares at maps it hits him: why do they have to stay in Panem at all?

Their second post-rebellion president was serving her third year. With the economy more stable, it seemed like the military presence that had dominated life in Panem for years was dying down. Now the nation’s security forces had other interests besides weapons and population control. Peeta was aware of this, as he followed current events through his regular contact with Capitol doctors. His travel needed to be secure and this required military involvement, which is why he knows how to reach Lieutenant General Hawthorne, though he never has in the decade plus since their time together in the Battle of Coin. But he sends him a letter now, which take him five days to write. He scraps eleven drafts before settling on something simple:

_Can we travel outside of Panem?_

For two months he hears nothing and figures it was a stupid question. Even if there were places outside of Panem how would they get there? Surely there were other governments to contend with, maybe even other languages. It was a silly idea. But finally, in early spring, he receives a thick manila envelope embossed with an official military seal. It has about one hundred and fifty pages of documents that require their signatures, two wrist identification fingerprint scanners and a detailed military clearance. The last page is a list of phone numbers, some of which are circled hastily. At the bottom is a handwritten note in barely legible script that reads, “Take her some place nice.”

Peeta’s a little resentful. Of course he’ll take her some place nice. But now by doing so he’ll be following the orders of Gale Hawthorne. Ugh. The nineteen year old in him can’t help but think it’s intentional.

To his credit, the phone numbers paired with the security clearances are direct lines to people who confirm, yes, there is a world outside of Panem and yes there are ways to get there. Several more phone calls, holographic projections, and military checks later he has an itinerary and a tentative departure date.
He hasn’t told Katniss.

Finally at dinner one night he brings it up.

“So…” he trails off uselessly. At her cocked eyebrow he tries again.

“So. Technically your ‘district arrest’ ended three years ago.”

Silence.

“Have you ever thought about leaving Twelve? I mean, for a little bit?”

Her fork stills mid bite and she looks at him like he’s lost his mind. She gets up from the table and leaves. He knows better than to follow her.

Four days later in bed one night, just as he is bringing his arm around her narrow waist she mutters, “There isn’t a place in Panem without some kind of ghost that haunts me.”

“What if it wasn’t in Panem at all,” he answers slowly. “What if we went some place new?”

She turns abruptly in his arms and stares at him again. Her gazes makes him uncomfortable but he doesn’t look away. She turns around and gathers herself to the edge of the bed, like his body is burning her. He sighs. He’s not sure what response he expected, but withdrawal is always the hardest for him to handle. Tomorrow, he decides, he will table his work on the expansion for the community home and paint instead. He’s learned the hard way that some days he must be kind to himself or else everyone pays for it in the end.

They don’t discuss it again, but a week later he comes home from a meeting with the builders to find five beautiful silver-tip badger hair paintbrushes newly made sitting on the kitchen table. Next to them are all one hundred and fifty pages of documents signed, initialed and dated by one Katniss Everdeen, though she is no where to be found. He spends the evening filling out his portion of the paperwork and marvels that she had the patience to complete it all without throwing something.
Later he finds two broken plates on the dining room floor.

That’s how they find themselves on a rocky beach some place far to the north of District Twelve. They took a train to the military base in Seven, then a hovercraft across the sea. They stopped at an island where they met a group of people in leather bomber suits and fur-collared coats despite being in the middle of summer. They were deeply tanned with dark hair, almost with a Seam look to them. They spoke quietly and quickly in what sounded like a variation of Panamese but with a strange accent. Fingerprint scanners and security clearances later, they were in another hovercraft, this one small and for only three people. It dropped them on an island about two hours from the first. It had apparently been abandoned in a nuclear fall out nearly a century earlier, but the plant life had returned though the people hadn’t.

They arrive around noon and the pilot tells them he’ll be back in eight to nine hours. Then the hovercraft takes off and they are alone on a pebbled beach surrounded by dense forest. For a moment they are both quiet, in awe of the calm waves rolling up to the shore, the glistening rocks and the fresh sea breeze the remained crisp in the height of summer. Then Katniss is stripping off clothing and running towards the water. Peeta feels a little affronted: he thought he was the only thing she would strip so fast for.

Hours pass. She is on her back, floating with the current, and hasn’t looked to the shore once. He’s happy but his body is humming with nervous energy. He considers joining her, but decides against it, remembering the times he sought oblivion in the absolute solitude of the sea. He tries to take it in, the indigo waves lined with a lacework of sea foam, the endless horizon stretching out before him, but all he can see is the tiny naked body of a woman swimming further and further away from him. The longer he sits on the beach the more nervous he gets until the sun on the water makes everything look shiny and threatening. He shakes his head angrily. He - will not - have an episode here, today, goddamit. If only the sea wasn’t so calm like it had been in the Quarter Quell. Or the rocks didn’t remind him of the cave...

It becomes harder and harder until even the clear blue sky looks sinister.

Sometimes he is so tired of being crazy.

He stands quickly and paces the beach before he starts climbing the rocks. They are slick and sharp, and he recognizes too late that doing this barefoot was probably not a smart decision, as his feet are soon cut and bleeding. But then the salt on the rocks enters the cuts and he’s blinded briefly by a soothing bolt of pain. It steadies him as he pushes himself forward over the rocks
looking out to the sea. As he climbs he remembers the first time he kissed Katniss when their lives were not in danger. And the night she stayed up decorated cookies for the Community Home with him until three in the morning. And the time he spent a day in bed with her doing nothing but listening to her tell stories about Prim while she both laughed and cried. It occurs to him that in the last twelve or thirteen years, they’ve created enough memories that the shiny ones are drowned out in comparison. When he reaches the top of the small sea cliff, he realizes he is standing in a new land, unscathed by his past life. He’s bleeding and in pain, his love is floating away on the tide, and it’s alright.

It has to be.

When he returns, she’s still in the water but he’s not looking for her. Instead he finds fruit in a knapsack left with them by the pilot. While he eats an apple, he lays down at the water’s edge and lets the sea foam wash the sand from his wounded feet. The sun feels warm and good.

He closes his eyes.

“Peeta?” Her voice sounds very far away.

“Peeta?” she tries again.

He cracks an eye to see the sun is low over the water and Katniss is shivering next to him on the beach.

“You came back,” he murmurs sleepily, not fully awake.

“Are you surprised?” she asks, looking at him incredulously.

He sits up and stares at her for a moment, all glowing and healthy in the afternoon sun, salt crystallizing on her skin. The woman in front of him is both identical to and nothing like the girl he fell in love with all those years ago.

“No,” he answers. “Hungry?”
When she nods, he tries to feed her an apple, but it seems she has an appetite for other things.

Later, when they are both sticky and uncomfortable on the rapidly cooling beach, with sand in places they would rather not imagine, she drags him into the water. He’s cold and shivering but all of a sudden she’s in his arms, her head buried in his neck.

“You found a place with no Games,” she whispers.

An affirmation rumbles in his chest as he holds her tightly to him.

“Imagine - someone’s kids could come here one day and be in a place where there were no Games. Ever.”

Their eyes meet as he nods silently. Then together they look out over the sea and say nothing else until the hovercraft comes for them.

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it. Thank you for reading, reviewing, commiserating and the occasional well deserved eye-roll. All the views, kudos, and messages mean more than any author can describe. See you on a beach somewhere <3

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