Train Tracks

by annieoakley1

Summary

He’s just a boy from the Seam, trying to keep his family from starving. What would the apothecary owner’s daughter ever see in him? One shot, Panem AU.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Peeta was a lousy shot. He realized it when he first ventured into the woods two months after the mine explosion that claimed his father’s life. He’d never been beyond the fence alone before; all the other times he’d gone into the forest, he was with his father, who hunted with a skill and precision that Peeta failed to inherit.

Frustrated and famished, Peeta collapsed onto the forest floor as he remembered the happier times in these spots. His father had been unfailingly patient, always offering words of encouragement and a gentle tousle of his hair when Peeta missed the mark yet again. “You’ll get better with age and practice,” he’d smile. “You have time.”

He was nearly twelve now, due for his first reaping that summer, and he didn’t have any time left. His mother and Prim were near starvation at home, and Prim had developed a terrible cough that kept him up all night not out of disturbance but fear. The small payout from the mines was gone, his mother was still so consumed by grief that she could barely move, and so the weight of the world rested on Peeta’s young shoulders.

If only he could take down a rabbit, or maybe a squirrel. Anything to take to the apothecary to trade for medicine for Prim. But he slipped under the fence empty-handed, forced to return home with nothing to offer his family.
As his mother and Prim lay curled together on the bed, Peeta searched frantically through their bureau for anything of value. His little sister’s old baby clothes were nestled in the bottom drawer, so he scooped the threadbare garments up in his arms and raced out the door. He hoped to trade them at the public market in town, desperate for money or medicine, but no one was interested in bartering for crumbs, let alone anything of value. Defeated, he took the clothes to the apothecary. The owners had three children, two teenage boys and a daughter about his age. These clothes were utterly useless to them. But maybe, just maybe, they’d take pity on him. Maybe he’d be lucky enough to talk with the wife, who seemed so much nicer than the man. Just maybe…

But it was useless. Useless and hopeless. The man screamed at him until his face was red, threatening to call the Peacekeepers if the boy didn’t leave immediately. Peeta stumbled outside in the now pouring rain and dropped Prim’s sodden baby clothes to the ground. He rounded the corner, fighting back tears as he leaned against the building. He wished that the cold rain would make him just as sick as Prim was. If he couldn’t help her get better, than he wanted to die, too.

He was just about to close his eyes when he saw her, the owner’s youngest. Wisps of black hair were plastered against her face as she blinked away the rain drops, but she knelt next to him, undeterred. “Take this,” she said, handing him a bottle. “Give her a spoonful, every six hours.”

“Katniss!” he heard her father screaming. “Katniss, get back here right now!”

“Take it!”

He wanted to tell her that he couldn’t, that he didn’t want her to get into trouble. But it was for Prim, and he couldn’t afford to think about anyone but her.

She ran away before he had the chance to thank her, so he took off in the opposite direction, racing back to the Seam with the heavy bottle clutched protectively against him. He roused Prim awake to take the first dose as soon as he was back home, and then he offered her a weak tea made from boiled peppermint leaves he found in the back of the cupboard. He wished he could offer her food, too, but the medicine was all that mattered now.

Prim slept soundly that night, the thick medicine suppressing her harsh cough. The next morning she was well enough to go to school, and they walked there together hand-in-hand. The sun was shining, birds chirping, and yesterday’s cold rain felt like a lifetime ago now that the air was warm with spring.

In the hallway at school, he saw her and their eyes met. His mouth dropped open at the sight of her bruised cheek and swollen eye, and he wanted so badly to go to her and say something, whether it was an apology or a thank you. But she quickly looked away, and Peeta dropped his own gaze in embarrassment.

That was when he noticed the dandelion, the first of the year. And suddenly he knew how he could keep his mother and sister alive without the use of his father’s bow and arrow.

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He made most of his trades at the apothecary, where even the cruel man had no choice but to pay up for the essential plants and herbs Peeta collected. Medicines from the Capital cost him top dollar, but the concoctions he and his wife could make with the items from the forest were just as potent and much cheaper to produce.

But he also took apples to the baker in the fall, and strawberries to the mayor in the summer. And
the rest that he foraged was split between his family and the Hawthornes.

He’d met Gale, his now best friend, just a few months after he first started slipping beneath the fence in search of plants and berries. Before he saw the tall boy with the dark good looks of a merchant, he saw his snares and the fat squirrels they’d captured. Gale nearly scared him to death when he emerged from the thicket and barked at him to stay away. Their relationship was tense at first, fueled by their desperation to provide for their families and an innate distrust of each other. But it didn’t take long to realize that everyone benefitted when they worked together. Now they met in the woods each day after school; as Gale checked his traps and snares, Peeta foraged, and then they split their haul. Today Gale had two rabbits, and Peeta had mushrooms, berries, and plenty of katniss tubers, which were hearty enough to make a meal even when they didn’t have meat.

Peeta briefly wondered what inspired her parents to name her after the plant, but he forced himself to focus on more important matters. Gale may have made time for girls- even merchant girls that he claimed to not care about- but Peeta had to focus on getting Prim through her first reaping. At 16, Peeta will have his name in twenty times. Only one slip of paper will have Prim’s name on it, but that was still one too many.

“Look what I got,” Gale said, pulling a loaf of bakery bread from his bag. He tore it in half and gave him his share, and Peeta raised a brow when he felt how soft and still warm it was. Gale shrugged. “I checked some other snares this morning and traded the squirrels I caught at the bakery.”

Today was Gale’s final reaping, but his name was entered forty-two times. The thought of it made Peeta feel sick with worry, and not even fresh bakery bread could entice him. “Baker must have been feeling sentimental,” he said. Usually the trades they made there weren’t nearly this generous. The baker was only a few years out of the reaping himself. Despite his youth, something about the man reminded Peeta of Katniss’s father at the apothecary. Maybe it was the way he looked at them when they came to trade. Not quite at them, but through them. As if they were nothing.

Maybe they were nothing. Sometimes Peeta wondered if he didn’t collapse and die on that day in the rain, and everything after was just death’s dream. He shook his head; reaping days made him morosely introspective. The only silver-lining was that it wasn’t possible for both he and Gale to be chosen, and so one would be left behind to care for the other’s family. But Peeta knew he wouldn’t be able to take care of them all the way Gale could, so he already had his mind made up on what he’d do if Gale’s name was called.

An hour later, as they stood with all the other children and waited for Effie Trinket to call a name, Peeta pleaded with whatever forces were out there for it to not be someone he cared about.

While the universe was never too kind before, this year he got what he wanted most. The chosentributes were strangers, kids Peeta only knew from around school or the Seam. He watched them go off with Effie, walking toward certain death, and he felt guilty for being so relieved.

As he took Prim’s small hand and waited for Gale to gather the rest of the Hawthornes, he saw her in the crowd of girls. She was wearing a blue dress, her long hair pinned up in an elaborate braid. And most curiously, she was staring right at him. She quickly looked away, and so did Peeta as one thought reverberated in his head.

Thank goodness it wasn’t her.

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Peeta was a dreamer. It was impractical to waste time and energy thinking about things that couldn’t happen and didn’t matter, but the what-ifs and fantasies were sometimes his only escape.

He wished, more than anything he ever wished for himself, for art supplies. He wanted to be able to recreate the gorgeous sights and colors he saw in the forest. He wondered how he would mix the paints to replicate the beauty of the soft orange sunset as it dipped below the hills, or the bright purple flowers that bloomed in spring.

But Prim needed clothes and shoes and food, and so did he. So the closest thing he would ever know to real painting was the patterns he made on his pink skin with juice from berries too tart to eat. He was doing just that now, tracing his stained fingertip on his forearm, following the image he saw in his mind. A three-petaled flower, arrowhead leaves at the stalk...Katniss.

Katniss.

If only he could think of way to repay her for the medicine, maybe then he could get her out of his head. But that was an insurmountable debt, one he was cursed to owe forever, and so she would haunt him like a ghost for as long as he lived. Resigned to that simple fact, he brushed his hand down his arm and smeared his masterpiece. There was no time for silly games when he had medicinal herbs to gather for the apothecary.

As he trekked back through the town with his bag thrown over his shoulder, he passed the bakery and indulged in one more daydream. Years ago, when Peeta first told his mother that he was a terrible hunter, she laughed and said that was because he was a creator and not a destroyer. It was something that stuck with him for a long time, but the thought depressed him because there was no opportunity for the creation of anything in a district as poor as theirs. That was when he started to wonder what it would be like to be a merchant. Specifically, a baker. To make from simple ingredients the bread that fed the town, and to decorate the cakes in the window display for everyone to look at as they passed by. That would probably be his favorite part, the chance to paint with frosting.

Everyone would respect him as the breadmaker, not dismiss him as Seam trash. And they would all be warm in the winter because of the ovens, and they would always have food and never know hunger again. What a life that would be.

But it wasn’t a life he was destined to have, and the closest Peeta would ever get to it was baking the dense loaves from the grains they received from his tesserae.

He put those thoughts out of his head by the time he reached the apothecary. He went around the back and knocked at the door, hoping it would be the oldest or his mother to deal with. The younger son, whose name he couldn’t quite remember, was like Sae’s granddaughter, what those in the Seam called slow. He didn’t understand the trades and always fetched his father, probably out of fear of doing something wrong and feeling his wrath. Peeta could never understand how someone could treat another person that way, especially one as innocent as a very small child. But Katniss wasn’t the only one with bruises peppering her olive skin, so he knew none of them were exempt from the man’s anger.

To his surprise, it was Katniss now who greeted him at the door. He offered a friendly smile and hello, which she didn’t return. In fact, she barely looked him in the eye. But she studied everything he brought with meticulous detail, almost daring him to have found something of subpar quality.

“It’s good,” she finally said, taking everything from him before handing over some coins. He
watched her in amusement, wondering what it would take to get her to laugh or smile. What would she even look like without that scowl settled on her face?

“What?” she snapped, put off by his smirk.

The smile fell away as he pocketed the coins. “Nothing,” he said somberly. Sometimes he wasn’t sure if her brusque attitude was all an act to keep other people at bay, or if she really did hate him now. Would such a feeling even be unjustified? After all, she must associate him with that day in the rain over five years ago. Maybe it wasn’t worth it to her, giving him the medicine that saved Prim’s life. Maybe she still felt the sting on her cheekbone every time he came by.

“Thank you,” he said deliberately now, hoping she knew he wasn’t just talking about the money.

Her features softened for just a moment. “You’re welcome,” she said, and then she was turning around and slamming the door in his face.

Peeta laughed softly to himself as he started back home. Oh, it was an act all right. And she wasn’t as good at it as she thought she was.

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“Gale?” Peeta asked, watching closely as the boy finished up the snare. “What did your grandmother do in town?”

Gale would be starting at the mines full time next week, and he was intent on showing Peeta everything he knew about snares so that he could continue coming out here after school while Gale was still at work. After a summer of intense instruction, Peeta was sure he had it all down now, and he was growing bored and restless. So he asked questions.

“Her father owned the butcher shop,” he answered, tugging on the wire to make sure it’d hold.

“How’d she meet your grandfather?”

“School,” he answered gruffly. “Here, now you try.”

Peeta took over the next snare and replicated Gale’s work perfectly. “She sure must’ve been crazy about him to leave all that for the Seam.”

“Yeah, well, crazy’s a good word for it, I guess.”

“Ever wonder what life would be like if you had the butcher shop?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” Gale admitted, surprising Peeta. “But no sense in wondering for long, because I’m not a townie. I’m going to the mines. And you’ll be in the mines soon enough, too.”

Peeta was well aware of that fact. He looked down at his pale skin and imagined it covered in a thin layer of coal dust. He’d be a mole in two years time. Moles were the nickname for the fairhaired Seam workers that were forced to mine coal underground in order to eek out a living. There was no sense in wishing or hoping for something else, because Peeta’s fate was sealed as soon as he was born in the Seam. But he made peace with it, oddly enough. His father was a mole, and in a few days Gale would be a mole, too. There were worse things to be. Like an angry merchant who slapped his family around to feel better about himself.

“You should come out tonight, Peet,” Gale said. “Leevy has a few friends who really like you.
There’s probably even a couple girls from town who’d follow you to the slagheap.”

The offer seemed more appealing every time he made it, but Peeta still declined. He was tired after a long day in the woods, and Prim and his mother were expecting him home soon. He told Gale to head out, that he’d take everything into town to trade and catch up with him later to give him his share. Gale never liked going to the square much so he readily agreed, and they separated at the fence.

After stopping at the mayor’s and the bakery, Peeta took his wild flowers to the florist, who requested additional bouquets for an upcoming toasting. He made a surprising amount there, and it was almost enough to make him consider skipping the apothecary all together, since Peeta would give anything to avoid that man. But common sense won out. An unpleasant interaction was always worth the coins.

But again it was Katniss who answered the back door. She’d been the one dealing with his trades for weeks now, so curiosity got the best of him and he asked where her father was.

“He’s sick.”

“Oh,” Peeta said. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

She handed over his pay as her lips twitched to a smile. “I’m not.” He met her bright eyes as she started to close the door, and he reached out his hand to stop her.

“Then I hope to see you again in a few days.”

She nodded, and he whispered goodbye before turning to leave.

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Katniss’s father fell ill for three months, and he was bedridden for much of that time. Katniss said her family was mystified, and even the town doctor had no idea what ailed him.

“Did you bring everything I needed?” she asked, rummaging through his bag.

“Yes,” he answered. “Don’t I always?”

She scowled as she looked up, earning a smile from him. But then her hand wrapped around the foxglove and all was forgiven. “Good,” she said simply. “For father’s medicine.”

“Ah,” he replied, as he always did now.

Did she think that he didn’t know? That he survived this long off the woods without an intricate understanding of what was safe to eat and what to avoid? He smiled more broadly, thinking of the plant book his father showed him all those years ago. Peeta recently picked it up where he left off, finding it to be the perfect marriage between practicality and his love of art. One of the first entries in the book? Foxglove. A purple or white plant with tubular flowers and thick leaves, it has many medicinal purposes if administered expertly and in small doses, but it’s also very toxic if used in excess.

It was one of the plants his father always told him to stay clear of, so he never touched it until Katniss started requesting it a few months ago. The first time he got it for her, he brought a single flower, sure that it would be plenty for her to treat her father.

“I’ll need more next time,” she said firmly, and that’s when he knew.
So, the next time, he brought her more.

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A year and a half passed and the perplexing “illness” still plagued her father. The atmosphere in the apothecary was completely different now that the man was forced to stay holed up in his room, so weak he was unable to leave his bed.

Peeta no longer made trades at the back door. Alder, the oldest Everdeen child, insisted he come through the front now, that he was as important as any patient. Everyone in the family seemed more relaxed now that the father was confined to the upstairs.

And Katniss, with her scowl and narrowed eyes and ever stern demeanor, changed the most of all. At least in Peeta’s eyes. She was still no nonsense when it came to business and her brothers’ well-being, but sometimes, when they were alone, she allowed him a glimpse of the real her. Her smile, it turned out, was beautiful. Maybe it was a good thing she didn’t show it off too much, because it might just have overwhelmed him completely if she had.

Now they didn’t just trade herbs for coins. They traded stories. They laughed together, too. And there were small, tentative touches. Like her hand on his wrist, or his elbow brushing against her side as they stood next to each other and talked. It drove him crazy, and he was half-tempted to find any girl to take to the slagheap just to find some relief.

But he didn’t want to be with just any girl. As he listened to her tell a story about the goat she got as a birthday present for her other brother, Sage, he watched her closely and realized, with startling clarity, that he was crazy in love with her.

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“He’s getting better,” she whispered to him from across the counter.

Peeta didn’t know what to say. “What are you going to do?”

“I guess I need to find another medicine to help him along.”

“I’ll get whatever you need,” he told her, and she smiled softly at him as she leaned forward on her elbows. “But I won’t be able to come around as much,” he added, and her smile fell. “I start at the mines next week.”

“Oh,” she said, looking away. “Right.”

He reached out to stop her from turning away. “We’ll figure something out,” he promised. “Gale’s younger brothers are helping out now. They can bring things to you every day if that’s what you need.”

“Thank you.”

His eyes widened in surprise, and he insisted that she didn’t need to thank him for anything. As he rambled on about how he should be thanking her, she stood still in front of him and watched him closely. “After what you did for me,” he said, licking his dry lips. “For Prim, I would never be able to repay you for that. You saved her life. You-”

Her lips cut off his words, and he froze up for a second before he realized this was real and she was kissing him. His hands came up to cup her face as his mouth moved with hers, and when she broke the kiss, puffing her warm breath against his nose, he slowly opened his eyes to meet hers.
“Try to stop in sometimes,” she told him as she backed away. “Whether you have herbs or not...just come by. For me.”

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The feel of Katniss in his arms, her body pressed tightly against his while they kissed deeply, was unparalleled. The tenderest of touches now turned into frenzied need within a few moments time, and as she grabbed at him, her hands in his hair or sliding down his chest, he marveled that this was really happening, that she was really with him.

Gale said it was about time he found a girl, but he was shocked when he found out just who the girl was. “What in the world do you have in common with someone like that?” he asked one morning as they walked to the mines.

“It’s hard to explain,” Peeta replied thoughtfully. “But it feels like we were always meant to be together.”

He expected Gale to be happy for him, but his friend seemed cautious. “Just be careful, Peet,” he said. “I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Peeta dismissed Gale’s advice as overprotective concern, and he got through his grueling work day by thinking of Katniss and making plans to see her as soon as he could.

It was a few days later when he finally had a chance to go into town. As he passed by the front window on his way into the apothecary, he saw Katniss jump out of her chair from behind the counter and race to the door to meet him. He smiled as it swung open, surprised by her exuberance, but then she was pushing him back outside and leading him by hand to the back of the building.

“You can’t be here,” she cried, spinning around in his arms. “He’s up. He’s better.”

Peeta steadied her against him and gently trailed his fingertips along the side of her marred face. She had purple bruises blossoming down her cheek and jaw, and there was a cut on her lip that probably needed a stitch or two. He felt eerily calm as he studied her injuries. “What happened?” he asked lowly.

“He’s been out of bed for a couple days now, and yesterday he came back down to the shop. He saw Sage’s goat tied up in the back. She’d gotten into the garden and ate some of the flowers, and he...he-” She started crying now, the first time he ever saw tears in her beautiful gray eyes. He carefully brushed them away, shushing her softly as she shook against him. “I found it, and I couldn’t believe he’d do that to Sage. I know he’s awful, but I didn’t know he was that awful.”

“You confronted him?” Peeta asked.

She nodded, wincing in pain as his finger probed the bruise on her jaw. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“I told Sage it ran away. If he asks you about it, say Lady ran away.” Her lip was bleeding again, and he caught the droplet of blood with his thumb. He could only imagine the encounter she had if it left her this shaken.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he said calmly. “I’ll take care of this.”

He didn’t want to leave her flustered and bleeding, with that monster waiting back inside. But he had to go now before it got dark. “I’ll be back tonight. Meet me here at nine.” He kissed her forehead and left before she could protest.
Once he was on the other side of the fence, he went in search of the berry bush that he always avoided before. Before he plucked any from the shrub, he put on a pair of old leather gloves to protect his hands. Then he gathered handfuls, collecting them in a cloth that he held against his father’s old hunting jacket.

When he had more than enough, he checked Gale’s snares. Rory and Vick must have just reset them, as most were empty. But there was a rabbit caught in one of the wire traps along the perimeter, and that would do just fine. He slaughtered it with his knife and then skinned and gutted it right there. Then he took one of the bowls from his hunting bag and mashed up the nightlock into a thin paste the color of blood. He placed the meat in the bowl next, rolling it around in the berries so it could marinate in the toxic juices. Nightlock was the most lethal plant in the forest, and not even cooking the berries could dispel their toxicity.

Katniss had opened up to him about her father’s depravity, so he was sure the Everdeens would be forced to feast on goat for the next several days. Even poor Sage, who would unknowingly be eating his beloved pet. Katniss, ever protective of her brother, would want something else to feed him. Her father, the monster, would never allow it, and after berating and beating her for the trade she made with Seam trash, he’d take the rabbit meat for himself.

“Be careful, and don’t let anyone else touch it,” he warned in a low whisper as he handed the wrapped package over to her.

“What do you want for it?” she loudly asked. Her eyes flitted up to the small window above their heads.

“What do you have?” he countered back cockily.

“Not much. A few coins.”

“That’s rabbit. It’s worth more than just a couple coins. And I cleaned it myself, which only raises the price.”

“Please?” she implored. “I need it for my brother. I can give you more money later.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “I’ll be back later in the week to collect. If you don’t pay up, I’ll tell your father.”

He stalked off in a fabricated huff, his fingers twitching to touch her, his lips burning to kiss her. But he could do no such thing now.

They had to wait.

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Rowan Everdeen fell dead at the dinner table the next night. It was a real shame, but not unexpected. Those kind of things happen when you don’t give yourself proper time to heal after a lengthy illness. His devastated family now had to pick up the pieces and somehow cope despite such a momentous loss. How ever would they get on?

Peeta had to remind himself to act somber, but the smiles were hard to fight. Especially when he was on his way to see her.

When they were finally alone, he was expecting her to be every bit as happy as he was, but she
looked as upset as she was before her father died. “What’s wrong?” he asked, terrified.

She wasn’t even able to look him in the eye. “My parents arranged for me to marry the baker.”

He couldn’t have heard right. “What?”

“You heard me,” she said. “Alder is going to take over the business, and he’ll be able to support Sage and my mother, and his family when he has one. But he can’t take care of me, too. And I guess my parents made this agreement last year. We’re to be married the fall after my final reaping.”

“It is the fall after your final reaping,” he snapped now.

Her lifeless eyes finally met his. “I know.”

“So what now? You really want to do this?”

“Want?” she asked incredulously. “What I want has never mattered. I don’t have a choice. I never have a choice.”

“Marry me.”

“What?”

He ran his hand through his hair, and then wiped the coal dust off on his pant leg. “Marry me,” he repeated. “It doesn’t even have to be that kind of marriage, if you don’t want that. We’d get a house assigned to us and you could live there, and I’d stay with my mother and Prim. I can’t offer you much but you’d be free as you can be.”

“Peeta, if I broke a marriage agreement with a merchant, I’d be run out of the town. I couldn’t see my family again.” Her voice cracked at that last declaration, and there were tears shimmering in her eyes.

He wiped at his own tears, utterly crestfallen. “I know,” he choked. “I’m sorry. I wish there was a better way.”

He was about to walk away when she said, “Ask me again.”

“What?”

“Ask me again.”

He was a befuddled mess, but he managed to get the words out one more time. And then she smiled, the most beautiful, radiant smile he ever saw, and she said the last thing he ever expected.

She said yes.

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To see Katniss and Prim together, one might think they were sisters. Physically they looked nothing alike, but they took to each other immediately, forging a bond that surprised them all. It warmed Peeta’s heart to see his new wife getting along so well with his mother and beloved little sister, and each night he looked forward to getting home for dinner and seeing them all happily together. When the meal was over, Katniss would take Prim aside and teach her more about the
healing trade. Starting her own makeshift apothecary in the Seam gave Katniss a sense of purpose after such a tumultuous year, and she dived right into all the work. But she needed an assistant. Prim, she claimed, was a natural.

At the end of the night, Peeta took Katniss’s hand and walked her to their house a few rows away. He’d chastely kiss her cheek goodnight, and then he would start back home to his mother and Prim.

But tonight, Katniss didn’t let go of him. “Peeta, this is ridiculous. You’re a grown man and you have to share a room with them.”

“I don’t mind, Katniss,” he said with a shrug. “I’ve always shared a room with them.”

“But this is your place.” She gripped him harder, tugging at him to come inside. “Stay with me.”

He considered it seriously. The word always, which seemed the natural response to such a request from her, was on the tip of his tongue. But the idea of sleeping in the same small house as her was a whole different type of torture. It was difficult enough knowing she was only a few houses away.

“Please?” she implored.

He followed her inside to appease her, but he had no intention of spending the night. “I can’t stay too long,” he said, wiping the soot from his face. “I need a bath. And clean clothes.”

“You can take a bath here. And you don’t need any clothes.”

Maybe if any other woman in the world had said it, it might sound seductive. But Katniss had a way of stating things so matter-of-factly that it was devoid of any hint of sex. That was one of the many things about her that intrigued him. She was so...pure. And he was pretty pure too, after all, so she was perfect for him.

Again she coaxed him to stay with her, even going as far as to prepare a bath for him there. He declined for as long as he could, reminding her that it would be odd for him to return home squeaky clean -he didn’t know how he would even begin to explain that to Prim- and that he didn’t want to change back into his filthy work clothes.

Katniss gave him a towel and pushed him toward the tub. “I told you, you don’t need clothes. And Prim’s 15, Peeta. She knows we’re married, and she knows what that means.”

“What does it mean?” he asked softly.

She hesitated for a moment, and then she shook her head and firmly told him, again, to get his bath. “I’ll be out here.”

He did as she asked, and it was only after he was washed, rinsed, and wrapping the towel around his hips that he realized he had no idea what to do next. “Uh, Katniss,” he said, opening the door that led into the bedroom. “You’re going to have to get some clothes for me-“

He stopped short at the vision before him- Katniss on the bed, the sheet bunched around her naked waist. “Your clothes are already here,” she told him as he gawked. “I brought them over while you were at work.”

He couldn’t speak. He was too mesmerized by her and her bare breasts, her dark nipples hardened by the chilly air. He’d never seen a naked woman before, but he couldn’t imagine another one more beautiful. She beckoned him to her, and he followed in a daze.
“Kiss me,” she commanded before their mouths met.

He took all his strength to pull away, but he did it a few moments later, breathless.

“I’ve had a crush on you forever,” she said sadly. “And you never kiss me anymore.”

Her nails were digging into his strong shoulders, but he was still caught up in her declaration. It was hard to imagine Katniss having a crush on anyone, let alone someone like him. How could he be so lucky? “I don’t want you to think I expect anything,” he answered.

“What if I want you to expect things?” she countered. She trailed her lips along his defined jaw. “Things like kisses. And more.”

“I’ll give you everything I can. Whatever you want, just ask.”

“Then stay with me,” she repeated as she guided him between her splayed legs.

He whispered, “Always,” against her lips, cupping her breast as he pushed inside of her.

It was a quick and messy coupling, but he tried to soothe her discomfort with sweet kisses across her face. The pleasure, so exquisite it was almost painful, mounted quickly. She told him it was okay, that he could let go, that she took care of everything, so he kissed her hard as he came.

After, as she curled up next to him, he asked, “So when did forever start?” At her look of confusion, he clarified. “Earlier, you said you had a crush on me for forever. So when did that start?”

“I guess it was back in kindergarten,” she sighed happily. “I was with my mother, waiting in line to sign in, and she pointed you out across the room. She said, ‘See that blond-haired boy over there? I went to kindergarten with his daddy.’”

“Really?” he asked with surprise.

“Yeah. And I watched you for the rest of the day, wondering if we might become friends like our parents. After recess, we came in to draw, and then the teacher asked if anyone would like to show off their picture. Your hand shot straight up. Do you remember that?”

He dropped a kiss on her crown and shook his head. It sounded familiar, but he didn’t quite recall it.

“You painted a dandelion,” she told him. “And I guess that’s when forever started.”

As she fell asleep in his arms, he wondered how he went all those year without noticing her. Why did it take that terrible day in the cold rain to realize how special she was? But he guessed that didn’t matter anymore, now that they were together.

All those other lives, the ones where he was a painter, or maybe a baker, or even a Victor, wouldn’t matter any without her right next to him. He closed his eyes and drifted off, for once thankful that he was just a boy from the Seam.
This was meant to be a series at one point where I played around with different versions of Everlark in the Seam and merchant classes, but I don't think I'll get to any of the other ones. But I am diligently working on other fics, including updates, so thank you again for your patience.

I'm everlarkeologist on tumblr, and since I'll be seeing the movie tomorrow (!!!) I'll be able to catch up on messages soon. Thank you so much for reading! Happy Mockingjay Part 2 premiere week to you all!

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