the night starts here

by arsonistlullabye

Summary

Gale Hawthorne spends the night with the mayor’s daughter. Slightly AU, I guess.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

"You look so much older than you are," she tells me in the dark, her slender fingers tracing my jaw line. She does not mean this as an insult, and I don't take it as one, but I turn my face away and find myself staring out the window.

"Gale," she says, her voice surprisingly firm and assertive. She demands my attention.

I look back at her but avoid eye contact, instead focusing on the natural peachy blush of her cheeks. There is a lump of shame and guilt stuck in my throat that leaves me unable to speak and an agonizing ache in my gut.

She sighs and turns her body so that she is completely facing me, her face so close to mine that I can smell the sweet fruity fragrance of her perfume. It almost makes me sick. "Gale," she finally speaks, "what's wrong?"

I look at the ceiling before answering, as if what I wanted to say was written there in bold letters only visible to me. "I… Nothing."

"You know, it'd be great if you could talk to me like I'm not stupid," she says without any anger, though her voice broken and stripped of its usual enthusiasm. There is a long moment of almost
grueling silence before she speaks again. "This was… Not smart," she smiles and laughs, though it's clear to the both of us that she's faking it.

"It wasn't," my voice is a lot icier than I intended it to be. I sigh. "I'm sorry… It's just-" I tug at my hair in frustration, "I'm so sorry."

And there's the brutal silence again. There is nothing I could say that could make this situation any better or any easier, but by not saying anything, I know I am making things worse. Still, my brain and my mouth refuse to cooperate.

x

The Games were finally over. Today both Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark were crowned victors and everyone was gathered in the square to watch. I forced myself to watch as Katniss and Peeta stood side-by-side as the proud victors of District 12, footage of their highlights in the Games projected on a large screen behind them; clips of each of them forming different alliances, a few of Katniss in the tree and with Rue, Peeta betraying the Careers. And then there's the pivotal cave scene.

Now I can't watch. A part of me wants to believe that this is all part of a strategy – a plan Katniss had formed and committed to so that both she could live and save Peeta, though I can't imagine why. But what if it's not? What if she did develop feelings for Mellark? Where would that leave me?

The celebration eventually ceases and the crowd begins to disperse. I am still sitting on the same step as I was hours before, thinking about what it would be like to see Katniss again when she finally returned. Things wouldn't be the same, of that I was sure. But would she still play up her romance with Peeta? Or worse – would I learn that the whole thing was real all along?

"Now this year's Games… One to remember, that's for sure," says a familiar voice from behind me, interrupting the irritating sound of my own thoughts.

I turn to see Madge Undersee, of all people, standing behind me. She sits down next to me on the cold floor, even though she is wearing a short white dress made of delicate fabric.

"Who said you could sit here?" I ask bitterly. Normally I don't have a problem with the mayor's daughter, but tonight I felt too cold and too distraught to even make an attempt at conversation, especially not with a girl I hardly know.

Madge had other ideas, though. She ignores my question and twists to face me. "Katniss is alive. She's coming back from the Capitol tomorrow. What could you possibly be sulking about?"

I ignore her, even though she's right. I sigh heavily and slide my foot over some pieces of rubble. "I'd ask you why you're even here, but then you'd throw the same question back at me, wouldn't you?"

Once again, she dismisses my question. She stands up and begins to walk away before turning around and looking at me. "Come with me. I know what you need."

At first I hesitate, but for some reason, I give in and follow her lead. We walk through the night in complete silence, maneuvering through familiar roads. I follow her until we reach a wall made of brick that looks as if it may be falling apart. I do not recognize it, or any of my surroundings for that matter – at least not with the sun down. She grabs onto a protruding block and carefully pushes herself up, propping herself up on top. Her eyes are on me now, signaling me to do the same.
Once I'm up there, I ask her where we are.

"My house. I would have taken you through the front, but there's a good chance my parents are still awake."

"And what am I doing here?"

She flashes me a half-smile and hops off, landing feet first on the ground. I groan and do the same.

x

Once again, Madge fills the silence. "I know how you feel about her and I know I don't come close. And this was partly my decision and my fault. But that doesn't make it okay for you to…" she pauses for a moment, cautiously reaching over again to touch my face. I don't move. "I know that you love Katniss, but she was changed in there. We can't change what happened to us just like we can't prevent things from happening to us. The only thing we can control is how we let these things affect us."

She stops and for a moment, it feels like she's talking about us or whatever this is but then she continues, "She did what she had to do."

For the first time since earlier that night, my dark eyes shoot up to meet her bright blues and I understand what she is trying to say. Or at least I think I do. I hadn't said anything about Katniss all night, yet she kept bringing her up. I suppose I didn't have to, though. I could move through the woods stealthily and virtually unnoticed, but I had never exactly been an expert in subtlety when it came to Katniss.

Unsure of how to respond, I pressed my lips together and inched my face closer to hers. I contemplated kissing her again, but I was unsure of how she would react to it, or if I even wanted to. So instead, I lowered my head to her shoulder and let it rest there, my face pressed into her warm bare neck. I felt her hands moving through my hair.

"That feels nice," I mumble in hopes that she wouldn't stop.

She doesn't.

x

We end up sitting on the ground inside a small shed in her back yard, filled mostly with tools intended for gardening. She sits across from me, taking a swig of some awful-smelling liquor out of a bottle she kept stashed there. The whole time, I kept thinking, 'Madge Undersee, huh? Who knew?'

She passes it to me with a blank expression on her face. "Take it."

I take a sip and then offer it back to her but she shakes her head. "I don't want any."

I keep it held out before her, staring her down.

"Fine," she says after a minute. "I'll keep you company."

She doesn't directly ask about Katniss or why I seemed upset. Instead, to fill the silence, she tells me about school and being the mayor's daughter and I tell her about my brothers.

I learn that there is more to her – much more – than I had originally believed. Though far beyond
more privileged than the rest of the children in Twelve, she is lonely. She has no brothers or sisters, barely gets along with her parents, and socializes at school for the sake of it, not because she actually felt as if she wanted to be friends with any of her classmates. Except for Katniss, of course.

She does ask about my father, however. About how it felt to have him gone and what it was like to be the head of the household before I even finished school. I am in the middle of telling her about one of my most favorite memories that I had of him – which felt odd; I only ever spoke of my father with Katniss – when she kisses me.

To both of our surprises, I kiss back, raw and aggressively. I would blame it on the intoxication, but neither of us drank much.

Still, we find ourselves silently stumbling up to her bedroom, sloppily undressing each other the moment she closes the door behind her.

x

I don't know why it happened and I still don't know how I feel about it, even now with the sun coming up. Neither of us got any sleep. We spent the rest of the night with her fingers stroking my hair and mine tracing different shapes and letters across her bare stomach, neither of us saying much.

I don't know why I stayed. I could have left. I should have left.

My head was resting on her shoulder now, my cheek pressed against her collarbone.

"Today is going to be a loooong day," I say groggily. It's my turn to break the silence.

I feel her chest rise as she breathes in deeply. "Yeah well, it's a good thing we're so well rested."

I laugh and allow my eyes to meet hers. I smile, sort of, and for the first time since the 74th Hunger Games began, it doesn't feel forced.

"You were right," I tell her after a moment of gazing at each other.

She looks at me expectantly; she wants me to elaborate.

"You were right about everything. I shouldn't be sulking. I mean, I fucking hate the idea of celebrating something so wrong, but I should have at least tried to. I don't know," I say.

"Yeah, but she comes home today. Celebrate it when she's here, when it matters."

I nod. She's right again.

"I'm sorry," I move my hand up to her face and brush a lock of her hair behind her ear, "for acting the way I did last night."

She grins and shakes her head, "I know. It's okay. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like that. You were vulnerable and I always found you kind of attractive. So, I'm sorry too."

"You always thought I was attractive, huh?" I tease her, moving closer towards her.

"Please," she swats me away with her, "don't act like every girl in 12 doesn't think so too."

"Maybe," I agree. And then the words escape my mouth before my mind even fully processes them, "but every girl in 12 isn't you."
She bites her lip and looks to the side, probably dismissing what I just said as bullshit considering the fact that just a few hours earlier I was moping over Katniss. But I feel like I meant it.

Despite this, I move up for a kiss. It is gentler than any of the kisses we shared that night but more than that, it is one I am sure of.

When the clock on her wall reads a quarter to seven, I gather my clothes and dress myself. She helps sneak me out of her house without raising any suspicion and I quietly tread across her backyard and glance over my shoulder before hopping over the wall.

I wonder how the rest of the day will unfold; if either of us will acknowledge any of this ever happened or if we would just go on pretending not to know each other. I wonder what I will do or how I will feel when I see Katniss again. I can't help but wonder what to expect.

Madge's voice is suddenly in my head. "She was changed in there."

And she's right. She was. And as much as I love her, as much as it hurts, I can't control that. I can't help her. And I'm probably never getting my hunting partner back; not like she was, anyway.

There is nothing I can do about it except move forward and see what I can make of whatever happens. I tell myself this as I make my way back to my mother and my brothers in the Seam, taking the long way to avoid being seen.

The night before begins to play out in my mind like one of the film reels they'd show us in school or on television during a special broadcast; the awkwardness of our walk to her home, getting slightly drunk in the Undersee's garden shed, tiptoeing up to her bedroom and then laying there in her bed until the sun came up.

Today might have been spent waiting anxiously for Katniss' arrival, and then probably having to deal with the crushing disappointment of unrequited affections, but Madge Undersee had other ideas.

End Notes

This was my first THG-related fan fic and has also been posted on fanfiction.net under the username tiffinnick.

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