I Wish I Would Have

by hutchabelle

Summary

Peeta Mellark desperately wants to return to District 12 from the Capitol after Coin’s assassination, but he can’t go home without his doctor’s approval. Even though his life is in ruins, his biggest regrets revolve around his relationship with Katniss. By facing those, he can find his way home and back to her.

Notes

Written for Prompts in Panem Dreamscape Week (March/April 2015), Day 6 (Ashes)

“Good morning, Peeta.”

Peeta cocks his head and studies the man sitting across the room. He takes a moment to consider the older man and then asks calmly, “Is it really, Dr. Aurelius?”

The doctor clasps his hands together and nods slowly. He surveys his patient carefully before asking, “Are you not sure? Are you having trouble distinguishing between reality and illusion more than normal?”

“Define normal.” Peeta’s tone holds a hint of bitterness, one he’s frustrated by almost as much as he’s angry about it. He doesn’t like being this way anymore than anyone else likes his current state.
“Are you aware of your surroundings? Are you experiencing disorientation? Are you afraid you’ll harm yourself or others?”

The questions come in rapid succession, and Peeta shakes his head slightly to clear his thoughts. “I’m not going to go mutt if that’s what you’re worried about, Doctor.”

“Then what did you mean, Peeta?” he urges gently. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what you’re thinking or feeling.”

“I want to go home.”

“And you will, Peeta. You will as soon as I’m confident you’ll be able to handle what’s waiting for you there. Remember that District 12 is not what you remember. It’s practically ashes now. It’s been severely damaged, drastically changed.”

“Haven’t we all?” His blue stare pins the medical professional to his chair. Both of them know what the patient says is true.

Changing topics, Dr. Aurelius poses another question. “Why do you want to go home, Peeta?”

“Why wouldn’t I want to go home?” The fight of a Hunger Games victor sparks in his voice in determined, controlled fury.

“Calm down, son. You’re fine. It’s just a question.”

“I’m not your son, sir. My father is dead. I want to go home—to where he was. I want to feel close to my family again, and I can’t do that here.”

“Tell me more.”

Peeta rises and begins to pace, limping slightly on his left leg. He’s not convinced he’ll ever get used to the feel of the prosthesis from the knee down.

Muttering under his breath, he huffs, “I wish I could have said goodbye, but Thread forced us onto the train without letting us say anything to anyone. I should have fought harder. I should have yelled something to them as the door closed. I should have written to my family and let Haymitch send the letter—if he could stop drinking long enough. I should have…” His voice quiets and comes in a whisper, “I should have done more.” Peeta squirms under the doctor’s scrutiny, and the silence in the room deepens. Finally, the younger boy demands, “What? What are you thinking?”

“It sounds as if you’re suffering from some fairly painful regrets.”

“How long did you have to go to school to figure that out?” Peeta snips and then immediately feels remorse at his nastiness. This isn’t him. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

“It’s fine. Fine. I’m just curious about the regrets. Most people I talk to refuse to admit they have any. Why are yours something you’ll readily share?”

Peeta sighs and drops back into his chair heavily. His shoulders hunch in an attempt to protect himself, and he takes a moment before he gathers his thoughts to begin his explanation.

“With all due respect, Dr. Aurelius, that is bullshit.”

“I’m sorry?”
“It’s bullshit,” Peeta says so sharply he practically spits. “Everybody has regrets. Every single person. Anyone who says they don’t is lying to themselves as much as they’re lying to the person they’re trying to convince.”

“What makes you say that?”

“What do most people say? That they don’t have regrets because every choice they made brought them to where they are and they wouldn’t change who they are?” He pauses for confirmation and then asserts again, “Total bullshit.”

“Explain, please.”

“I’ve known some incredibly miserable people who’ve said that. And you know why they said that? Because they’re trying to convince themselves that it’s okay that they made shitty decisions. Sometimes it’s not their fault. Sometimes there are no good answers. Sometimes both options suck, but come on. No one lives their entire lives without wondering how things would have gone differently, and maybe better, if they’d chosen the other path.”

“Maybe it’s not a matter of lying as much as it is a choice to be more positive.”

“Or maybe it’s an act put on to make you look good in front of other people.”

“But why would anyone want to do that?” the therapist questions.

“Really? Really?! Have you not met people? No one wants to admit personal vulnerability. Or mistakes. Or self-absorption. No one wants to acknowledge having flaws.”

“You don’t think the refusal to admit regret could possibly be a positive thing? Maybe an attempt at acceptance of circumstances or introspection of oneself?”

Peeta twists his hands together in frustration. “I’m not saying every single person is lying about what they truly believe, but humanity is fickle and selfish. I’d say the vast majority of people in Panem say they have no regrets so they can pretend to have it all together when they don’t.”

“Do you have other regrets, Peeta?”

The question is so unexpected, he’s not sure whether to answer or not. He was enjoying the psychological debate. He doesn’t want to bare himself any more than he has to. However, the quiet room is private and safe, so he gives voice to his pain.

“I wish I hadn’t let her go at the tree,” he whispers.

“You mean Katniss?” the doctor prods.

“Of course, Katniss,” Peeta confirms. “Who else would I mean? I let her go, and when that happened, we were separated for good. If I’d stayed with her, we would have been together when the hovercraft came. I never would have been taken to the Capitol. I never would have been hijacked. We could have discussed things, talked strategy, provided a united front to prevent the war, saved all those people’s lives. Saved Prim.”

Silence hangs in the room at the mention of Katniss’ sister. Both men understand the gravity of that loss.

“Do you feel responsible for Prim’s death, Peeta?”

“I—No! I mean, I… Maybe. I don’t know.”
“It wasn’t your fault, Peeta. You didn’t even know she’d left District 13 when you went out that day.”

“No, I didn’t, but I knew what the games were. I knew the Capitol would be the same. I knew the twisted, demented traps the Gamemakers created in the past. I don’t know why I didn’t realize it sooner when we made it out of the tunnels.”

“You were in a high stress situation, one that was rapidly changing as well. I don’t think too many people would fault you for not being completely aware of the dangers in the streets.”

“I should have known. I was the one in the Capitol after the arena blew. I was the one who saw what they did to me, to Johanna, to the avoxes. I was the one of the group who’d seen their evil from the inside. I should have warned her. I should have told Katniss to be aware. I should have —” Peeta’s voice spills from him in a strangled moan. “I should have been able to protect her. I want to be able to protect her. I couldn’t protect her, and I can’t protect her now.”

“Is that your regret? That you can’t keep her safe?” At the question, Peeta’s blue eyes reflect such a haunted look that Dr. Aurelius leans forward in his seat in anticipation.

“It’s one of them. Am I only supposed to have one? I have a bunch of them. I still think most people are lying if they say they don’t have any regrets.”

“Do you want to talk about others?”

“No,” Peeta snaps. “They haunt my dreams—especially since I sleep alone. I don’t want to face them during my waking hours, too.”

“Maybe if you address them now, your sleeping patterns will change. You might be able to rest better.”

“I won’t do more than nap, and even that restlessly, without Katniss. No amount of talking will change that. Not ever.”

“Interesting.” Dr. Aurelius pauses and crosses his legs. He considers his patient again for a few minutes before making up his mind. The blue eyes are clear. There’s no confusion. This is the right time to ask.

“Can I ask you a serious question, Peeta?”

“Since when have you bothered to request that before you’ve interrogated me?”

“Fair enough.”

Silence stretches between them until Peeta relents, “Go ahead. What do you want to know?”

“Are most of your regrets about your relationship with Katniss?”

The blue eyes darken for a few seconds and sharpen with hurt before the haze clears.

“Yes,” he admits.

“Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t you?”
“Why are you making me talk about it? I don’t want to face this.” Peeta’s groan rumbles from him in a desperate plea for relief.

“But you want to go home.”

“Yes,” he gasps. “Yes, I want to go home. I don’t want to be in the Capitol anymore.”

“I can’t let you leave until you’ve worked through this, Peeta. Katniss is in District 12. Her home is next to yours, and I can’t take the risk that you’ll attack her if I let you leave. I need to know what your thoughts are regarding her. There are deep losses in that district—almost as many as your regrets.” When Peeta doesn’t answer, the doctor urges, “Tackle them, Peeta. Do it so you can go home. Do it for Katniss. Do it for yourself. You deserve to let them go.”

Tears streak down the patient’s cheeks, and his shoulders slump. “Okay.”

“Are you ready?”

“I’m ready to go home. I need to be there, and…”

“And what, Peeta?”

“Katniss might need me, too,” he admits softly. “Prim’s gone. Who else does she have left?”

“Tell me what you regret.”

“I regret not telling her how I felt about her when I first heard her sing.”

“What else?”

“I regret that I couldn’t do more for her after her father died. We were only eleven. I did everything I could, but I wish I could have done more.” Peeta pauses with shining eyes and blinks before continuing. “I wish I would have told her. I wasted so much time.”

“You have time now, Peeta. You can still tell her. I’m sure she already knows.”

“She might have once, but after the hijacking? How could she really know? How could she know I regret that I waited so long to fight for her, but at the same time I can’t ever let her go?”

“If you go home, will you tell her?”

Peeta hesitates briefly. “I don’t want to be honest because I want to go home, but I suppose I have to be. I… can’t tell Katniss how I feel right now. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because words won’t convince her of anything,” he answers.

“I’m afraid you might be right about that.”

“But I can show her I still love her. That’s the only thing she’ll ever believe.”

“Will you show her?”

“I want to.”

“But will you?”
“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I’m scared.”

“Of rejection?”

Peeta gulps before answering. “What if I hurt her?”

“Oh, I see.”

“I want to go home, Dr. Aurelius. I want to more than I can say, but if I hurt her…”

“We’ve talked about coping mechanisms, about what to do if you feel you’re going to lose control. Do you remember what those options are?”

The patient nods sharply. “Take deep breaths. Leave the room. Play the real or not real game. Paint. There are others, but those are the methods we’ve discussed most often and those I feel would be the most helpful.”

“Have you had periods of confusion recently?”

“None. Not since before the last time I saw her. I thought I would after she shot President Coin. Seeing her kill someone should have been a trigger, but it wasn’t.”

“And why do you think that is, Peeta?”

“Because I know why she did it. She did it to protect Panem. If she’d done it for selfish reasons or because she’d lost her hold on sanity, I wouldn’t have had to stop her from trying to take the Nightlock.”

“So you protected her and didn’t hurt her.”

Realization spreads across Peeta’s face, and he mumbles, “I guess I did.”

Dr. Aurelius leans back in his chair and ponders his patient for several moments. Finally, he speaks, confidently and calmly. “I think you’re ready to go home. You’ll need to check in with me weekly by phone, but today was quite a breakthrough, Peeta. You handled this pressure well today, and you did it without succumbing to the hijacking once. I’m still concerned, but I’m not fearful you’ll hurt yourself or anyone else. You’ll probably have some flashbacks, but I’m pretty confident you’ll be able to handle them now. I have no qualms about allowing you to seek out time with Katniss and be alone with her.”

“Really?” Peeta’s face is so hopeful it’s almost heartbreaking.

“Really. I’ll arrange for you to be released from my primary care this afternoon. Arrangements will be made for you to return to District 12 within the next few days.”

A relieved “thank you” gushes from the younger man’s mouth. His eyes sparkle with happiness at the news.

“You’re welcome. Just one thing before you go.”

“What’s that, Doctor?”

“Don’t make me regret my decision.”
“No more regrets. That’s a promise.”

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