Sparkling Frost

by theechosea

Summary

A friend and I wondered what might have happened to make things quite so frosty between Peeta and Katniss at the beginning of "Catching Fire" and this came about. So, my Peeta muse decided to give me this.

=====

So, this sees us a couple of weeks before the Victory Tour, and Peeta is muddling through life back in District 12, one evening while checking in on Haymitch he begins to realize the weight of becoming mentors and things spiral on from there, leading to the bakery, the Hob, and to a meeting with Katniss.
“You know you don't have to eat dinner with me,” Haymitch grumbles as I set the basket down on the table and unfold the towel which has been keeping the pie warm so I can take it out and put it on the table.

“What's the sense in us both eating the same thing alone in separate houses?” I ask him. He grunts assent, “Fine. Fine,” he shoves papers and things aside and offers a plate to me. I take it and put it crusty covered self in the sink with the stack already there that need to be washed.

“I have clean ones from my house,” I tell him.

“You'll make someone a good wife some day,” he muses, peering at me through the clear liquid in his glass.

I take out the rest of the contents of the basket: two plates, a pie cutter, a knife and fork for each of us given I knew there was no guarantee of any of these things being present or clean, “Who knows?” I decide is the safest answer.

“I hope you're not holding out for Katniss,” he says, “There are plenty of other young women around here, and I know you have to be getting messages from the Capitol. I know I did,” he snorts, “believe it or not,” he takes another drink.

“You were the one who told me it wasn't over,” I remind him as I cut the pie. He sniffs deeply as the steam comes out along with more of the scent, “Did I say that?”

“Yes, and then you took half a bag of pastries,” he doesn't say anything so I continue, “I don't know if I'm holding out for anything. Nothing is up to me, but I can't just turn things off. I wish I could. Let's...just talk about something else.”

“Fair enough,” Haymitch raises his glass, as he pulls his piece of pie towards him, “Have you seen your family recently?”

I close my eyes, really, Haymitch?

“I made the pie at home if that's what you mean.”

“Kid, they're the only family you've got.”

“They're really not,” I take my own piece and sit down, “Come on eat. The dough will help soak up some of this,” I wave at all the bottles around the room with my fork, “stuff you put in your system, and the vegetables will do you good.”

“Are you my mother now?”

“Apparently I'm your wife, so I guess that makes Katniss your husband. We've got to keep you alive at least long enough to mentor us through mentoring someone else through the games...” I shudder at the thought as it fully sinks in. We have to send two more unfortunates off to possibly die.

What was it he said on the train? Embrace the probability of your imminent demise? Before us District 12 hadn't had a victor since his games, the 50th games, that's 46 kids he's watched die his first two he was maybe a year or so older than, like we will be. How are we going to do this?

“Realizing why I said it's never over now, aren't we?” Haymitch remarks. He pushes the bottle across the table towards me but I don't touch it.

“Your games were a Quarter Quell too, weren't they?”

“Oh, no! We are not doing that tonight,” he says, or maybe ever his face continues without him having to, “I think you can head home. Leave the pie. You can collect everything tomorrow. I'll probably have finished it by then. Maybe the husband and I will have a piece when she brings me more booze.”

“When she checks to make sure you're alive you mean.”

“Same old. Same old.”

“We are going to talk about this,” I tell Haymitch as I leave the house.

He waves a hand dismissively and shuts the door.

I make my slippery, sliding way down the street to my house, muttering about having left the cane in Haymitch's hallway and reminding myself that I need the practice walking on the snow and ice
It's a sleepless night. Faceless children dying on screen no matter how many parachutes we're able to send. One freaks out too much and steps off the platform before time is called and blows up before things even start and after that I give up on sleep and paint. Dark shapes swirl and bleed across the canvas but at least they leave my head for a while. I bet the Capitol's check-up cameras would love this type of Mellark original. “Two weeks and counting!” Effie's reminder of the Victory tour and the newly amended itinerary part five is in my messages. I read it but don't retain any of the information. It's never over. Haymitch reminds me toasting amber liquid. I lean my head down on the cool surface of the kitchen table for a while.

What did happen in the 2nd Quarter Quell? And for that matter where are Haymitch's family? That must be why he was on at me...maybe he has a point. Well, of course he has a point, Peeta, don't be an idiot. I sit up and massage my temples. I just don't know if they'll agree. They're the ones who wrote me off, after all. I wasn't supposed to come back. Sure they were all smiles and happy at the station while the cameras were still here, but it's been upset and annoyance that I'm still around, unless they want something, and Mom won't even come then. Still...

I find myself filling a bag with trade gifts, dates, goat cheese, figs, oranges, chocolate and slowly picking my way down the path from Victor's Village towards the town itself. The additional snow and ice make it difficult with the new leg but I'm not going to stop at Haymitch's for the cane and I'm not going to focus too much on the fact that “snow” is what is making it difficult for me to walk because then I might either laugh or cry too much and really fall down. No, practice without the cane is good. I need to stop relying on it. I need to walk normally. It'll stop me getting those looks or I'll get less of them, at least, anyway.

As I pass the turn to The Hob I try to add up how many bottles of liquor there are. Much as I don't like what Haymitch does to himself the weeks he was without were so much worse—we thought he would die, trying to ration him is better it was decided between Katniss, her mother, Prim and I. So, we keep watch on him, making sure that his diet isn't solely liquid. Katniss brings meat from the butcher and the occasional turkey or squirrel and I bring baked goods designed to last a while. We make sure he has fruit. We've tried to work other drinks in but that hasn't worked so far. His color is better though. Katniss' mother maintains we're doing some good, but for how long are we delaying the inevitable? And today I find myself wondering how long will it be before Capitol life and mentoring take it's toll on us and we stop trying to do anything but drown our own pain the way he has his or worse?
As always I can smell the bakery before I get there. It should be my father that's working this morning if I'm tracking the schedule correctly but I'm not sure which of my brother's will be on with him. I work my way around to the back door and knock carefully. I hear some talk about it being a little early for hunter's trading, and then my father opens the door and blinks a little, slightly confused and then manages a smile, “Peeta,” he says, softly, and wipes his hands on his apron and moves forward instead of backward, which leads to an awkward stumbling situation and him catching me by the arms so I don't slip over, and then us both on the ground and not on the steps, but everyone is upright and nothing is spilled.

It takes me a moment, “Mom's inside not Jeemi.”

He nods, solemnly.

“I should just go then. None of us will be able to talk.”

He grabs my arm and holds it tightly. I wonder for half a moment if I got more strength from him or her, “You must have come all the way down here for a reason.”

“Yes, and I realize now that it was a stupid one.”

“Peeta--” he says, with dismay, “Don't be like that.”

“How am I supposed to feel when you sneak me outside to have even half a conversation because—are you afraid of her? or ashamed of me?”

He pulls me to him then, “I've never been ashamed of you,” he whispers, “Never.”

I feel the hot tears welling up inside me and try to bite them back, “Could have fooled me,” I pull away. Don't fall down. Don't fall down. Thank you.

“Where are you?!” The door opens and there she is. Pinched and angry.

He turns, hands up in placating gestures, automatically.

I don't know which of us she's more shocked to be looking at standing out here in the frost. My father skin reddening in the chill or me in my thick coat, bag slung over my shoulder with what I imagine are red eyes and red nose looking suspicious and guilty.

“Why are you here?”

“Now, dear,” my father starts but is cut off by the glare.

“Don't worry,” I shake the bag, “I came to buy. I'll be gone quickly.”

“We're not open yet,” she snaps.

“I thought you'd want me in and out before anyone could see,” I wheedle, “Why do you think I came to this door?”

My father looks at his feet.

She steps back from the door, turning away from me in one swift motion. I climb up onto the first step and knock the snow and mud off my boots and then walk into the small room in the back where all the supplies are kept. The smell is stronger inside and it's so very warm. That was one thing we never had to worry about: freezing to death. They're making honey oat bread and plain, and there's also the scent of raisin and berry muffins that I can catch in the air, berry jam pastries. She goes back to kneading dough on the opposite side of the room, “See to the customer then,” she instructs my father.

“Come through,” he says, ignoring her protest, “You know the way.”

We walk into the front where the cases and ovens are. I unbutton my coat to try and ease some of the heat and see him looking at the clothes I'm wearing. He reaches to touch the fabric of the shirt and then hesitates wiping his hand on his apron again. I feel slightly embarrassed. Thanks to all the interviews we've had to do I have more clothes now than the entire household here put together probably has.

“What is it?” he asks.

“A shirt?” I can't help myself.
“I know that!” he replies, “I’m not that stupid.”
“Let’s just not,” I tell him, “I don’t want to get you in trouble for fraternizing with the dead.” He sighs and looks out of the front of the shop window for a moment. I set the bag down on the counter and pull out the four oranges, figs and one of the boxes of dates. He picks up one of the oranges and inhales the scent, “Do you have more of these?”
“Not at the moment. How many more would you want?”
“You don’t want the answer to that,” he says. I think for a moment that I see her near the edge of the doorway but I’m not sure.
“I can probably get a dozen. A true dozen, not one of ours.”
His lip twitches, “I can work with that.”
I expected so, “I also have this,” I show him the goat cheese.
“Now you’re just being evil,” he jokes, “What are you trying to get exactly? The whole shop?”
“It’s something for her, isn’t it?” her voice cuts in, “We’re not making anything for her.”
“I wouldn’t have expected you to,” I answer, “What is your problem with Katniss, exactly?”
“Peeta—” my father warns, but I am so done. I know Katniss would only trade squirrels with him. I remember her grumbling about things but a lot of the time I would tune her out because she would go on about so many things and as long as they weren’t likely to end with the rolling pin or something else along that kind it was just easier. “Why would I want to make something for that rude and obnoxious girl?” she asks.
“Oh, I don’t know, perhaps because she’s the reason District 12 has victors. You did say that to me when we left, didn’t you? You were quite happy about her going then because you thought she might win. The whole District gets more to eat now because of her. You should be kind to your victors. I bet you were happy enough to make things for the return banquet.”
“That was work.”
“Right. Of course, she brought me back with her. You weren’t counting on that. Would bleeding to death on top of the Cornucopia have been an embarrassing death or not, out of curiosity? Would it have met with your approval? I would like to know before I leave with two, actually better make that three, of the berry pastries, and a dozen of the small loaves of bread,” I tell my father, “I have people to visit,” she can’t technically get angry with me for giving the bread away any more given I’m actually paying for it but I know it must irritate her all the same so I make sure she knows. In this case I am that petty. I remember the beatings though and the extra names in the pot.
She can’t give me an answer though to any of the questions. I can see her hands twitching. She wants to go for me. I want to dare her. I know it’s not wise. My father bags up things quickly and offers them to me. I leave the items on the counter. I give him a bag of chocolate pieces and some coin also to cover things and put my items in the trade bag.
“I’ll be back next week with the oranges we talked about and some other things,” I tell him. He takes my arm and holds it tightly with his hand. It’s a different type of squeeze than earlier. “Me too.” I answer, and walk around the counter, unlock the front door of the bakery and walk out onto the street.

Chapter End Notes

in case it’s not clear when Peeta thinks of "extra names in the pot" he means tessarae.
The Hob is already bustling when I walk in, despite it being so early. When is it not? People are setting up and vendors appreciate the fresh bread, and the hand to hold things up or carry things. We each chat for a while, things going on around and about, did you hear that so and so is pregnant? or that so and so—her husband is sick and her son can't pull so many extra shifts being so young. My heart aches and I make notes to see what arrangements I might be able to pull off. Though I'm told it would have been worse if we hadn't won, the extra tesserae they would have had to put in to make it through.

I haven't been in the Hob much before. I would drop things off only on occasion so I find out what each of them trade and sell. I'd heard about Sae from Katniss before and her tasty soups which I let her know. I'm told to come back later once she has things properly on the go and get a sample and then some. I'll come back with coin then too and buy some things.

“What are you doing slumming down here?” Gale's voice sounds behind me breaking away from his co-workers on the way to mine to talk at me, “Didn't think this was your scene.”

“There are a lot of things you don't know about me,” I point out.

I have two loaves of bread left. I can perhaps take some to Haymitch—I doubt Gale wants anything from me even though his family would appreciate it. Perhaps it would be better to take to the Everdeens, Haymitch might still be pissed, plus odds are he drank himself to sleep and is nowhere near awake yet. “I probably won't see you again before you leave so watch yourself on the tour, okay?”

“What?”

“On the tour, with Katniss, watch yourself--”

“You really don't know me, Gale, if you think--”

There's conflict on his face as he looks at me and I'm annoyed I can't read what it means.

“Besides,” I tell him, “I'm more afraid of her than you.”

That gets a laugh from him and my release from the conversation so I can go.
I wind up dropping bread with Mrs. Everdeen and Prim who gives me a hug. Katniss is off hunting, as to be expected. Gale will be down in the mine by now and they have some sort of arrangement where she hunts and gives the food to his family given he can't be out there in the woods all the time now. I can't imagine what it must be like being down there twelve hours a day, six days a week for all the issues our family had there was the benefit to being born in the Merchant district and never having the risk of working down in the mines.

“Two weeks, huh?” Prim asks, “Excited?”

I give a slight laugh, “Not exactly.”

“Yeah,” she nods, “I can't imagine all those people staring at you all the time and then my sister...” she trails off.

“Prim come help me with something!” Mrs. Everdeen calls from the other room, “I'm sure Peeta has things to do.”

Prim gives me another hug and I see myself out, and trudge the couple of houses down to my own property. Things to do...sure...

The Capitol interviewers always want to catch up on everything we're supposed to be doing and there's a chance they'll want to talk to us individually when they come to do the pre-interviews before the Victory Tour starts; but there are things that wouldn't go over well like the fact I sleep in my living room because the house is too big for me, or the venting paintings but cheery things those they love: landscapes, flowers and Katniss. They eat up pictures of Katniss and it's not like I mind drawing pictures of her either.

I open the front windows to let the air in before I start to sketch. Her face, in profile, braid curling over her shoulder. I surround her with a necklace of her namesake flowers and then other local blooms fill the remainder of the picture. I'm not sure how long I've been working when Katniss calling my name stops me in the middle of a stamen. I go out into the hallway and she's there, looking uncomfortable in a wool coat.

“I knocked,” she says, “You didn't answer.”

“I'm mapping out a painting,” I explain.

“Oh,” she nods.

“They prefer the happy ones and everything.”

“Right.”

“Was there something...?” I can't help but trail off when she turns and for a moment her pose mirrors the painting, “...you wanted?”

“Thank you for the bread.”

“You're...welcome but you didn't have to come all the way over here and thank me for that. It's no problem...I'm happy to do it. I...”

“You what?” she asks, stepping further up the hallway.
I'm hesitant to let her all the way in to the living room; she might not take well to her portrait. She doesn't seem to see good in herself, always, and she would likely be irritated I'm drawing her anyway.

“You just—you don't have to thank me every time...” we're going round in circles. I don't understand this constantly owing me for bread. I owe her for everything I have—everything I am, and my mother—why did I even go up to the bakery?

“What was that look for?” she asks.

“Why do you think you owe me anything?” I demand. It comes out harsher than I meant but all this stumbling and fumbling has finally broken me. We've been on glass and eggshells for months. Is this why Gale is angry all the time?

“Peeta--”

“No, Katniss--” I move away from her, and wind up in the living room, “I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for you—there is nothing you need to thank me for. I can't--” She gets me all in knots. My words gum up, 'for once' Mom would say. She's echoing all through me right now and I can't stand it. I shouldn't have gone over there, “I can't keep doing this. We're going to be on a train together in two weeks. In six months we're going to be mentoring tributes--”

“Did you draw that?” she points to the canvas.

“Change the subject why don't you?”

“Did you?”

“No, someone broke in to my house and drew a picture of you--”

“Don't be like that!” she snaps back.

“You're ignoring my point. How am I supposed to be? I'm sick of this!” I wave a hand between the two of us, “this—this...”

“This what?”

“This! Everything is so—broken.”

“I'm broken?” The look on her face stabs me.

“No!” Way to go. Brilliant, “No, our relationship.”

“We don't...”

“I know we don't have that sort of relationship. The whole arena versus reality thing is something that was made painfully clear to me months ago.”

“Peeta--” she reaches for my arm, and I want to pull away, but at the same time I can't, “I am sorry about that. I didn't mean--” she pauses, holding my hand there and sighs deeply, “There are so many things...”

“Then explain them to me.”

She releases my arm and turns away.
“Right! Great!”

The door bangs open, “Are you serious right now?” Haymitch demands, “Her I expect this from! Not you! You're supposed to be the calming influence! What the hell is going on?”

“Butt out, Haymitch!” Katniss says at the same time I tell him that it's not his business right now.

“That's where you're wrong, kiddies,” he says, “Nice sketch,” he waves towards the canvas by the window, “Capitol will be all over that once it has color.”

“Not helping, Haymitch.” I tell him as Katniss clenches her fists and looks towards the door.

“Look, you two are always my business and for the rest of my life you will be my business whether I want it or not, and having a screaming match that they can probably hear down in the bottom of the lowest mine shaft is definitely my business. The Capitol cameras will be here in two weeks you need to get it together! They're expecting love birds so you need to stop this nonsense,” he points to Katniss.

“He started it this time!” she points to me.

“I'm sorry for trying to get you to talk to me about...anything,” I retort, “I mean it's not as if couples do that ever.”

“Peeta, please, just stop,” Katniss says.

She reaches for me again but this time I pull back, “No, you stop. I'm just—I can't right now. I'm leaving.”

“This is your house--” Katniss points out.

“I don't care. I'm going!” I walk past Haymitch and go out the front door but once outside I don't know what to do with myself because I've just made things so much worse.

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