Cato's nine years old when he first sees her.

She's a year younger than him, and normally that would draw him away, but instead he's intrigued. Her eyes are what attracts him, he thinks. They're an olive colour, somewhat green, somewhat brown. They remind him of spring. He doesn't even know her name, but still - he can't look away.

"What're you looking at?" Cato's friend, Jonas, asks him. Jonas is scanning the crowd, looking at all of the people, trying to find just who Cato's looking at.

"Nothing," Cato says quickly. "Let's go."

"Whatever," Jonas says, shrugging. "C'mon. We're going to graduate tomorrow. And then - and then we get to go to the Academy! We've got to prepare!"

Everyone, once they turn ten, are supposed to go the Academy in District Two. District One has an Academy just like it, but none of the other Districts do. Cato's confused by that, but nobody has ever explained it to him. One day he'd like to visit those Districts, just to see what they're really like. "Are you going to volunteer?" Cato asks. He says it like he's joking, but he isn't. He doesn't want Jonas to volunteer. He's got family, and lots of friends, and a lot to live for. And although he's going to try as hard as he can, Jonas is just too scrawny. There are plenty of other people that
already have more muscle than him, Cato included. Jonas would never survive.

"Of course I am," Jonas replies, just as Cato knew he would. It's the honesty that surprises Cato the most.

*****

When Cato's eleven, she joins the Academy. He's almost forgotten about her, because he hasn't seen her in over a year, but she's joined today, and now he's going to see her everyday. Her eyes still look like spring, and even though spring is long over, he feels like the season is still around him everytime he looks at her.

"Hi," he says, walking up to her. It's her first day today - or second, he's not sure - and she's on her way to the weapons room. He's already picked his - he carries a long sword around everywhere, but she's yet to make her choice.

"Um, hi," she says, only sparing him a glance. "Do I know you?"

"No," he says, finding that he actually has to work to keep up with her strides. "What's your name?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because, like, I do?"

She's ten years old (he's only eleven) and yet, they both walk with such confidence. "Clove," she finally says and they both stop as they realize that they've reached the door to the weapons room. "My name is Clove."

"I'm Cato," Clove. Even that is like spring to him. He can finally put a name to those eyes.

"Nice to meet you, Cato," she says. "Now, I need to go and pick a weapon, so..."

"Oh, right." He moves out of the way and she walks inside the room, not looking at him again as she shuts the door. He doesn't care. He got what he came for - a name.

Later that day, he sees her once again. She's got two knives, hidden up her sleeves. She looks surprisingly masterful.

*****

"So, are you going to tell me who you've been infatuated with now?"

Cato looks over at Jonas. They're fourteen today, and Clove is thirteen. Cato hasn't spoken another word to her, but he keeps watching her whenever he can. And right now, he's standing with Jonas at the edge of the field, watching Clove and twenty-three others duel. It's a mock Hunger Games - the Academy randomly draws twenty-four names, sets them in the field and they all have to spar until twenty-three are unable to continue, and one is.

"What makes you think I'm infatuated?" Cato asks, distracted. His heart races when he sees Clove nearly get hit.

"Seriously? You never watch these - and you've been watching this one for three hours straight." Jonas has a very good point, but Cato still doesn't say anything. It's ridiculous for him to feel this way about a girl he's spoken to once.
"Oh, come on!" Jonas complains. "What's their name? Are they hot?"

"The one with the knives," Cato says after a minute of silence. "The one with the eyes."

"Well, I see two with knives," Jonas says, laughing, "And both have eyes, so..."

"She's the one who is winning right now."

"Oh. Oh. Good choice, man, she is hot."

There's a couple more seconds of silence before Cato says, "I didn't know if you would like that, seeing as she's the one who knocked out Dean."

Jonas just stares back at Cato, who's now smirking. "How did you know that I like him?" Jonas whispers. "Do you have eyes everywhere?"

"No," Cato says, still laughing, but still staring at Clove, too. "Just a couple places."

Cato knows he's definitely made the right choice when, twenty minutes later, Clove wins, a surprising underdog victory.

*****

"Will you go out with me?"

It's Cato's sixteenth birthday today. That's a huge deal at the Academy - because now he's graduated. He's never done a mock Hunger Games, never had any real training, but he's sixteen so they're giving up on him. They're letting him go, just like every sixteen year old goes. And now he's expected to volunteer. Everyone is. If he doesn't, he's shamed.

Jonas has already turned sixteen - and he's thrown Cato a sort of party, just to show that they "made it." And now, as a "birthday dare" he has to ask Clove out. Cato's wanted to for a long time - he's just never had the courage. And now Jonas is making him and honestly, he's grateful.

"What?" Clove seems stunned by the suddenness of his actions. "We've never spoken - no, wait, we did. Once. So...why now? Why me?"

"Because I've liked you for a long, long time." Saying it seems stupid. He doesn't even know her. "And your eyes are really pretty." That sounds even worse.

"Well, why not?" she sighs, laughing a little. "You know, might as well, I guess."

"Seriously?" A grin spreads across his face, larger than any he's ever had.

"Seriously," she says. "Surprise me."

He hopes that he can, because she's already surprised him.

*****

"Let's start with the girls."

It's the Reaping today and honestly, Cato couldn't be more scared. He's been with Clove for months now, and it's going strong, but she keeps talking about volunteering. Apparently her brother or something lost the Games once and she wants to bring her family glory - but occasionally he catches a glimpse of doubt in her eyes that tells him she doesn't really want to. But if she volunteers, he'll have to, as well. He won't let her go alone.
Keesha, their District representative from the Capitol, stands in front of the two bowls filled with names. Cato's name is in the boys' one too many times. Just two pieces of paper will change two people's lives forever. It's sick, really, if he thinks about it too long.

Keesha flicks a few pieces of paper aside before snatching one from the bottom of the bowl. She never goes for the ones on top. Unfolding the paper, she reads in a dramatic voice, "Valerie Zay!" and Cato knows he's screwed.

"Oh, hell no," Clove whispers. She shoots Cato an apologetic look before her hand slides out of his and she shouts, "I volunteer as Tribute!" He sees Valerie, a small, twelve year old girl, relax and shed a couple tears of relief. Clove knows Valerie - they're like sisters, almost, so of course Clove would feel the need to save her. Of course.

"Welcome, welcome," Keesha says, taking Clove's hand and pulling her up onto the stage. Volunteers are not uncommon here anyway, so nobody really cares. In fact, they're happy, because Clove has a better chance than Valerie ever did. "Now, for the boys."

If his name isn't called, he's volunteering. That's it. That's the bottom line. He didn't want to, but now he will.

"James."

"I volunteer as Tribute!" He makes sure to say it early so no one else can, and looking around, he realizes he beat about five other people to it. They're all scowling at him, but he doesn't care. He walks confidently towards the stage, and he's about to finally walk on to the stage to meet Clove, when suddenly there's a shriek and he's being tackled from behind.

His head hits the floor and then a fist is swung at his face. It connects before he can recover his senses, but he makes out another boy, bigger than him, repeatedly saying "I was going to volunteer! I was going to volunteer!" And it just makes Cato angry that someone could care this much. So, without another thought, he uses all the training he's got and catches the boy's fist before it hits him again, and throws his own punch. The boy's surprised, and Cato uses it to his advantage, throwing him off and pining him down.

Finally, a couple Peacekeepers come and throw the boy off Cato. He's still yelling, but Cato just marches up the stage, expressionless. He didn't want to have to do that. Now he's going to be viewed as the ruthless Career from District Two.

The worst part is, that as he's shaking hands with Clove, she doesn't look happy at all. Well. At least he surprised her.

*****

"So," Brutus says, sighing. "You've got an image to uphold now. A fitting one, too."

Brutus is their mentor. He tells them this as they sit in the Capitol, eating round after round of food. It just keeps being brought to them. It's fairly alike to the food Cato sometimes ate in District Two, but just a little better. Brutus won his Games a long time ago, and Cato really isn't surprised - he is the stereotypical Career. "We know," Clove says. He can't stop staring at her. Why did he volunteer? Both of them aren't making it out. He didn't want to have to do that. Now he's going to be viewed as the ruthless Career from District Two.

The worst part is, that as he's shaking hands with Clove, she doesn't look happy at all. Well. At least he surprised her.

*****

"Actually," Brutus says, and Cato realizes he's being stared at, "I was talking to him. Impressive fighting back there, at the Reaping. Everyone's going to be expecting that from you."

"Weren't they already?" he asks.
"Well, yes," he laughs. "But even more so. Be fierce. Show you aren't afraid. Which you shouldn't be. But, now, the real question is - do you want to be trained together or alone?"

There's two beats of silence - he's counting - before Clove says, "Alone."

"Well, well. Okay," Brutus says, laughing again. It's a joke to him. Cato turns to look at Clove but she's not looking back. "Training starts tomorrow. Now, I have some things to do - don't kill each other."

He leaves. Cato doesn't speak. He can't find the words. Clove leaves, too. She's surprised him.

*****

"We need to talk."

They've just finished their interviews - District Three or Four is going now - and Cato's found Clove sitting up near the roof, looking out over the Capitol. It's night, but the black sky seems to illuminate Clove even more. He's not sure what's going on with them now, but he doesn't like it.

"Yeah," she says, not looking at him, "I guess we do."

"Thing is," he sighs, sitting down across from her, "I don't know what to say."

"Stop loving me."

"What?"

She sighs, and finally she turns towards him. "Two people don't come out of the arena. One person does. So unless you can magically change the rules...we can't do this. Career Tributes in love? Whoever heard of a more stupid story? We won't - we just won't survive like this."

"I can't just stop loving you," he says quietly, even though she's right.

"Well, neither can I," she says. "But we have to try, because..." She doesn't finish. She doesn't have to.

"But we're different. We don't think like other Careers do. We don't want to be here." He thinks of the District One Tributes, Glimmer and Marvel - they want to be here. Cato and Clove were, in a way, forced.

"Don't you think I know that?" He swears she's fighting tears. "And that's just why we won't survive! I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. But we can't."

"At least say we're allies."

She stands, but only looks back at him once. "I think I'm going to die with or without you, for completely different reasons. So yeah. We're allies."

She leaves. He stays, his eyes watching a monitor in the distance. The male Tribute from Twelve is on - the last to go. Ceaser Flickerman is asking him if he has a girlfriend, and the Tribute replies with, "I brought her here with me." Cato can't help but laugh. District Twelve hardly ever wins - so they're playing the sappy love story to get sponsors. Yeah, Cato thinks. Good luck with that.

Clove doesn't talk to him anymore. It's not surprising, but it hurts.

*****
They're in the Games now. It's not as hard as Cato always thought - maybe because he's been brought up this way. It's the second or third day (he always loses track) but right now they're lying under a tree that Katniss has climbed up. She scored an eleven - she's competition. Therefore, she has to go. He's found that being in the Games has just reverted his mind to survival instinct - he does, or he does not. Without Clove there all the time, that's all he can think about. Otherwise, he's worried he'll cry.

He cracks one eye open. Katniss is still up there, but she's - what is she doing? She's sawing off a tree branch. No. She's sawing off a tree branch that has a trackerjacker nest on it. He should shout. He should move. But he doesn't, because he wants District One dead. He hates them, he really does - they're so brainwashed they think that by winning they'll actually bring pride to their District. He finds Clove with his eyes. He'll protect her, though.

The branch is about to fall. He tenses his muscles and then, as it does, he jumps up and throws his arms around her, pulling her up as well. Glimmer's screaming and so is Clove, but he guides her away. She doesn't protest. It's natural instinct.

They run, and run, and run. Marvel's running with them - dammit - but Glimmer's not. A canon goes off, confirming her death. Peeta, or "loverboy" is still there, too, but slightly behind. Katniss is nowhere to be seen. Finally they reach some water and Cato submerges himself in it. He only got stung once, and although it hurts, he doesn't really care.

He forces himself to get out of the soothing water after a few minutes. Marvel's sitting at the edge, his expression tight. Losing Glimmer probably hurt. But Clove is seated on the other side, so he goes over to her, but she's not happy. "You idiot," she mutters.

"I saved your life."

"I can take care of myself."

"I told you I can't stop loving you."

"Yeah, and I thought we had an agreement," she snaps. "Allies. That's all. Because one, if not both, of us are going to die. Right? So stop."

It's not surprising. He wishes that she would surprise him again.

*****

"Cato! Cato!"

Her last screams still haunt him.

He can't think, or breathe.

He just holds her lifeless body until it's taken away from him.

He won't see her again.

He's alone.

He cries, because what else is he going to do?

A part of him's dead now.

There's no point.
He can't win.

He never could. He's really, really not surprised.

*****

The mutts are after him. He keeps running, all the way back to the Cornucopia, even after it turns to night. He just keeps running and climbs on top of it, ignoring the fact that he's bleeding. One of them already bit him, and he tripped twice on his way here. But it's a high vantage point.

Except then Twelve come climbing up. The canon was for Eleven, not one of them, like he'd hoped. It's not fair. They shouldn't be together. They won't. As soon as Peeta's climbed up he throws Katniss down and holds Peeta, standing at the edge of the Cornucopia. The mutts are snapping at him from below but really, he can't find himself caring. He has nothing to live for. He's as good as dead to himself. It's a dangerous way of thinking, but he doesn't even want to win anymore. But even if he's going to die, he's going to take one of them with him, because they shouldn't get to live happily ever after if he can't.

He was different before coming here. He didn't like the Games - he hated them. But then the Capitol took him and morphed him and now he's like this. It's sick, how if happens, but it's clever, he'll give them that, because now he's no different then them.

He's still bleeding and he's crying, but Katniss has an arrow pointed at him, even though he's got Peeta in a chokehold. The arrow doesn't make much difference. He'll take Peeta with him to the grave; he's okay with that. "Go on," he says, his heart hammering. He can't think. All he can think of is Clove. "Shoot." He wants her to. He wants to die. He doesn't want to live like this, a slave of the Capitol. He will get his revenge and then, and then, that will bring "pride" to his District. Pride. If this is pride, than everything he knows is wrong.

She's not shooting. Why isn't she shooting? "I'm dead anyway!" he shouts. "I always was, right? I didn't know that 'till now - how's that? Is that what you want?" He's not even talking to Katniss - he's talking to the Capitol, to Snow, to anyone who's watching. He was never going to live with his way of thinking - and even though the Capitol tried to change him, obviously they didn't do a very good job of it. "I can still do this," he mutters, but he's not talking about winning. He can show Clove he's good enough. He can do this for Clove, because she shouldn't have died. He should've been there, and she shouldn't have died.

Katniss shoots. He waits.

It doesn't hit his head.

The arrow flies into his hand and he lets Peeta go, out of surprise. Peeta shoves him and then he's falling, falling...

Maybe a part of him wanted to let Peeta go, because he realizes, in a split second, he could've held on. He didn't have to let go. It didn't hurt that much. Maybe he wanted someone to have a happy ending.

A mutt stares at him. It's eyes are green and olive, at the same time, like spring. Exactly like spring.

He laughs before it's teeth tear into his neck.

Well.

At least she managed to surprise him.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!