A Chronicle of Lies

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Summary

"There are so many ways this could go wrong, and yet it sounds like just the story of his whole life. He’s never felt he has a greater purpose, he’s never felt a calling or a sign as to what he’d like to be, but somehow this seems like the greatest painting he’ll ever make without wielding a brush."

A collection of Peeta Mellark’s firsts, a handful of his seconds, and one last thing.

Set mostly in The Hunger Games and pre-series.

Notes

I wrote this a long time ago. Tonight I just finished the ending, and decided to post this. This is solely my interpretation of Peeta Mellark's intentions throughout all of THG, because I have always found more interesting that Peeta had a slight crush on Katniss rather than "loving" her from "the first time he saw her" when he was 5 years old. Peeta makes more sense to me if he planned to make his confession in the interviews, fully knowing he only had a crush on her, and that he falls in love by accident during the first games. This is me exploring that idea. Hopefully it is entertaining and enlightening for all of you, too.

This one-shot also accidentally ended up being Part 1 in a collection of character studies of the three main characters in the series, so if after reading this you’re curious as to what’s my take on Gale and Katniss as well, you can follow the series through the link at the bottom of this fic.
a chronicle of lies

or alternatively

a collection of firsts, a handful of seconds, and one last thing.

I.

The first time he sees her, he’s five.

It’s his first day of school, and there’s a whirlwind of children gathering outside the modest building, fluttering and chattering like birds do every morning when the sun has just come up. He doesn’t notice anything specific, just legs and random names and groups of children all around pressing noise into his ears. His father holds him by the hand, and his palms sweat profusely in fear of letting go.

Don’t get lost. Don’t get lost. Don’t get lost.

The thought is all consuming; it won’t leave space for anything else inside his five-year-old brain until his father points at her.

She has two braids, tanned skin, coal dusting her fingers, gray eyes. She jumps up and down near her father as he listens to his own reveal how careless he is to confide to a child the burdens of his past. He’s too young to notice his father’s mistake, too young to know, too young to understand the implications in his voice and the dying embers underneath.

He’s a regular boy, she’s a regular girl. That much he’s old enough to know.

II.

When he first hears her sing, five years old becomes old enough for his skin to burst at the seams.

He still doesn’t understand what his father was talking about hours before, but the birds did stop to listen.

He’s still a regular boy. If she’s a regular girl, he’s not so sure.

III.

The first time he talks to her, he’s nine.
There’s a math test at school, and a screaming match between his parents at home, and no arithmetic answers in his skull.

He looks at the coal in the board and sees the numbers dance and he knows he’s supposed to know three times seven because his brothers have been drilling the tables inside him for months, but he can’t concentrate and there are two coal black braids in the chair in front of him and he’s desperate enough to ask.

She tenses when he whispers the question, and for a second he thinks she’s going to leave him to dry, but she pretends to draw the shape of a 21 in the wood of her chair, so he can decipher the answer without leaving evidence of their crime.

She doesn’t speak to him then, but he hears the Valley Song in the silence while the rest of the class finishes their test.

IV.

He watches her go home for the first time that very same day.

He wants to thank her, he wants to explain. He wants to tell her it’s not like him to cheat, and that he won’t do it again. He wants to say that if she ever needs help with something else, he owes her one and she can collect.

But when the school day is over, she’s already jumping into her father’s dirty and tired arms with the brightest smile on her face, and their laughter sounds like music, and maybe he’s a mockingjay, because he stops and listens, all purposes forgotten in the wind.

They take the path to the poorest part of town, the one his mother forbids him to go because ‘merchant children have no business in The Seam’.

Her braids move in tandem with her arms as she walks, and he only stops staring when a hill steals her from his view.

V.

He’s eleven when he hears her scream the first time.

He’s sitting with his school friends, and a girl he likes at lunch and he absentmindedly knows she’s eating by the window across the room.

Then there’s a deafening bang and the ground vibrates under his feet, and the older kids are yelling above the noise something about the mines. There’s confusion all around him and he can barely make out his thoughts while the teachers gather their students like shepherds herd their lambs, and he catches it. It’s distorted and rebellious and full of fight and fear, but he’s trained his ears to recognize that voice and its song is not about valleys or laughter, but about desperation, underground coal, questions and my dad, my dad.
VI.

The first time he takes a blow for her, it’s raining.

He hasn’t seen her at school in weeks, so it shocks the marrow out of his bones when he hears his mother screaming at someone in the back of the bakery and his eyes land on someone that looks like her, that moves like her, but that cannot possibly be her. The girl he remembers has two braids and a smile that reaches her eyes, but this version stands in the rain her hair a matted mess with wires for bones and skin stretched tight trying to hug the cold out of her body. But it’s not the astonishment at the sight of her features, or the sluggishness of her movements, or the way her body slides down an apple tree defeated what moves him to compassion or to try to help.

What makes him stretch two loaves of bread too close to the flame and burn his own fingers is the summation of several things. It’s the fact that his father singled her out on his first day of school, and the fact that his mother growled at her for no reason at all, and the fact that he’s a bit older and can understand that people channel their hatred and jealousy in the wrong ways. It’s the fact that there’s violence and hunger in this world he lives in, and he’s ordinary but she’s special in a way he still can’t get.

It’s selfish really. When he tosses the bread and a welt is forming on his cheek he’s wishing that perhaps by helping her, some of her uniqueness passes down on him through the rain, and some of his warmth reaches into her stomach and gives her a fresh start.

VII.

The first time he catches her looking at him, he doesn’t stare back. Actually, he pretends he doesn’t notice.

His cheek is swollen and his eye bears a blackened patch that makes it hard to see, but he wouldn’t miss the contours of her shoulders on the corner outside school, even if his mother had struck both his eyes. She stares at him cautiously from afar, probably wondering why he helped her the night before, but he knows his motives weren’t pure, and he knows she’s strong enough to stand her ground, so he gives her the benefit of never staring back. Besides, he tells himself, help is help whether it comes from an oven or in the form of a drawn 21 in the air on a math test.

He smiles a bit as he walks past her, staring at his shoes. It hurts his cheek, but at least the pain makes it tangible enough to hold on to.

VIII.

The first time he follows her to the fence, it’s a Sunday, and he is fourteen.
It’s early in the morning and he’s out of his house because he was stuck with going to the Hob to trade. He catches a glimpse of her doubling a corner, the tail end of her single braid swishing and calling his name like the mythical creatures old civilizations respected and feared. He crouches and walks several feet behind her; he doesn’t want to startle her and he doesn’t intend to follow her for long; but there’s some sort of purpose to her walk, a purpose and a pride he hasn’t seen since her father died and there’s curiosity at the tips of his fingers and at the balls of his feet and he follows, follows, follows until she makes it out to the forest and fades.

He doesn’t worry. He knows she will be back because she has a sister that she takes care of; and the girl that once helped him in math is smart enough to not get caught out outside Panem.

He goes back to the Hob in silence; he has some bread and artifacts to trade.

He’s a regular boy from town, and but she’s more than just a girl from The Seam. She needed help once. She’s doing fine on her own now, it seems.

IX.

The first time he feels jealousy, to the universe’s irony, he’s holding a girl’s hand.

Her name is Corinna and her hair is the color of avenging fire, with freckles that make constellations on her cheeks. Her mother owns a small shop near the bakery in town, and they both have a common interest in painting; in shaping things more colorful than the world they live in, and she is so charming, and smiles just when his world seems dire; so he asks her what she’s doing this Sunday because maybe, if his mom goes and runs errands he can persuade his dad to give him pastries for a small banquet up the steps of Corinna’s mother’s shop.

So he meets her, and they go, because he only has this life, in this country, in this town and District where a common cold might kill him next month or the government might do it next year, and he’s not going to talk to that girl with the braid, he’s decided. Four years have passed since he helped her with the bread, and she seems more closed off yet happier than she’d been in months. He’s gained more perspective on the brevity of their encounters and their very short time. He was just there at the right moment at the right time, and maybe that’s the extent of how special he’s supposed to be by proxy.

He’s still convinced she’s not ordinary. That’s the only thing that hasn’t changed.

He’s spent about an hour and a half talking to Corinna when he sees the boy first. He knows who he is, all the girls in school talk about him in hushed whispers, all lean shoulders and wiry strength. He’s seen him at the Hob trading squirrels he’s caught in snares, and he just knows before he sees her that she’s going to appear at this boy’s side at any moment, and surely, she does. At the moment, all he feels is vacancy. Like his brain sends a signal through his body, and the rest of his anatomy is confused. There is no danger, there is no pain, yet his brain is telling him he’s supposed to feel something, do something, narrow his eyes, avert his gaze, scream, anything, yet the next thing he knows, Corinna’s holding his hand, and he’s squeezing her knuckles gently in his.

Later, in the privacy of his bed, he allows himself to name the feeling, and it’s funny. He knows he has no right to feel how he feels. The help he’s given her, and she’s given him should be selfless, but he does feel his blood turn sour and tastes something metallic in the back of his throat every time he remembers the sight of them together and he just feels worse. It’s just proof to him
that he’s selfish in some capacity when it comes to her, and it’s funny that he was the one holding someone’s hand, and all she was doing was walking far away from him, side by side with another person.

Before he rolls into the sheet that he’s using for pillow, he heaves a sigh and lets it be. He’s not going to talk to her, ever. This makes absolutely no difference. She’s not his.

Yet, his kindness and the only good thing he’s ever done belong to her.

X.

The first time the world stops spinning, he’s sixteen.

His name gets called to play the worst Game mankind has ever seen; his name is read like the names of thousands of ordinary boys years before him, all of them dead.

Her name’s not called like the name of other girls years prior.

She volunteers.

All these years have passed and he’s still an ordinary boy, but she becomes an extraordinary girl by protecting her sister that day, and he’s just starting to understand how deeply bravery runs in her blood.

XI.

The moment he first touches her is one he wishes he could forget.

They are standing in a platform in front of District Twelve, and a woman with pink hair is urging them to shake each other’s hand, as if they are the best of friends and not about to go into a Game where they’ll surely wind up dead.

The touch is wrong. It’s cold. He registers her shock and combines him with his fear, and he thinks he might throw up. Her hands are rough and his are soft and he and his friends could’ve appreciated that irony under a less dire situation, but he doesn’t want to touch her, he doesn’t want to be here.

She’s supposed to be unique, and his mother always tells him that he’s not. She’s going to die in an ordinary way with his less than extraordinary self, and the thought is one that doesn’t fit inside his flesh.

There has to be something he can do.

XII.
He’s decided many things in his life up until this point. Whenever his school friends wanted to play a prank or whenever he wanted to miss a certain class, all he needed was to come up with a strategy and the right words would spill out of his mouth to weave a story with not a single thread falling loose.

But the first time he decides to rewrite his whole life to make her the main character happens right after his mother leaves him in the Justice Building and no one else comes at all.

No brothers, no friends, no freckled girls, no father who mourns what-if’s and loves two girls he thinks should have been his. There’s nothing but silence as his mother clanks the door shut, and ten full minutes pass before he realizes he’s definitely on his own.

She’s the only other person from home he’ll ever see, he might as well find a course in which he can accommodate her and persuade the odds to move their way.

XIII.

The first time they actually exchange words, the smell of vomit invades the air.

He’s holding on to his drunken mentor’s left arm, while she holds the rest of his weight on the right. They are bonded by the sudden realization that, once the Game’s begin, this man’s all the chance they have. He stares at her, and she stares back, and wordlessly they both pick the man up from his own vile and set forth on taking him back to his room.

*It’s okay, I’ll take it from here,* he says, once they reach his door and the grimace on her face leaves thin lines at the corners of her nose.

*Alright, I can send one of the Capitol people to help you.*

She almost looks relieved, and he doesn’t blame her. Washing up a drunken man is not on anybody’s list but much how he helped her once for selfish purposes, he wants to help Haymitch now because he has a lot to learn.

XIV.

The first time she stuns him, it’s actually with a kiss on the cheek.

The tribute parade has just finished. He’s dressed in tar black and so is her; but he can still see her engulfed by flames in the back of his eyelids every time he blinks. His hand is sore from where she gripped it, but the ghost of pressured pain in his knuckles wipes out the memory of their twisted handshake a week before. This pain is better, more tangible; more to do with support than defeat. He’s learned to connect his memories of her with pain; the pain keeps him grounded, and gives him purpose, so he massages his hand and thanks her for not falling off the cart.

*You should wear flames more often. They suit you.* The words are supposed to be a compliment but she scowls as if he had insulted her. There are wheels turning inside of her head and he’s trying to rewrite a story, trying to mold and shape a future within their limited days, so he continues pretending he doesn’t notice and smiles the kindest smile his body can muster.
He’s surprised when he realizes the smile comes easy to him, but that surprise is nothing compared to the contrast her furrowed brow makes with the tiptoe of her feet and the kiss she plants on a bruise that goes deeper than just the outside of his skin.

Her lips heal; her lips confuse. He’s not sure what to do with them, and he knows the kiss is a threat and not a token of affection, but he decides to use it as fuel to power their story and Effie Trinket’s astonished glance is shelved as evidence of how easy it would be for the whole of Panem to believe.

XV.

He decides to confide in his mentor first. It’s the first time he talks about her.

So, what you’re saying is, the sentence hangs, Haymitch swirls his glass of bourbon and the ice makes clacking sounds breaking the silence of the night. The next morning they will have their interviews, and his plan needs a few tweaks and brushes he’s hoping the old man can fix. You want to declare your love for her in front of the whole country.

Yes, the word tastes like sandpaper.

He swallows. The idea sounds ludicrous when spoken out loud. There are so many ways this could go wrong, and yet it sounds like just the story of his whole life. He’s never felt he has a greater purpose, he’s never felt a calling or a sign as to what he’d like to be, but somehow this seems like the greatest painting he’ll ever make without wielding a brush. This will be his masterpiece; he’s been carefully planning it all in his head, the oohs and aahs of the crowd, the downcast face he’ll portray.

The shocked face she’ll wear, the key to sealing their fates in ink.

He’s not in love, not really. She has always been special, that one girl that has always been at the corners of his vision, always tugging at the edges. Her olive skin and that black braid have always made him stare but love is such a powerful thing that can turn the most cowardly men into soldiers, and he hadn’t found the courage to talk to her before this wretched life was thrust upon him.

Love would’ve made him talk to her. Love wouldn’t be making him lie to stay alive.

I could work with that. Haymitch shrugs, but his voice turns to a warning. But it will make you targets. Prey.

It’ll give her an extra chance with the sponsors. It’ll single her out, yes, but she can handle that. She can take care of herself, I’ve seen it.

You really like her. It’s not an accusation, it’s more an intrigue. It should take him by surprise but it doesn’t shock him. He has asked himself the same thing for the past days as he rolls around in a much-too-comfortable-to-bring-comfort bed, and he has come to the realization that yes, he does. Not in a romantic way, but he likes the idea of how special she has been, how special she already is. There’s something about her that makes her unique, a hardened exterior that makes kindness much more notable when it flares up. He saw it when she volunteered for her sister; he sees it every day she looks at the girl from District 11.
But feelings are impractical here; he’s just looking for a way to help her stay alive.

He shakes his head and looks at Haymitch’s toes, She deserves a shot at this.

And you don’t? Haymitch swirls his glass, and once again, his voice is detached. No offense, kid, but I’m having trouble seeing what’s in it for you. Sure, claiming you ‘love’ her - he makes air quotes at the world love - certainly helps her. She needs something to soften her out for the sponsors. It’s all about the show. But you – he stops and points right at his chest – will look like a love-struck puppy, and there’s nothing the Careers love more than killing defenseless puppies.

A knot forms in his throat because yes, he has thought all about this. And yes, he has his life to lose. But he keeps thinking about the way she said “I volunteer” and about that scream she let out when the mine exploded and his mother’s words about maybe having a winner this year, and no one else visiting him in the Justice Hall, no loved ones who would dare fight a government for him.

And while the wheels on his head are spinning he is lucid enough to say I’m more than a defenseless puppy, and walks out of the room.

He doesn’t tell Haymitch his acts when it comes to that girl are never selfless; they are never pure. He has seen in his father’s eyes how clinging to the past leads to poor parenting choices and rips your personality apart; he has seen in his mother’s quick temper how the aggravation of being second to last freezes your heart. He has seen all around him how people dance to the music their circumstances play, and he has been thrown into this party like everyone else, but he doesn’t anything about him to change. He doesn’t tell Haymitch that by making her stand out more than she already has, without anyone being the wiser, he keeps true to himself; he doesn’t tell Haymitch that by pulling the strings and crafting a stage, he’s trying to wield his own sword.

XVI.

The first time she makes him bleed, is not in an arena and he’s not the slightest bit surprised.

Caesar Flickerman tells him all about how handsome he is, how there must be a girl back home, and he thinks this is it, of course, this is it; because lies have always come easy, whether they are about a bruise on his face, or a smile and a wave to a crowd in order to play a game. So, he takes the opportunity like a starving man hangs on to crumbs and when he says She came here with me, the whole world stops.

There’s silence in the auditorium as people process what he has just said, but he can sense it building, building, building and the whispers come and surge like the wind on a summer day.

It was always easy, to create a story with the words that tumbled out of his mouth and it is so easy to succeed here.

But then he sees her face in every camera his eyes can reach, and success tastes sour because he finds himself regretting it, regretting the fact that he bent the truth to try and keep her alive.

In all the years he’d caught glimpses of her face, he’d seen all sorts of expressions etched in her skin, but none quite like the one the whole of Panem had for show. Cheeks blushed, eyes downcast to her feet, hands fumbling with the corners of her nails, bottom lip caught between her teeth, glitter in her skin making her as radiant as the sun. The face of a vulnerable girl whose mask
has tumbled all over the floor. That was a face he wasn’t even sure he was allowed to view.

So afterwards, when she pushes him and his knees give way, and the pieces of a vase sear into his arm, he almost welcomes the sticky warmth of the blood pouring freely; because blood was usually offered as a way to atone for past sins. Isn’t that what the Capitol says, anyway? Blood for pardon, youths for fairness, so even after Haymitch convinces her that his lie made her desirable, that his lie did her a favor, he keeps thinking I’m sorry, forgive me, I gave them a piece of your soul.

XVII.

That night when he’s craving solitude, she also comes to the roof. It’s ironic that this is the first time she is willing to talk to him, and he doesn’t want to talk to her at all.

The following morning they’ll go to the Games, and he knows it’s a one way trip for him, that there are no guarantees, that maybe she hasn’t even realized he wants her to win, that there’s no rhyme or reason for him at all other than wanting to pay back a debt that is long overdue.

She tells him he should be sleeping, and for some reason anger starts boiling up inside him; making his lungs start to rot. All the frustration, the unfairness, the fact that he still had friends and girls he liked, and brothers and none of them ever said goodbye starts constricting his chest and the weight becomes too much. Underneath them, the crowd celebrates the fact that all these kids will be dead in a matter of days, all except one and he knows it should be her. The anger starts giving him a headache, and he just wants to be alone, but she comes to the railing and keeps on talking and a part of his brain keeps up with the conversation while the other is not processing it at all.

Instead, hate consumes him. He hates his father for pointing at her and telling him about her voice, making her special when he was just five years old; he hates his mother for the lack of willingness to love, and hates even Katniss for not realizing how special she is, how unlike himself. For half a second he hates even himself for being out here, trying to make this extraordinary girl win just so he can’t lose his sense of self. Just so he can have a purpose, so his death is not in vain.

I’m really sorry about your hands, she says, but it’s not an apology, not really. She’s worried her outburst gave him a disadvantage in the arena the next morning, and it makes him see bright points in his vision and blood pound on his temples.

Can’t you see? he thinks, I never really had a chance. You do.

He’s surprised when something similar comes out of his mouth of its own accord; he’s surprised he tells her he’s never been a contender anyway. His surprised his anger laces his voice, but he’s even more surprised when she says that is no way to be thinking.

Why not? It’s true. His voice is a challenge. For once he wants to make her break, he wants to make her rage, and he wants to see her wrath and bathe in it, hoping it somehow puts him at ease. His heart is pounding in every vein that makes up his body and he’s so alive he can’t believe in a few days, he just won’t exist.

So when he tells her he wants to die as himself, he’s not lying. He doesn’t want to be a monster, he doesn’t want to be a killer, but he also doesn’t want to be owned and he’s the writer of his own story.
She tells him that no one cares, that the Capitol still owns him, and he replies angrily to all her retorts. But perhaps she is right, they still own him, he’s still a pawn. What she doesn’t see is the fact that he flat out lied to the world, and would do it a thousand times over just to prove that even if they do own him, they don’t have to own her.

XVIII.

(The second time no one says goodbye to him, he welcomes it. This time, he’s more prepared. He welcomes the solitude before climbing into the capsule that will take him to the arena where terror surely awaits. He welcomes the silence, that way no one can hear his breaths. He’s glad Haymitch is with her, he’s glad the old man can see, just like his mother did, that she’s the one who deserves to win.)

XIX.

Once the plates are lifted, and the countdown reaches zero, he grabs a backpack and runs like a man possessed for the first time in his life. His body makes the repetitive motion completely fueled by adrenaline until his body eventually burns all of it and he tastes the bitter flavor of his own bile at the back of his mouth. When his knees give way, he finds a rock in an open space and lies down in the sun. The light is warm and he sees orange behind his closed lids, and he almost thinks this could be peaceful. The woods, the air, the faraway sounds of a stream, the chirping of birds; maybe those were the reasons she went outside the fence. Maybe that’s the reason he’s here.

When he hears the steps he remembers this isn’t meant to be peaceful. There was a reason he wasn’t hiding. They were the reason for his waiting, and he gets up to meet his fate.

XX.

The first time he has to spin the truth and is actually scared while doing it, his eyes cannot stop staring at a thick silver blade.

The kid from District 2 is holding it, Cato, his mind repeats nervously over and over again. There’s an itch at the balls of his feet, survival at the top of his stomach. He is constantly reminding himself that he knows he’s going to die, he knows he won’t be the winner, that there’s no point in hoping, but this wretched body of his always ignites at the sight of danger, always reacts in order to stay alive. So, stupidly, he contemplates making a run for it; the arena is big, he’s resourceful, and Cato might not find him if he’s fast enough, but if there’s something he learned at training is that he’s too built and heavy for flight. His other resource is his strength and the compact muscles around his bones, and he would actually consider taking Cato down if it weren’t for that sword.

Well, well, well… look who we have here, the voice is taunting, it makes him inhale profusely. He doesn’t want to be scared but the voice seeps into his bone marrow and the flare of steel and
sunlight blinds him momentarily. A girl comes out of a mass of trees behind Cato. He knows the Careers usually form alliances in order to kill everyone else and then each other, so the others must be close. He isn’t sure if it’s the steps he hears or his own blood in his eardrums.

_Oooh, lover boy_, Glimmer says. _Where’s your sweetheart, baby?_

Her voice is sickly sweet and mocking; right on cue the other two make their entrance from behind him. They pin his body to the earth and he feels the wind knocked out of him and the pressure of the ground inside his skull. For a sheer instant, the panic stops and he thinks _this is it, this kind of force to the head is what kills me_, but no cannon sounds and his vision is restored.

He forces himself to take in his surroundings even though his brain is still thrashing and his eyes won’t adjust. He takes in the four faces above him and he mentally speaks all of their names. _Cato, Marvel, Clove, Glimmer… they are kids, he thinks, just like me._

But as he feels Cato’s sword edge against his collarbone, and the prick of slightly torn skin is added to the list of pains his body is trying to pay attention to, he realizes the main difference is _they want_ to be here, _he has_ to be here. They offered their lives and his will surely be taken from him.

He squints and he can see enough to notice Glimmer has a bow and arrow that are not supposed to be hers. They are meant to be for a specific girl with much darker skin, and much darker hair. Everything in his life seems to be about a specific girl, even the account of his death judging by the length and sharpness of that blade, so even though his fists are shaking and blood is pooling at his collarbone, he starts doing everything like he practiced in the mirror for the past few days.

_If you kill me, you will never know._

He looks right at Cato as the words come out, he does it in order to drive the message home, since he is clearly the leader of this pack, but part of him is scared that the ruse won’t take and the eyes of this malevolent kid are the last thing he will see.

Cato considers it, and looks at Marvel or at Clove behind him, Peeta isn’t sure. The blade is still in his neck, so he thinks this could go either way, and experience has taught him hesitation is one of those moments when it’s easier to persuade. His throat is dry and the pressure is too much to speak loudly, but his voice comes sure enough once he commands _I am your best chance at finding her. We have lived in the same District our whole lives. I know how she operates. I know her._

Even under these circumstances, part of him wishes that were true.

Clove shakes his body and the blade scratches against his skin, _How do we know you won’t lead us away from her to keep her alive?_

_Either way, it’s not like he has a chance_, Marvel enforces his sentence by banging Peeta’s head to the floor once more. And it’s true, he probably has no chance, but the fact that Clove asked the question means she thinks he loves that girl whose braid he’s watched from afar for so many years, just like he told the whole world the night before; so maybe his plan is working better than he thought, maybe, even if he dies, he gave her a shot at something more.

_How do we know?_ Clove asks again in a whisper against his ear, in complete contrast to the cruelty from the other three.

He closes his eyes. They are all grabbing his limbs one way or another, there’s a sword at his neck that can swiftly kill him right here at this moment, but if it does, if that blade drives true, the
cameras and everyone at home will believe he sold her out; that he lied about her being unique and special, and the glimpse the Capitol had of his partner’s vulnerable face was for nothing; and she deserves to be more than just a pawn.

He looks at the sword that has him so terrified and thinks that if lies could buy redemption, he’d have enough to grant it to the world like god, and says, *Because I want to kill her, too.*

XXI.

The first time he kills someone, it’s not as hard as he expects. Who would have thought flesh and muscle were so soft, so easy to tear through.

It’s late at night and there’s no moon; the anthem has already played, and he sees the smoke before Clove comments on it. Some poor child is trying to keep warm; and it will probably be the last time they get warm enough.

They head in that direction. The unfortunate victim is a girl whose curls he liked, and a triangle face with freckles that reminded him of a different set of freckles and what could have been if he hadn’t been reaped, and Cato wastes no time in driving that sword into the girl’s stomach, leaving her for dead. They continue walking along the woods and he feels the night air’s sudden cold inside him, he curls his hands against the spear the Careers have given him for defense, and he hates himself; hates Cato, hates the Capitol and hates the world.

The hate stops and alarm takes its place when he looks up and sees a bundle atop a tree, and it would be just the story of his life if it’s *her.*

So when the others start complaining about the cannon not sounding, and who should go finish the girl off, he volunteers for several reasons: He wants to give proof of his allegiance, he wants to distract the others from the shapeless form above their heads, but the most important one that leaves a hollow place inside his chest is the fact that the girl with freckles deserved mercy and not drowning in a pool of her own blood.

XXII.

(He leads them to her snare once he has killed the freckled girl. It’s a mix of selfishness and devotion, this combination of truth and lies. He shows them a snare she made because he still has a sense of self-preservation, there has to be a sliver of truth to all his cunning, and he is not ready to die by their hand just yet, but he leads them in the opposite direction because he doesn’t want them to meet her so soon either. This is a game, but right now, he makes the rules. He’s constantly dancing between hero and villain, but he takes whatever role he can get, just as long as he’s never their pawn.)

XXIII.
(She’s up in a tree and the scent of singed hair and burned skin emanates from her when he persuades the Careers in her favor the second time. He stares at her in the branch, and she looks at his eyes, and for once life imitates his perception. He looks up to her; she looks down to him. He has always been ordinary, but he does what needs to be done. For some of these kids and past victors that means to kill people, but for him it means to survive with half-truths, so when he says She can’t stay up there for long with the most derisory and mocking tone he can muster, and the others agree, he convinces himself that by buying her at least a day, the viewers will see a lover and think all is fair in love and war.)

XXIV.

The first time he’s stung by a trackerjacker, also happens to be the second time he saves her life. He’s convinced there’s a joke to be made here, somewhere. She just threw a trackerjacker nest on top of his head, and here he is beating Cato to give her a chance to run.

Through the haze of pain, he fights him mercilessly. He throws punches and kicks at random for as long as he can, after screaming at Katniss to run. Cato is sluggish and he’s also been stung by the wasps, so for a while, everything is blurry for both of them and the pain is so brutal he’s amazed he can distinguish anything else.

Cato punches him in the jaw, Peeta jabs his chest with the spear. He thinks he sees his mother at the corner of his eyes, and can hear his brothers laughing at him as another trackerjacker stings his neck, and that’s when he feels a different kind of agony piercing through him that runs from his hipbone all the way down his thigh.

Through the illusions and the fact that his mother keeps repeating “District 12 may have a winner this year” over and over again, he thinks it’s funny. Every time he saves her, some part of his body has to bear the burden. A black eye, a cut down his arm, a sword through his leg, what difference does it make.

XXV.

Days pass. He loses track of time for the first time in his life.

He dreams about mine explosions; about being burned alive, about drowning, about four kids pinning him down and crushing him to the ground. About freckles and splashing paint on canvasses. The venom courses through him, his sleep is fitful and feverish and he sees horrors he wishes he could forget. He dreams about his mother’s knuckles and his father’s stories, and of cruelty at the sound of the valley song.

On the nights he’s lucid enough; he looks up, and reminds himself he’s alive because her face is not in the sky. The nights he fears the most are those when he sees his own face looking down from above him, and he hears the sound of cannons and smells the blood that has started to clot on the surface of his knees.

He’s going to die here, he has always known it. He just wonders if his half-written story is enough to keep her alive and jump to the ending he set out to convey.
XXVI.

The first and only time he cries in the arena, he’s staring at Rue’s face.

The tears are silent, they roll heavy down his face like rocks down a steep hill, as he hides by the riverbed, and the anthem plays. That little girl, she’s up in the sky.

He doesn’t know how it happened. He doesn’t even want to think it, imagine it; picture it. No. Instead, he thinks of her sister, Primrose is her name.

Primrose.

Rue.

It’s obvious now: Katniss has a weakness for flowers in the middle of wastelands.

XXVII.

The first time he dares to hope, there’s a silhouette in the sun

They gave the announcement the day before, the one that promises two victors can win if they are from the same district. But he’s not betting on that front because the last time he lucidly saw her, she was up in a tree and treason of the highest order was brimming in her eyes. She was also stung by devilish wasps, and he himself can’t remember much of the past few days; there’s no guarantee she can remember he tried to help her escape. Every time he thinks he’s going to die, and all she might remember is that he joined the Careers, it gets a bit harder for him to breathe. But at least when he dies, he’ll still have his identity. He still knows who he is. He can die soaking on mud holding on to his peace of mind.

Besides, he can’t feel the lower half of his leg anymore, and he feels dizzy and lightheaded every time he moves. He’s lost a lot of blood, and the last time he dared look at the cut itself it had started to turn a color that reminded him of coal. Thousands of people have had the chance to come looking for him when he has been healthy, and dashing, and proud, and none of those people ever chose him above their own life. Why would someone do that now, that it’s just a matter of time? He’s going to die anyway; he’s used to loneliness in the middle of crowds.

But, against all odds, there’s a silhouette blocking the sun. A silhouette with a braid and a bow, and it is shaped exactly like hope.

XXVIII.

When she stands by his face and he can see the contours of her ankle right by his nose, he’s so dumbfounded it takes him a few seconds to speak. There’s not enough blood in his body for his heart to pound this crazily; or for his fingers to rattle this intensely. She has finally done it. It’s the
first time in Panem’s history that two tributes can win, and he is not an ordinary boy anymore; he is not just a regular kid. She has made him unique just by not leaving him behind; he has become unique just by coming to this hell with her. And suddenly if he outlives the rest, and she does it too, they can go back home.

He wants to say something emotive. He wants to say a thousand words. But he says: Here to finish me off, sweetheart? and the pet name is not there just to be playful, or irritating, like Haymitch.

He professed to the world he loved her, and she came back for him. His story has plots and twists that he tried to anticipate, but he never expected the odds to actually help him in shaping everything. It’s easier and easier to believe that this is a love story, a love story of his own concoction, and for once the Capitol and the whole nation is effectively playing by his rules.

All they have to do is play their roles and she keeps her promise to her sister, and he proves his mother wrong.

XXIX.

You’re not going to die.

Says who?

Says me. We’re on the same team now, you know?

A team.

He figures it’s the only way this turn of events would have taken place: in a set of carefully crafted games designed to massacre children. He figures life has hooks and bends he doesn’t want turn, but here, in the mud dying and throwing off sarcastic jokes about frosting and cake at the brink of death, it’s the first time in a long, long time he has felt he belongs to something. Or someone.

XXX.

The first time his lips touch her cheek now, she’s mesmerized. For once in his life he managed to surprise her.

She’s taking him in, watching him in the mud, a face of awe and concern as she sees his camouflage and evaluates it. He doesn’t have a chance to tell this to anyone, and probably wouldn’t say it even if he could, but he’s proud of his work in terms of hiding. Life and the hardships of his household have taught him how to be a perfectionist. Whether he’s painting, or baking or building a costume out of rocks, mud and weeds, he has learned that when you judge yourself harder than anyone else does, people’s opinions hurt less, and it’s easier for you to improve. So, considering he hid himself in the riverbank all injured and bleeding and fighting unconsciousness, he did a damn good job.

She smiles a little as he closes his eyes and disappears into the ground, and he feels almost normal, almost like this isn’t happening in a god-forsaken place and he isn’t dying and cameras aren’t
watching their every move like his blood and her burns are cause for entertainment. But they are, and this is his game now, his show. So when he asks her to bend down and she puts her ear against his lips and he feels her warmth, her fight, her caution, he reminds her they’re madly in love, that she can kiss him whenever she wants.

But at this point a kiss is not the only thing he wants to give. It goes deeper than that. He wants to give a chance to not be owned, a chance to show true colors with false shades. He wants her to use whatever is left of him to claim her body and reject the system that tried to take her sister from her. So, in essence he reminds her that she can take, clutch, grab, seize, gorge, swallow, and breathe in whatever parts of his soul she desires without room for demure or naiveté. He wants to remind her that there’s a chance here; and that he will turn his kiss into an armor to help her survive.

She laughs, and it’s not the ideal reaction, but the sensation that lingers on his lips, and the earthy smell of her skin is victory enough.

XXXI.

The first time she willingly touches him, he’s burning.

She’s washing his clothes, his hair, she rubs strange leaves down his trackerjacker stings and dabs ointment on his burns. And even though she washes him and the water cools him off through the pain, he feels a heat in her hands wherever her fingers make contact with his flesh. He could almost swear her nails are flint spark every time they caress his scalp, the slope of his shoulders, down his chest. Lava runs in every curve of his arms and the crook of his elbows; it revolves and consumes all around him.

Her hands burn brighter than the stars, marking him, taking care of him when no one else has done it, not with this care, or this genuine worry, and he has to check his skin several times to make sure her pure warmth is not destroying him. Instead, her palms just cleanse him, they leave sacredness where the world had dirtied him, and he remembers that fire is supposed to make the world anew.

Later, she tells him that he has a fever; that his body is fighting off an infection that has probably been in his veins rotting him long before a sword cut through; she tries to convince him that that’s the reason why he’s burning, but he knows better.

After burning bread a million years ago, he knows how flames feel like. She is, after all, a girl made of fire.

XXXII.

The first time she asks him to strip, is probably the least sexually charged moment of his life.

She has just drained what feels like a gallon of pus from his wounded leg, and she has been so squeamish and brave through it all, it’s been a constant battle between hilarious and touching. It’s not until she gives him a bag and asks him to take off his undershorts that it even occurs to him that she might be bothered, not only by the severity of the situation, but also by touching his bare
body.

For him, it’s easier. It’s not the first time a girl has seen him naked, and it’s not the first time his body has been on display, so he honestly doesn’t care if the whole of Panem sees his mangled body in national TV, but she says I care, alright? and he tosses his undershorts down the stream, no questions asked, with what little strength remains in his arms just to honor the pink rosy tone of her cheeks. Just because she didn’t have to come for him.

Just because she didn’t have to care.

XXXIII.

The first time they kiss, he has just been trying to convince her about the very real possibility that he’s going to die. He’d prepared for that. This kiss was entirely a different animal.

For all his talk about wanting a kiss from her before, and for all his jokes about that kiss ever since she found him, he wasn’t really banking on her actually doing it. One thing this wretched system taught him is that the odds are never actually supposed to be in his favor, so he’s all wired to move against the flow. He’s learned to be one of those stubborn fishes who always swims the wrong way up a river; the fever has made him forget their names, but he was expecting this story to be harder to craft. At this point, with the pain he feels, and all Katniss’ attempts to heal him getting nowhere, he was actually awaiting death sooner than expected. He’d already managed to be unique: a rule change was made in her favor because of his little tactic in the interviews, so he was ready to go if his blood was what was necessary for her to live. And yet, when she kisses him to silence, and even though the haze of fever he’s acutely aware of how this looks for the audiences at home, all he can think is that there’s some sort of peace here. There shouldn’t be though, he isn’t supposed to feel peace in a game like this, where someone can appear at any second in their cave and kill them, all having been for nothing. He shouldn’t feel tranquility in the soft way her lips move with his, no tongue, just soft flesh against each other, her lips strangely cold.

Yet, that’s all there is. And as he dozes off with the sound of a parachute outside the cave, some part of his head knows she’s probably doing it because she must be aware of the cameras too, but it was so easy.

Love, or whatever it is that animal is supposed to be, shouldn’t be this easy to fake, to come about.

The odds aren’t supposed to move their way.

XXXIV.

The first time he sees massive quantities of blood, he actually thinks he’s having a nightmare.

He wakes up and takes in his surroundings, the cave, the faint sound of water trickling down a stream somewhere, the crickets singing even in this manmade landscape, and then he looks to his side and the shock of finding her amid an ocean of red is such that his hand goes to his mouth and stifles a sob.

He has to be dreaming. He has to be dead. That’s the only scenario where he would have ever
imagined Katniss dying in a pool of her own blood, and for a second he wonders what happened. He wonders why his leg doesn’t hurt anymore and why she has such a terrible gash on her head, but then he remembers she went out for him and he balls his hands into fists.

He goes to touch her and stops himself because he thinks he’s going to vomit if he winds up touching her skin and his fingers come out cold, but then he sees the faint, barely-there rise and fall of her chest, and the scene is horrific yet manageable enough for it to be Panem reality and not some twisted dream.

He allows himself one sigh before he rips up the hem of his t-shirt to carefully apply pressure on her wound.

She almost died saving him. She’s here because she was willing to risk her life for the love she felt for her sister, and he’s starting to make connections in this game that he isn’t sure he should be making. Katniss seems to show care by throwing herself in the line of fire for people, even against their will. She did it for her sister, she did it for Rue, but she also did it for him, and once more he thinks this is jarring.

He no longer feels in control of this story, but that’s not what scares him the most. What scares him most is the possibility that maybe his story is writing itself because there was some truth somewhere to the lies he’s told.

XXXV.

The first time he forgets he’s at The Hunger Games, there are berries in his hands.

A cannon sounds. He feels a chill in his veins before he hears her screaming for him, and he appears out of the foliage just in time to see a white hot flash of fear pass her eyes as she puts down her bow.

*What are you doing? You’re supposed to be here, not running around in the woods!* She all but screams at him, and he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care because once more he’s acutely aware of the cameras around them, of how they must be making close-ups into her face, which is the same vulnerable face she made when he told the world he loved her.

He doesn’t like that face in her, and he doesn’t think she knows how much she’s shaking, he doesn’t think he knows how strangled and cracked her voice sounds when she screams *I thought Cato killed you!*.

There’s anger in her voice but there’s also something else, and she keeps shaking, shaking, like an earthquake is going through her body and he doesn’t want the world to see her crack, to see her emotions so raw and so… real and on the surface of her skin. He already did that to her once, he doesn’t want to let it happen more times than is necessary, so he walks up to her and places his hands on her shoulders to steady her and make her find her ground.

Minutes later she informs him that the berries he was collecting could have killed him, and he should have been afraid by it, but he can’t stop himself from replaying what he just saw: a girl so distressed about his safety in a way he hasn’t even seen his own mother worry, and he wonders if this is how love looks like.

He wonders if what he has called a concocted story and a half truth is perhaps what she truly has
found in him in this godforsaken arena.

His heart beats so much and so loud and so alive, he wonders if he came all this way to the end of the world to face death in order to actually discover what being loved by someone feels like.

XXXVI.

(The second time lies get told to a whole country is when they both manage to survive these awful games, and he dares to think all this is behind him. Caesar Flickerman asks him when he first realized he was in love with Katniss, and he tells him it happened the first time he saw her. He’s lying, he knows it. Age 5 is not an age of love, but he knows that when he first heard her sing, something inside him that burst through sharply and life-changing. Truth be told, he doesn’t know if it was love, he wouldn’t dare call it that because he was too young. He just knows it was real. And the truth is, the first time he realized he was in love with her happens minutes later, indirectly when Caesar asks her when she realized she was in love with him, and he notices that what she answers is actually what is true for him.

Peeta Mellark actually realized he was in love with Katniss Everdeen when the 74th Annual Hunger Games were over, and he realized he could keep her.)

XXXVII.

It’s a funny thing when you realize you’ve told so many lies, that you’ve started to believe them all yourself. When it dawns on him that no, the games are not proof of how Katniss loves, or that she loves him, it is the first time he feels betrayed.

It was all for the games, how you acted he says as he stares at her face, and he sees despair but recognition when he says it. It’s so ironic, he almost wants to laugh.

Not all of it. She’s holding flowers, and she looks so radiant, so real, and so small.

What was he expecting? He knew from the first moment in the Justice Building that he wanted to make a story for the audience, that none of it would be real, that he was doing this as a way to stop being a pawn in the Games, as a way to stay true to himself, and in the end he’s been played by his own craftsmanship. He’s the plot twist of his own story, the one loose end, the one scenario he had not calculated or made plans for.

He’s his own plan’s weak link and if he could he would kick himself for the sheer anger he feels.

What’s going to be left when we get home? He asks her, because suddenly he has stopped being able to read circumstances and to even read himself, but even as he says it, and before she mouths I don’t know, he already knows nothing will be left when they get home.

Because there was nothing to begin with, just burned bread and glances stolen, and kindness, and stories he made himself. They’re just strangers that were forced to play a sadistic game. He used to know that. He planned for it, even.

There’s no sin in Katniss only playing the cameras to survive, because that’s what he was doing
too, wasn’t it? At the beginning? But he needs somewhere to direct his anger, and he’s just realized he actually loves her, so he takes it out on her.

He’s really just angry at himself, but he’s not used to not being in control in some capacity. He’s angry that even in his desire to not be played by this corrupt government and rebel against it, he has been played by his own heart.

*Let me know when you figure it out,* he hears his own voice being petty and blaming her for things he only has himself to blame for. He sees himself walking away from her, from the one person who saved his life just by giving him a purpose, the one person who has made him remarkable, and he hates himself even more.

When he tells her they have to do it for the audience the next day, he holds her hand and he feels her eyes looking for her hunting partner in the crowd, yet, he feels the electricity coursing from his hand to hers, and he loves her with everything he has. But he realized he loved her when he thought he could keep her but how can you keep someone who doesn’t feel the same.

**XXXVIII.**

**'(the one last thing)***

When he’s strapped to the chair, somewhere in a Capitol facility, with devices keeping his eyes open, with wires attached to his veins and sweat coursing through every square inch of skin, he has one sudden moment of clarity where he knows what they’re doing. Where he knows that he’s losing himself, and with everything that makes him him, he’s also losing the memories he has of that one person he loved by accident in a mix of pretending, faking, and reality behind closed doors. The Capitol technicians who work horrors on him are always Avoxes, he suspects so that they aren’t tempted to tell him what will become of him but he knows. He knows because the Capitol always looks right to the marrow of your being in order to destroy whatever makes you human, and what makes Peeta human is his ability to adapt while also knowing what his twisted morals are. That’s his weakness. That’s how he lowered his defenses enough to fall in love without intending to, and that’s what they will wreck with this torture of venom and pain.

He knows the Capitol will strip him of the choice to play by his own rules by making something out of him. Some kind of weapon, maybe. Something to destroy the revolution he himself has wanted for years. He isn’t sure what they’ll do, but he knows there is no way the real version of him will survive this one game unscathed.

He loses memories, he loses the voice of the girl with the braid, the mockingjays falling silent, he loses the bread, he loses conversations of favorite colors, and suddenly there is no girl, there are no braids, there is only red eyes and bites and venom, but before they break apart everything he is, the last lucid memory of something he can make sense of; of something he can relate to is not interviews or pearls, or kisses given by the beach, or the longing looks he shared with her.

His last lucid memory is a word that flashes in his brain like a neon sign with bright lights pointing
the way and, he bites into his tongue until he can taste blood so as to remember what the pain is
telling him. Pain has always grounded him, pain has always taught him when to let go, and it will
tell him now the only thing he needs to hold on to the person that he is. The pain will remind him
it's not the Capitol who owns him; he doesn't even own himself anymore.

Weeks later, when Delly’s telling him about a childhood he simultaneously remembers and not, he
doesn’t know why he’s writing the word always over and over and over again in patches of
patchwork until his fingers are blistered and the ends of his nails almost draw blood.

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