The lesser of two evils

by ForestFairy

Summary

Haymitch Abernathy just mentored Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark to victory in the 74th Hunger Games. An unpleasant encounter makes Haymitch question the moves he made during the mentoring and forces him to make an appalling choice.

Notes

One Shot, set in the Capitol during Book One, The Hunger Games, shortly after the Games are over and before the return to District 12.

It's only when Haymitch Abernathy is sitting in a posh restaurant near the Capitol center with yellow haired and big-bellied Aonus Rore that he realizes that praising Katniss Everdeen's good points to Capitol mogul Lemus Churcher might not have been his best idea.

The 74th Hunger Games are over and for the first time since Haymitch became victor himself he is not only going home with a victor. No, there will be two victors. No coffins, no crying families, no
depressing funerals. Haymitch is almost unable to cope with that sort of unheard happy situation.

When the Capitol game makers changed the rules and allowed two victors to be crowned Haymitch knew better.

He knew better, but he couldn't communicate with Katniss and Peeta directly, and if he had that opportunity, what good would have that done anyway?

He was certain that Peeta wouldn't make it out, but the boy deserved to die in a honorable fashion, with the girl he loved holding his hand. The least he could do was to keep them unaware and let Peeta pass calmly, with his dream of a future still intact.

The baker's youngest son turned out to be a kind and sensitive young man, intelligent to the point of being almost philosophical. Haymitch was impressed with the courage that the town boy possessed.

He had been selfless. Selfless enough to come to Haymitch and ask for help in a plan to save Katniss Everdeen, choosing a girl he barely knew over himself. Peeta had accepted to die. For her.

Haymitch teased the boy, told him that he was being foolish, that this were only the hormones talking, but in the end agreed to help, after Peeta calmly claimed that he wouldn't want any help from Haymitch thereafter. If only Haymitch would grant his dying wish.

It was heroic and stupid. However it had been his request all the same. Peeta Mellark may have been naive, but he was a sixteen year old boy, hopelessly in love. So who could fault him?

Haymitch knew that he could never have given up himself like this at this age, being so much closer to Katniss in his character traits. He and Katniss Everdeen - they were just too similar. From the Seam, survivor types, no time for any notion of sappy romance in their lifes.

Luckily he didn't have to decide who to work for, who to woo the sponsors for. The decision was made for him and he was thankful that he got Peeta's blessing to concentrate on her.

On Katniss Everdeen.

In a way, Haymitch understands Peeta, he understands the Capitol and he is shocked when he realizes that even he, the drunk mentor, the joke of District 12, is wowed by a tribute. For the first time in 23 years.

How she volunteered for her sister, her dazzling smile on the chariot, her skills with the bow and arrow - it wasn't hard to see why Katniss Everdeen became everybody's darling. As soon as she first stepped out of that train from District 12 and Haymitch watched the cheering crowd he felt it in the air.

There had been a different atmosphere in the Capitol. Like a star was born, a more modern era had started, a new generation of something wondrous was about to begin.

Even though Haymitch hadn't sobered up completely when they arrived at the training center, he knew that there was change about to happen and soon.

The prep teams that were usually more than unhappy with District 12 tributes were envied for having Katniss at their hands. And for the first time since Haymitch mentored, victors, celebrities, politicians and all important people alike, were asking for a chat and wanted to know everything about her.
Effie Trinket was having a field day, as she had never seen such a favorable response to any tribute before.

The Capitol men were in awe of the soft but fierce huntress, so skilled in the art of survival. The women wanted to be like her, compassionate and loving, they adored her hair and imitated her look.

Katniss Everdeen even started a trend with the citizens and brought the braid back in style. On his way to the restaurant, Haymitch saw not only children but even an eighty year old woman wearing Katniss' signature braid.

He sits down at the table where middle-aged Aonus Rore is already waiting for him. Rore is supposed to be an important man here in the Capitol.

Over the years, Haymitch hadn't had much contact with Rore. He doesn't even know what exactly Rore's occupation is, only that it has to do with the victors. Aonus Rore hadn't worked for the Hunger Games when Haymitch won, at least Haymitch doesn't remember the guy from these days. He never met him officially.

Haymitch knows nothing about the protocol or what happens after the Games. It has been 24 years, there must've been changes.

This is much more Effie Trinket's forte than his. Maybe the meeting is about the Victory Tour? Haymitch shakes his head. So many meetings and all these different people are as new to him as that green liquor that is now served in the Capitol. He will always prefer the white liquor. It had been popular in his twenties and Haymitch has been loyal to the drink ever since.

"Oh, Mr. Abernathy. It is so nice that you found the time, I'm sure you are quite busy," Rore smiles at Haymitch, who can almost smell the Capitol faked sweetness.

"I did order you a drink, I hope you don't mind, do you?" Rore chuckles at his own joke. Everyone in the Capitol knows that Haymitch Abernathy is a drunk.

But Haymitch doesn't want to get drunk tonight, the situation with Katniss and President Snow is not exactly easy, and Peeta has another leg surgery this evening - the prosthesis is not fitting as it should.

He is under no delusions that he can refuse this meeting or the drink. This is not a nice evening chat, it is not an invitation. It is a duty he has to carry out. Effie Trinket rushed him out of the door earlier this afternoon, saying that, in no way, he is ought to miss this important appointment with Rore.

"Congratulations, my dear Mr. Abernathy. Two victors, that's something, isn't it? The Games get more exciting every year, don't they?" Rore begins, not aware that Haymitch has no idea what he wants and that he is most likely the wrong person to talk to.

Could this be about the berries? Haymitch starts to sweat and feels a tad more nervous than before.

"So, Katniss Everdeen, the girl on fire. What a victor, what a lady, what a hero! She is the talk of the town. Everyone just loves her, and those who sponsored, aah, they are overjoyed that they contributed to her victory!"
Haymitch takes a deep slug of his drink. The sponsors? Yes, it never had been easier to get them than this year.

Haymitch has to admit though, that he stopped trying, really trying after the first three years. He couldn't take the tributes dying. He turned to drink and tuned their panicking voices out. Didn't care much anymore and only made half-hearted attempts at getting gifts.

He couldn't help it. If he hadn't drowned out these children with the help of white liquor he would've killed himself. Not caring about the tributes, that was the only way to survive the yearly games and the annual trips to the Capitol.

Until this year came around. Haymitch realizes that, even when he thought that Katniss was about to die in the arena, he already cared for her. More than he ever cared for any tribute before. He remembers each name, he remembers each face, but he had forced himself not to care.

But then she volunteered.

Katniss was so different. When she was in the arena, he did everything in his power to help her.

Gifts weren't cheap, not at all. And rich people could be extremely picky, especially at the beginning of the Games. When Effie told him the price for the burn balm, that Katniss needed, he had to calm down, nearly smashing a vase on the ground. It had been so horrendously high! Shocked, he never thought someone would honestly pay that much money. It had been early in the games. But he underestimated the rich Capitol sponsors. He got the gift so easily, it was almost ridiculous.

Aonus Rore takes as sip from his drink and says, "Well, everyone here just adores our beautiful Miss Everdeen. I think I've never seen Caesar Flickerman so smitten with a tribute. And he is not the only one. There are many happy sponsors, I'm very pleased to tell you. One sponsor in particular. You have certainly convinced Lemus Churcher of Katniss' gorgeousness, that's for sure. He fancies her. Good Job, Mr. Abernathy."

Rore laughs dirtily and orders more drinks. Churcher, Churcher? Haymitch curses inwardly. He didn't want to get drunk, but it is too late, he notices because he has a hard time concentrating. Who was Churcher again?

During the games, the high society of the Capitol mingled with the mentors in a huge banquet hall of a hotel, especially decorated for extended Hunger Games viewings on gigantic screens.

Haymitch's job was to talk to all those Capitol people and to convince them that this fantastic tribute of his deserved all the gifts and more. Sponsor hunting. And it worked. Better than ever before.

The gifts for Katniss had been expensive, but thanks to her getting an Eleven and her popularity, the Capitol people put their stakes on Katniss and wanted to help her out. There had been this balding man, in his fifties, maybe a little older. He had been very interested in Katniss and wanted to know everything about her.

Effie then told Haymitch that this towering man was one of the richest men in the Capitol and went by the name of Lemus Churcher. Haymitch sang the praise of Katniss to the mogul, when the games were nearing the end and the gifts became unaffordable, even by Capitol standards.

Lemus Churcher was a different type of Capitol breed. He signed the cheque for a gift without blinking once and clapped Haymitch on the back saying something about hopefully meeting Katniss
in person soon.

Haymitch remembers that he didn't like the guy much, but why should he have cared? Churcher helped in keeping Katniss alive, that had been the only thing that counted.

"I'm glad, he liked her. Katniss is thankful for every gift, she received in the arena," Haymitch says, relieved that he manages not to slur.

He wants the man to get to the point, so that he can get back and check on Peeta. Haymitch worries about that leg of his, it didn't look good this afternoon.

"I understand that Katniss is quite busy at the moment, just having won the Games, there must be so much to do. I didn't have time to check with Miss Trinket, but when do you think will Miss Everdeen be able to come back to the Capitol? There is almost half a year until the Victory Tour, so we must be able to squeeze in a few dates in the middle of all that, right?" Aonus Rore takes out a little black notebook and a pen, looking expectantly at Haymitch, ready to write something down.

"Come back? I'm not sure, I'm not her secretary, to be honest," Haymitch laughs nervously. Why should Katniss come back to the Capitol before the Victory Tour? Haymitch never does, the only time he has to is when he's mentoring.

"I know that you're not, Mr. Abernathy. What you are, is her mentor," Rore's eyebrows are twitching slightly, "You are in charge of her and looking after her when she is in the Capitol on business, right? That's the assignment of the mentor. Listen, Lemus Churcher and the other sponsors are busy people. They like to be prepared and know in advance when they can meet her. We have to set the dates now."

Rore rolls his eyes at Haymitch, who feels stupid, like he is too dumb to understand an inside joke. Haymitch has a feeling he is missing a puzzle piece, some important information. If this Lemus Churcher wants to meet Katniss, why can't he meet her on the Victory Tour and say hello to her then?

And then...it slowly dawns on Haymitch. The white liquor must have washed out his brain. He pales and feels sick to his stomach now knowing exactly why they want Katniss back here and at that soon. When she is still on everyone's radar, a shining star, the girl on fire.

He curses inwardly at his lack of hindsight. Hates himself for offering Katniss up, talking about her like she was a thing, a good investment. He'd done it to keep her alive. Never for this, never.

Why did he have to mention her sparkling grey eyes and her beautiful smile to a guy like Lemus Churcher? What had he been thinking?

No, he hadn't been thinking at all. He had been so shortsighted, spending not one little thought on the aftermath of the Hunger Games, only worrying about the immediate dangers they presented. Survival over all.

He was at fault and now he had to face reality. He was to be a procurer in charge of Katniss' dates? The notion alone felt disgusting.

Katniss Everdeen, a girl that had blushed so deeply, so innocently, when Peeta Mellark declared his love for her. A girl that hadn't even dared to look at the bare boy, when there was nothing remotely sexual about the situation they were in.
He twitches and looks at Aonus Rore, feeling only violent hate. He wants nothing more than to hit this man with the bottle that is standing on the table. But he can't, he can't.

Panic threatens to overwhelm Haymitch. How can he prevent this, how can he make them see? Katniss can never know. She just cannot be made to do this. Survive the Hunger Games just to be sold by the Capitol? No, he won't, he can't let that happen.

"Mr. Rore," he says, fighting hard at keeping his voice polite now "There must be some sort of misunderstanding. Miss Everdeen is certainly not available for these dates. We are thankful for all the sponsor's gifts, but what you're implying wasn't part of the deal."

"Mr. Abernathy," Aonus Rore says, calm and patronizing. "I am well aware of the fact that you are mentor to a winner for the first time. So I don't fault you for not being up to date with the current procedure. After all your time was long ago, you're not exactly the.....well, youngest person around anymore. But rest assured. This is how business is run in the Capitol now. In fact, it has been for a while, going back to Adaline Cranster."

Haymitch swallows. Now *that* is a threat. Yes, times have changed, especially in the Capitol. It's not only the fashion, the colors and all that. A different zeitgeist, a different style, and certainly different morals. Nothing stays the same, even the Hunger Games change. Haymitch knows that now. When he won the Hunger Games he had been sixteen, like Katniss and Peeta are now. *Ages* ago. Living his life in Twelve, it is so easy to stay unaware, to forget that the world keeps on turning.

Twenty four years ago, the Games were as brutal as ever, however the Capitol Citizens were slowly getting bored with them. Haymitch was lucky that he had been the winner in the Quarter Quell year. The Capitol Citizens enjoyed the novelty, the specialness of the Quell. But then it seemed they got bored again. Same old, same old. Five years after Haymitch won, the Games weren't that popular anymore and the Capitol had to think of a new twist to keep the sponsors interested.

In the year of the 55th Hunger Games, Panem saw a girl win. That was special, since the last ten winners had been male. Haymitch remembers that girl from District 4, Adaline Cranster. She had only been thirteen years old and Haymitch had never seen a girl as precious as Adaline before and probably ever since. With stunning blue eyes and golden curls, Adaline had the looks of a doll.

She hadn't been a brutal killer either, she had won her games by diving deep into a river and hiding between rocks. She had only killed two other tributes in self defence. That year there had been an mudslide that killed ten of the tributes in the arena, so Adaline came out of the games in sound condition. As innocent as one can be as a winner of the Hunger Games.

Three years later Haymitch had expected to see Adaline in the Capitol, mentoring as usual. But she wasn't there. In her place was Mags, an older woman who had mentored before Adaline had won. Haymitch had asked Mags where Adaline had gone, but Mags only smiled sadly and turned away from him.

From different victors Haymitch gathered all kind of information, so he could figure out what must have happened to Adaline. After she had won her games a close friend of the President became interested in the girl. Panem's President decided to sell little Adaline to his friend on a regular basis. Haymitch didn't shock easily, he had been used to the horrors of the Capitol by then. When he heard Adaline's tale he had been appalled in spite of that.
Adaline had been popular in the Capitol and it didn't stop at that one incident, at that one man. Those were the days when Snow and his cronies decided that selling victors was another profitable way to keep a tight reign over them.

Not every victor was made for this kind of work. The chosen ones had to be handsome and mostly sane. Not too brutal and not too old.

Lucky Haymitch. His games had been long over and people didn't care for him anymore. They had kept Adaline in line because she had a loving family, she must have wanted to protect. She probably had done everything they told her to do, met every demand and followed every order. What exactly that entailed Haymitch had no desire to speculate about.

After three years Adaline went into the ocean - never to return. Word was that President Snow had been furious that the girl had killed herself. To prevent a repeat of that accident, Adaline's family was executed in public. That had been a warning with a great impact. No victor would dare to commit suicide if there were any loved ones still alive and breathing.

Haymitch meets Aonus Rore's eyes and the man smiles slightly.

"I see you're catching on, Mr. Abernathy. Well, what do you say, when can we expect to see our lovely girl entertain in the Capitol? I suggest a break of two months, so that she can be introduced in the winter season."

Think, Haymitch, think fast. What to say, what to do? Haymitch's brain was never so slow on the uptake, even in drunken stupor.

He thinks of Katniss sitting on the sofa in the training center, a scared wounded girl, traumatized by the horrors of the Hunger Games and depressed about that little girl called Rue.

She must be so broken and afraid. Alone. He just wants to leave now, go to her, hold her, offer comfort. He wants to protect her from this horrendous Capitol scum and Lemus Churcher and these fucked up sponsors.

She must be thinking about the berries, so scared of President Snow's plans for her, scared for her sister and scared for the boy, pale faced on the operation table.

The boy.

"Mr. Rore, you might have not followed these games as closely as the rest of Panem, I assume. We had two victors this year. And they are, in fact, in a relationship. Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark are the star-crossed lovers. Surely you didn't think that the country would like to see you responsible for breaking these two apart with your schemes?"

That's it. They cannot sell her, that will destroy the star-crossed lovers image. Aonus Rore frowns.

"Yes, this is a complication that our department is well aware of. We hadn't had the chance to talk about this with President Snow. Yet. In the meantime, I suppose we cannot ask you to keep an eye on these two, right? If the girl on fire is still a virgin, that will fetch a gigantic profit."

Haymitch gapes at the man. Watch Katniss and Peeta to make sure she stays a virgin so that these
The rage he feels is uncontrollable. All he can think is that he wants to kill this man, right here, right now. Beat him to bloody pulp, destroy him.

But that would do no good. It won't help. Him or even Katniss. There has to be another way. He supposes Snow wouldn't want Katniss to be prostituted, that wouldn't work out well if the public found out. But he can't be sure, he must give this man, Aonus Rore, something. Something to buy time. But what? *What?*

A thought comes to him quickly and he feels ashamed and guilty for thinking it, immediately recognizing it as the only solution.

The lesser of two evils.

"What about Peeta Mellark, Mr. Rore? Wouldn't he be more profitable for your business?"

Haymitch never hated himself more than in this moment. He chooses Katniss again, chooses her over Peeta. Haymitch would sacrifice himself for both of them, if he could. Why was he so damn broken? Nobody would pay a penny for a drunk old victor in their bed.

Aonus Rore hesitates, fearing a trap in all probability.

"Why? He is a boy and not nearly as popular as her," he says sulkily.

Haymitch shakes his head,

"Well, yeah, he is a boy, but that can only be an advantage. The Capitol women will adore him. He is sweet and loving, good with words. They can feel like they are in a romance and imagine themselves as Katniss Everdeen, when they are with him."

Haymitch knows he has to be convincing, knows he has to make Peeta out to be even better suited for this than Katniss, or it won't work.

"Peeta is a popular guy in our district. He knows how to please a woman."

Of course, Peeta knows nothing of the sort. Peeta didn't outright say it, but Haymitch knows he is a virgin. The kiss he shared with Katniss in the cave might have been his first.

Haymitch's head hurts, thinking of Peeta. The boy is still a child, so young, and almost equally as innocent as Katniss when it comes to these things.

"By all means, that's true."

The wheels in Aonus Rore's head seem to be turning faster now.

"This is not a bad idea, Mr. Abernathy. In fact, Lemus Churcher told me before the games that he was interested in trying a boy for a change. I suggested Finnick Odair, but this is much more perfect in every sense."

Perfect? Perfect would be only one thing. To strangle Aonus Rore right now. Haymitch takes
another deep gulp of his drink, glad he steered Rore away from the idea of selling Katniss and disgusted about what that will mean for Peeta.

"There will be double profits if Mr. Mellark is introduced. He can entertain men and women equally. What do you think, Mr. Abernathy, will Mr. Mellark cooperate?"

"He will, if you promise to leave Katniss Everdeen alone," Haymitch says and tries to keep his voice down. The sad thing is, that he suspects that Peeta would indeed cooperate, if it means sparing Katniss. He would agree with this. The thought is unbearable.

"I see. Well, my department will consider the offer, talk to Churcher and of course, President Snow," Rore says.

"You will hear from us in due time. I'm afraid I have to leave now, and I'm sure you're busy, too. It was a pleasure, talking business with you Mr. Abernathy."

Rore stands up and holds out his hand, expecting Haymitch to shake it. Haymitch's hand is gripping his armchair so that the white of his knuckles can be seen. He knows one thing. The only time he will voluntarily touch this man, will be when his hands are wrapped around Rore's throat.

Aonus Rore huffs snootily at Haymitch's death glare and turns around to leave the restaurant. All fight leaves Haymitch's body.

Peeta doesn't deserve this, he is definitely not worth any less than Katniss. Haymitch likes Peeta. Having to choose between the two once before hadn't been easy. Right now it is torture. Like given the choice between blindness or deafness.

He had been proud and glad when Peeta didn't die and not only for the boy or Katniss' sake, but also his own. Returning with two victors to District 12, at last. It felt like a dream. Finally having two neighbors in that huge lonely Village, being part of a group, living with people who understand.

He wouldn't have to be so god damn lonely anymore, there would be others to share the pain and the grief, and Peeta seemed like someone who would care. Haymitch understood this in the train, only hours after the reaping, throwing up, feeling sick and unhappy. Then there was Peeta. A boy who just received his own death sentence.

Haymitch thinks of Peeta's blue eyes in that train, meeting his own eyes head on. Peeta was golden and shiny and warm. He had looked after him. Haymitch felt strangely safe when Peeta had helped him in the shower. There hadn't been a person so kind to him in years. The way Peeta handled him, it had been almost tender.

Peeta Mellark is good. Too good. This here, this horrible business in the Capitol will destroy him. Not only being a piece in the Hunger Games, but being a Capitol whore. Even if Peeta hasn't lost himself in the games, he will surely lose himself in the sheets of that dirty Capitol mogul. Haymitch knows that he can't let that happen. Never. Fortunately he bought a bit of time. For how long, he doesn't know.

He feels weak and powerless like when he realized that President Snow owned his life all those years ago. Mentally he is preparing a list of people who he can ask for help. There aren't a lot of them. Haymitch knows that he will defend Katniss and Peeta with his life. Both of them. He will not allow the Capitol to take them away from him. No matter what it takes. He can only pray that the whispered talks of an uprising, of a revolution are the truth. If they are, he knows he will fight on the front line, so he can help protecting these two.
Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, the winners of the 74th Hunger Games.

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