Peeta is requested to travel to the Capitol to shoot a propo. Haymitch accompanies his tribute on the trip while the Girl on Fire remains in District 12.

"Why do you have to go back now? I just don’t see the need. Why can’t they let us rest until the Victory Tour?"

Peeta looks around the kitchen and his blue eyes meet the gaze of Mrs. Everdeen, who gives an impalpable nod and disappears deeper into the house. He feels uncomfortable in Katniss’ home.
The atmosphere is so cozy and lively that it makes the absence of his own family next door glaringly obvious. He grips his tea cup tighter.

"I told you. An art-supply company wants me to do a propo for them. They’re producing a new oil color assortment, even calling it ‘Peeta’s Paint Box’. The Capitol is not asking for my opinion, they ordered me to promote it. I have to go and shoot a series of commercials before the product launch," Peeta says and hopes his voice is steady instead of laced with the icy fear that is clenching around his heart.

It is actually Katniss’ voice that’s shaky and nervous when she replies.

"I don’t like it. And I don’t want you to go, because…” She hesitates and he thinks of what he wants her to say, ‘Because I care, because it wasn’t an act, because I love you as much as you love me.’

He wishes for her to say something meaningful to hold on to later, then chides himself for these thoughts, uncomfortably aware that he is not over her, she doesn’t feel the same and never will. In a way that makes everything easier.

"It’s just, I’m scared," she whispers. All he manages is a small nod in return.

"It feels weird. You and Haymitch going to the Capitol without me. I wouldn’t want to go back either, but I’m afraid that….if only the two of you go…once you’re gone….that…”

She stops and turns to look out of the kitchen window while Peeta watches the subtle muscle movements beneath the olive skin of her long and graceful neck. He knows what she implies but can’t bring herself to say. She’s afraid that they won’t come back. He can’t do a thing to lessen her fears, but he tries anyway.

"Haymitch and I, we will look after each other in the Capitol, don’t worry. It'll only be a week. You'll barely notice we’re gone, you have…”

‘Gale’, he almost says, but stops and pushes the thought of Gale and Katniss together far away or he won’t be able to board that train, won’t be able to take that step, won’t be able to do what needs to be done. Not with dark thoughts of jealousy consuming him at the same time.

"…your mother and Prim to keep you company," he finishes instead.

She sighs and says no more. He wishes that Haymitch wouldn’t have insisted on informing Katniss on their trip to the Capitol. He is afraid she’ll see right through him when he returns, that she’ll immediately know something worse than a simple propo shoot took place. Katniss is more attentive than she gives herself credit for. Haymitch is right though, they couldn’t leave her in the dark. What if she’d appeared on Haymitch’s doorstep, wanting to talk, only to find both of them gone? She would’ve assumed they were abducted by the Capitol or worse. He finishes the last sip of his luke warm peppermint tea and stands up.

"I have to go and pack my bag. The train leaves shortly before midnight," he says and they make for the door.

"Do you want me to come to the station later?” Katniss asks, handing him his coat.

'Yes,’ he thinks. “No,” he says.
There won’t be any cameras so don’t worry - we don’t have to force ourselves to act out a big farewell scene in the middle of the night. Effie stayed in the Capitol to work out my itinerary anyway,” he says, flinching inwardly at the harshness of his words. The look Katniss gives him is sad, uncomfortable. She doesn’t insist on going again.

He takes a long final glance at her. Katniss’ alluring grey eyes are dark with something akin to concern. Her face appears pale in the twilight of the fading day. She is wearing a tightly woven green wool dress which compliments her curves, makes her look more womanly. Certainly a Cinna creation. Her hair is open, falling down over her shoulders in shiny, wavy curls. He imagines he can smell an earthy fragrance when she moves around him to open the door. His cock stirs slightly in response to a whiff of pinewood needles that defines Katniss. Thanks to the fear it is easier to ignore tonight.

Peeta longs to touch her so badly. He has to bite on his cheeks - hard - drawing blood to resist the urge to kiss her soft looking lips. It had been weeks since he last had the pleasure of having Katniss in his arms. Weeks since he had been allowed - even expected - to hold her, felt her warm embrace and had the pleasure of her petite mouth kissing his lips softly. Memories are the only thing he has left. The strong taste of the metallic liquid is threatening to choke him, so he swallows and mumbles a short goodbye, unable to look at her any longer, knowing the next time they meet he will be irrevocably changed. She will get suspicious if he makes too big of a deal. He never wanted them to change him. The Hunger Games nearly did it. This certainly will.

"Peeta! Wait," Katniss says urgently when he steps out and he sees her smaller hand reach out for his left one, feels her long fingers interweave with his.

'Don’t cry. Don’t let it show on your face. Don’t cry. Don’t let her see. Don’t cry.' His thoughts are like a prayer, a mantra he tries to hold on to. He forces himself not to break down and smiles at her.

"See you next week, Katniss," he says and Katniss squeezes his hand, smiling back at him.

"You’re real, Peeta. Real," Katniss says, lifts her other arm reassuringly to slowly caress his cheek and then lets go so fast, it is as if she’s never touched him at all. He immediately misses her warmth. He doesn’t understand the meaning of her words or the gesture. He feels comforted all the same, assured that the path he is about to take is the right one. She will be safe and will never know, that’s the only thing that matters. Katniss closes the door and Peeta stares longingly at the dangling door wreath, which undoubtedly has been hand crafted by her little sister. Peeta wonders if he should have embraced Katniss. The moment is gone and he didn’t. Outright regret ties itself around his insides like rope.

"Goodbye," he whispers into the darkness of the Victor’s Village, not sure who the addressee of that last farewell is supposed to be.

The place is called The Mauve Mare and located at the top floor of Equine Resort Hotel, only two buildings left to the Training Center where the Capitol grooms innocent kids in the art of slaughter each year. How very fitting that this is the next stop of Peeta’s own personal hell train. Haymitch took Peeta to the location which Portia called a ‘sky bar’ and then quickly left without even finishing one small glass of white liquor, unable to stand the tension.

Peeta is almost sorry for Haymitch. His mentor doesn’t know how to act around him anymore. Since the day Haymitch first came to him with his request, just a week after the return from the
Capitol, they have a hard time communicating. Haymitch is obviously tormented by feelings of guilt - as if he has any power to prevent this, when it is clear he is as much a pawn in this game as Peeta is. In the train to the Capitol and when he was back with his prep team earlier today he caught Haymitch looking at him, felt that he tried to make this better somehow, tried to make a difference by saying something - anything - helpful. In the end Haymitch only looked away quickly when their gazes met, silence the only comfort he was capable of giving. The sort of mentoring that is needed in this situation must feel foreign to Haymitch. He never saw a tribute survive and by the looks of it never stepped into an alien establishment like The Mauve Mare. Still Peeta is glad that Haymitch came here with him, a little bit comforted that he’s not entirely abandoned by everyone.

He told his family the same lie as the Everdeens. They barely shrugged when he visited the bakery to say goodbye, only his mother gave him a disapproving glance, mumbling something about him being ungrateful and arrogant with all that Capitol talk. He didn’t have the energy left to feel hurt by her words. Better for his mother if she stays unaware.

Not sure about what will happen next he looks around the room, taking in this new environment. True to its name the sky bar overlooks the whole Capitol - the view is magnificent. The place is furnished in fabrics that come in all shades of lilacs, the chairs, the table and even the drinks - everything is colored purple. He sits at the bar and next to him an older woman gulps down a drink that looks like liquid poison, something people in District 12 would never dare to touch. In the middle of the room a huge amethyst statue of a stallion rampant is dominating the scenery. The proportions of the horse statue are grotesque and unrealistic. In all its animalistic glory, no stallion has reproductive organs of that size, even erect. Peeta can’t help but laugh out loud when he sees it, earning a curious look from the lady sitting next to him. Honestly, all of this is extremely stupid and ridiculous and so very Capitol.

He is here, he knows what he has to do, he knows what is expected of him. But he has no idea if and how this will work in practice. Nobody gave him an instruction manual and he regrets that he was far too embarrassed to talk about the details with Haymitch when he had the chance. Now he is entirely on his own and almost as scared as he was in the arena. The Hunger Games are games with rules. However horrible they are, you can prepare and plan how to play. This is a game unlike any other and he has been declared the loser from the get-go. He will let it go so that she won’t have to.

His innocence.

After arriving in the Capitol Haymitch and Peeta had been greeted by Effie at the station. Peeta never thought he would see the Capitol again only a few weeks after the Games, thought he left it behind until the Victory Tour would be coming up half a year later. Effie looked ecstatic and extravagant in a turquoise mini dress and seven inch high heels. She ushered them to the hotel where he was about to stay during his trip. Unfortunately there was no time to rest as he was lead into some kind of spa area where his old prep team already spread out an abundance of suits, deciding on what he was about to wear for every day and every hour of the next week. He was told he had to change clothes at least thrice a day. Underwear changes were required to occur every hour!

"Peeta, Peeta, darling! How are you?" Portia kissed his cheeks and brought him into some clinical looking room where he was told to strip down. Completely naked he felt the first bit of embarrassment. He wasn’t used to being nude in front of so many people. This was different to the Hunger Games prep sessions. Portia explained that the Capitol style demanded no hair on his
body, expect for the golden locks on his head.

Then began the waxing and boy, that had hurt. He knew that Katniss’ entire body had been waxed as he had listened to a conversation between Cinna and Portia. Back then he thought it kind of hot, that secret place between her legs completely bare, he had fantasized about how it would look. Now that he had been waxed himself, he couldn’t see anything hot about it. It looked ridiculous. He hadn’t even been that hairy, compared to his father and brothers. When he had asked Portia why they didn’t simply shave him, she had laughed.

"That would leave ugly stubbles within the hour, darling boy. If we wax the hair away you look lovely and smooth for the entire week and long after." Faintly he worried about what Katniss would say about his lack of body hair. A needless worry as she wouldn’t see him naked any time soon or most likely never.

Portia had prepared a dark blue suit for him. Every little detail was carefully chosen, even his underwear harmonized with the color. They styled his hair for what seemed like hours. In the end he looked the same as he did when he woke up in the morning. They called it “rugged” style and seemed happy with the outcome. When they finally finished him up, Haymitch appeared in the room, together with Effie.

"You look wonderful Peeta, just wonderful, ah, everyone will be so pleased. This is fantastic!" Effie seemed to be beside herself with joy and not for the first time, Peeta asked himself what exactly was going on in her head. Did she not realize what was happening here? Or did she simply not care? People from the Capitol never made sense and Effie remained a mystery.

They were led into a private room of the hotel then, and Effie excused herself, saying she had other business in the Capitol but she would return tomorrow to inquire about his wellbeing. ‘Wellbeing’ honestly, he doubted anyone cared about his comfort here. Haymitch had been silent all this time and so sobered up that it made Peeta uneasy. Sure he had had a drink or two. But usually at this time of the day he was dead drunk.

The door to the private room opened and a plump man entered it swiftly. In his wake was a woman whose face had been tattooed with what looked like reptile scales. Haymitch released a small noise, so restrained Peeta barely made out the sound. He stood up to greet the man, unsure what was expected of him, but always minding his manners. Effie would be pleased.

"Mr. Mellark, good day to you. How splendid to finally meet you in person! What a pleasure, what a pleasure. Sit down, please, no need to be formal, we’re all friends here, ain’t that right?" The man gave a laugh and the reptile woman joined in. Peeta smiled haltingly, while they shook hands. Who were these people? The man sensed his confusion and immediately started talking again.

"Where are my manners? Haven’t introduced myself yet, haven’t I? Well, my dear boy, I am Aonus Rore. This beautiful young lady here is Choufer Guld, my assistant. We work for the Hunger Games, in the Department of Victor Administration, to be precise."

Haymitch snorted and Peeta gave him an indignant look. Was that wise? To act like this in front of a Capitol Official?

Aonus Rore turned his attention to Haymitch. A cold sneer had replaced his smile. “Mr. Abernathy. How magnificent to see you well. As chipper as ever, I see. Choufer would you mind ordering some drinks for our two Victors here? I’d say white liquor for Mr. Abernathy and Sweet Sunshine for dear Peeta.”
Choufer Guld ordered the drinks through an electronic device that had been placed on the table. Sweet Sunshine was the name of a Capitol drink, with a high alcoholic level. Peeta and Katniss hadn’t been offered any alcohol before. They were treated as children, like all tributes, including the 18 year olds. The old rules didn’t seem to apply anymore and Peeta hadn’t been sure if he was allowed to refuse this Aonus Rore anything.

"I have to applaud dear Portia, she did fabulous work on you, just fabulous. You look so young and oh, so very dashing! They’ll love you, all of them. I am pleased indeed." he laughed and Peeta knew that he hated the man already. He had barely said three sentences, but Peeta felt repulsed by the way he looked him up and down.

'Get a grip, man' he had thought to himself. 'This is just the beginning'.

"Let’s get down to business, eh? No time to waste what do you say, Peeta?" Rore using his first name felt wrong, completely different to say - Caesar Flickerman.

"I dunno," he mumbled, feeling uncomfortable. Usually with these Capitol folks he had no problems at conversation. He got them wrapped around his little finger in record time. Aonus Rore hadn’t simply been creepy - no - he had such a cold and calculating shine in his eyes, that even the fake talk couldn’t gild it in. Peeta sensed that the guy was truly dangerous, shouldn’t be crossed and all the thoughts of sarcastic replies or fun bantering were gone in an instant. He had been a bit vexed about the meeting with such a man. Couldn’t have Haymitch told him in advance? Give him a bit of warning about Rore?

"Ts, ts, Peeta dear. Answer clearly when someone asks a question. I think you’re more than just capable of doing that, we’ve all heard you talk before. I hope I won’t have to remind you to act properly with your patrons, boy."

And there went the politeness. An avox had entered the room at this moment, bringing the drinks and - to Peeta’s surprise - a whole bottle of white liquor for Haymitch. Did Aonus Rore want to get Haymitch drunk? Why?

"Drink up Peeta, this is the best the Capitol has to offer." Rore said and waited until Peeta took a small sip. The stuff had been strong and disgustingly sweet at the same time, but Rore had nodded, seemingly satisfied that Peeta gave it a try.

"That’s it, enjoy the generosity of the Capitol! But first things first. You’re not a virgin anymore, I reckon? Answer honestly, this is for the best."

Peeta gritted his teeth. At least he had been prepared for these kind of questions, having worked out a strategy with Haymitch at home.

"No, I’m not. I had a few girls back in District 12 before the Hunger Games. There is this place at the mines, the slag heap, where young people meet in the evenings. It was pretty easy for me to get a willing girl to come. But it was never serious, just little flings, you know," Peeta answered and then continued solemnly "Now, I’m devoted to my true love. Katniss is a respectable girl. We don’t have sex. We’re not married and her mother won’t allow it."

"Anything else you’d like to add?" Aonus Rore continued his investigation of deeply private issues. Lying to the man felt gratifying.

"Well, since you’re asking…. I’m a teenager, Mr. Rore. I did my fair share of experimenting."
"And what does that entail?" Rore raised his eyebrows seemingly stupefied by this admission.

"I slept with a male friend of mine. Actually, that’s not unusual for Merchant boys from our District. We all try it at least once. Contraception is expensive and with a boy you don’t have to be careful."

The longer Peeta talked, the more comfortable he became. Taking another sip from Sweet Sunshine he grinned at Aonus Rore, who grinned back as if they were sharing some dirty secret. What an idiot.

"You’re amazing, Peeta. I must say, I’m surprised. I knew you had some experience, but with the same sex? Great. Being a virgin is overrated, especially for boy Victors. Trust me, I know your patrons won’t mind that you’re turning out to be quite the stallion."

Aonus Rore and his reptile assistant laughed loudly. Peeta felt like puking but joined the laughter. It had been important to stay focused, to make no mistakes.

"Speaking of stallions, let’s have a look at your schedule for the next week! Starting tonight at 8 p.m. at The Mauve Mare, you’ll meet your very first patron, who helped keeping your beautiful girlfriend alive, he is an institution in the Capitol and goes by the name of Lemus Churcher. He booked you for the whole night. This is the longest date this week. We planned to go easy on you at the beginning, but Lemus insisted on a few extras. He had looked forward to meeting Katniss after all. Sorry to say, you’re only his second choice."

Choufer searched for something in her bag and then showed Peeta a picture of a towering older man, big and balding. So this was Lemus Churcher, the first in a line of many. Peeta felt a surge of dizziness at the thought, but the image of Katniss sitting here, in his place, grounded him quickly. He had chosen this, he would do this, and he would not lose his cool in front of the Capitol folk. It was hard to listen to Rore while agreeing and smiling but what choice did he have? He had had a few weeks warning, but could he have ever prepared for this?

"You’d better perform well. Mr. Churcher is a influential figure and has connections to the presidential office. It wasn’t easy to convince him that he should buy you - there were other choices. Listen now, this is important. Lemus dislikes all kind of sickness, blood or pain. He remarked that he doesn’t want - in any way - to be reminded of your abomination, so you’d do good to adhere his wishes."

"My abomination?" Peeta had been momentarily confused. What abomination?

"Your leg boy. Have you forgotten? It’s not looked upon favorably here in the Capitol, the loss of a limb. We don’t make much profit with crippled teenagers. Katniss would’ve been such a hit, but it is what it is, so you’d better try extra hard. Having to work with you - the consolation gift - instead of the girl on fire, that’s not exactly easy on our department, either."

That had been the moment when Haymitch jumped from his armchair and slurred “Gotta go..” staggered out to the next toilet, probably. Or to puke all over the hotel lobby. Rore and Guld looked as disgusted as Peeta felt, but for completely different reasons.

So far, he told himself that he was okay, he thought he could probably come out of this without feeling completely worthless, but to no avail. Them insulting his leg, his wholeness and calling him an abomination had been like a slap in the face and made his own insecurities come out in full force. It took all the willpower he had left to not let them see his pain, to not start crying.
Choufer Guld spoke up then, her voice eerily similar to Effie’s, “Mr. Rore, it is half past three. We have to leave now, if we’re to make your next appointment.”

Rore raised himself up with a sigh.

“We’ll leave you to rest a bit now, Peeta. Try to relax, maybe take a short nap? But don’t wrinkle those clothes. Let’s meet again, tomorrow at lunch time. I’ll tell you more details on your new patrons, and give you feedback on your performance. Remember one can always improve! You’ll have a rest day on Thursday and two female clients on Friday, including our former secretary of the Interior. Contrary to Lemus, she’s been quite excited that sweet Peeta Mellark is on the market now. I don’t want to hear any complaints, understood?”

Peeta had managed a small “Yes” and then they were gone. Haymitch still had not returned and Peeta was tempted to take another sip of Sweet Sunshine - anything to mute the pain.

He turned around and in his line of vision the bottle of white liquor glittered under the artificial lights - still corked.

8 p.m. is approaching steadily, while Peeta reminiscences about Katniss’ face before she closed the door in front of him only a few fleeting hours ago.

How wondrous it would be to have her here with him. The door to the sky bar would open up, and she would appear. He imagines her petite dark form, dressed in a beautiful white sundress, hugging her body tightly. She would wear no bra and no panties either. He would notice a dark shadow between her legs, the taut peaks of her nipples would be straining against the fabric. She would come closer, smile at the sight of him, showing no trace of guilt or uneasiness. She would interweave her fingers with his and they would leave this place, hand in hand.

She would invite him over to her room and they would slowly undress each other in her big, fluffy bed. She would look at him longingly, kiss his hair, his brow, his nose, his lips, his chest. Then she would pepper small loving kisses on his stump and finally turn her affection to his stiff cock, examining it with her long fingers, a luscious sound of appreciation leaving her. Maybe give it a few long licks or - even better - suckle the tip into her honeyed mouth. After finishing her exploration, she would lift herself into his arms, her beautiful breasts turned towards him like a pair of flowers to the sun. Her lust for him would be evident in her grey eyes.

She would be the one to tell him that he was worth loving and wonderful despite his shortcomings. No one ever told Peeta that he was special before, so that would be another first for him. She would tell him that he was The One, that she’d always dreamed of their first time, just like he did. She would push her body against his and their tongues would entwine while she would open her legs for him, slowly taking him into her sweet, warm opening. It would be wet and oh so tight, almost too much to handle for an innocent boy like him. She would roll him over then, sitting up, taking him in much deeper. They would be connected, they would be one. And then she would start to ride him gently, move her hips and moan ‘Peeta’ over and over.

There would be no pain, no tears, no shame - only joy, only bliss, only love. Peeta Mellark had dreamed of that moment, had brought himself to climax to thoughts of Katniss Everdeen countless times since the day he first began to pleasure himself.

Tears drip down his face, his vision blurring.
He did not let go of his fantasy when he never found the courage to talk to her. He did not let go when he saw her passing the bakery one winter evening, laughing with handsome Gale Hawthorne beside her. He did not let go when she was pushing him into that vase, after he confessed his love to her in front of Panem. He did not let go when he was dying in the mud. He did not even let go when she told him that she didn’t feel the same.

He will never let go.

At 8 o’clock sharp Peeta stands up, ready to face his destiny for the girl he loves more than life. The door to the sky bar opens and it almost feels like it could be his Katniss. Only it is not. It is not Lemus Churcher either.

Haymitch Abernathy has returned to The Mauve Mare.

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