

## Part I: Colter

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# Part I: Colter

by Anonymous

## Summary

After the disastrous heist in Blackwater, the Van der Linde gang fled through the mountains in an attempt to evade the law. There they discover Colm O'Driscoll also has men in the area and is planning some kind of heist. They manage to capture one of his men, keeping him alive to question to learn more about the O'Driscoll's plans. But they soon find out John Marston is surprisingly loyal to Colm and not so easy to break. (Basically a RDR2 rewrite with a Romeo and Juliet cowboy theme. Will probably get more and more AU as it goes)

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

## Prologue

He'd known it was a risk, but unfortunately it was a risk he had to take. His stolen horse had died and left him stranded practically in the middle of nowhere. He hadn't eaten in three days, and that rabbit had been as scrawny as himself. He couldn't even remember when he'd had food before that. His ribs were sharp as knives and he could easily see every knob of his spine in a mirror. If he didn't find something to eat soon he knew he wasn't going to make it to the next town.

So when he stumbled upon the homestead, he decided to take his chances. He waited till the middle of the night, long after all the lights in the house had gone out. He crept towards the house and used his knife to break open the lock on the kitchen window. Then climbed silently inside.

He wasn't after money or jewelry. All he wanted was food. A loaf of bread. Maybe some dried meat if he was lucky. A few canned vegetables or fruit. Anything...

What he found instead was a big mean dog, he didn't notice until it had already bowled him over, barking it's fool head off. He tried to escape, but the stubborn thing kept latching onto his legs, ripping his trousers, and tripping him up. Finally it grabbed his ankle and bit him badly enough that he couldn't have run after that even if he tried.

When the owners of the house found him, they laughed and let the dog snap at him for quite some time as he huddled in a ball on the floor. He was a bloodied mess. Bites and scratches all over his arms and legs before they finally yanked the beast off of him. Having taught him a 'lesson' he figured they'd let him go after that.

He figured wrong.

They tied his arms and legs together and once he was completely helpless they proceeded to beat him with their belts until he screamed. Once he could barely move anymore, they dragged him outside by his hair and dropped him unceremoniously on the ground. His prayers for mercy fell on deaf ears as they looped a lasso around his neck and hoisted him up on a tree branch.

He choked and gagged as the rope grew tighter and tighter, quickly cutting off his air supply. As his struggles grew weaker and weaker he heard them laughing again. They were *laughing* while they watched him die...

As darkness closed around him, he heard a crack like thunder from far away. Suddenly he was falling and he landed hard on the unforgiving ground. In too much pain to move, all he could do was lay there and gasp weakly as he heard people shouting and more gunshots. Then suddenly everything went quiet.

Dimly he heard the sound of footsteps walking towards him on grass. The jangle of spurs. A boot nudged his bruised ribs and he let out a pathetic moan.

“So, not quite dead yet. Cut him free,” a voice said, but he was having trouble focusing on whoever was speaking.

The noose around his neck was removed first, and then the ropes around his wrists and ankles were cut. All he could do was gasp like a fish stranded on dry land. Finally the shape of a man knelt down in front of him. He blinked his bruised eyes several times, but still could barely focus on his savior.

“What’s your name, boy?” the man asked.

It took him several tries before he finally managed to choke out a sound that barely resembled his name, but it seemed to satisfy the man regardless.

“John, huh?... Well, John, looks like today is your lucky day. My name is Colm O’Driscoll...”

## Chapter 2

Colter was a miserable place. High up in the mountains in the middle of nowhere, the previous occupants had to have been desperate or insane to attempt to carve out a life there.

If the winters wouldn't kill you, then the wildlife surely would. If there was some kind of emergency it could be months before anyone had any idea something bad had happened. The derelict buildings had an almost eerie feeling to them. Still mostly intact, and many of the former owners belongings had been left behind. Hell, there were still pictures on the walls, and cupboards full of rotting food. Like the former settlers had simply vanished without a trace one day. Or they'd been run off by something so terrible they'd never even dared to return for what had been left behind.

Still, Arthur knew beggars couldn't be choosers, and shelter was shelter. That's what was important right now. Between setting up in the eerie town or freezing to death out on the mountain, he'd take a bit of eeriness. Still, when Pearson asked Arthur to go out hunting for some food, he jumped at the chance. Glad to leave behind the oppressive feeling of the place for a few hours. Though admittedly that might have had more to do with the town's current occupants rather than the previous.

Blackwater. What a fucking mess that had been. No one could tell him exactly what had gone wrong. Dutch heavily implied that things had gone tits up because Arthur hadn't been on the ferry boat, instead of off working a lead with Hosea. Charles mentioned Dutch shooting some innocent girl, for god unknown reasons. Javier informed him how a near army of pinkertons had shown up in the middle of the job... one hell of a *coincidence*. Arthur didn't much believe in coincidences. But all anyone could really agree on was that things had gone real bad real quick, resulting in them losing four members of their family. Two dead and two whose fates were uncertain. That wasn't even taking into account the loss of all the money they'd been saving up for damn near a year as they were forced to flee for their lives.

While no one was outright blaming anyone for how things had turned out, the atmosphere was still... tense to say the least. Arthur could only hope once things had settled down for a while, and everyone had full bellies, things would begin to improve. Being cold, miserable, and hungry would put a stress on any group, even one as tightly knit as the Van der Linde gang. But they were still a family, and in this together.

If only Arthur was having a little more luck hunting. Charles insisted that since the snow had stopped, game would start emerging from their hiding places to feed. It was too bad the man had ended up shot in the leg in Blackwater, since he was by far their best hunter. Bill and Lenny had no luck when they'd gone out earlier. Everyone was counting on Arthur, so he *couldn't* fail.

At least following tracks in the snow was fairly easy. He managed to stumble across a set of tracks that didn't look too fresh, but he hoped would lead him in the right direction.

Unfortunately the tracks seemed to be leading him further and further up the mountain. Probably not the place most animals would be hiding or foraging.

Arthur almost turned his horse around to head back the way he came, but stopped when he spotted the frozen carcass of a dead horse half buried in the snow. Ah hell...

He didn't recognize the horse, and all of their members were currently accounted for. Except for Sean and Mac, that was. While it was *possible* one of them had gotten away from the pinkertons and headed in this direction only to get lost in the snow, it was *highly* unlikely.

That meant some other fool was probably lost out here. Maybe already dead given the state of the horse, from either the weather or wolves. They definitely didn't need another mouth to feed. They'd already taken in Mrs. Adler and they didn't have enough to go around as it was...

But while Arthur might have grown more jaded as he got older, he couldn't quite forget the words Dutch had spoken to him when he'd taken in an angry fifteen year old boy so long ago. They might be outlaws, but they still had a code. They helped folk who needed helping, fed folk who needed feeding, and of course, shot folks that needed shooting. While Arthur sometimes felt they had lost their way a bit over the years, he still tried to live by those words.

Whomever was out here obviously needed help, and there was a good chance they wouldn't survive if Arthur didn't give it. Who else would come all the way out here? So Arthur continued following the faint trail, up through the peaks and along icy cliffs... what the hell had this fool been thinking coming all the way out here! Eventually he fired a shot from his revolver into the air, just to see if anyone was around or if he was following the trail of a dead man. To his surprise he heard a faint voice calling for help on the wind, so he continued on.

Eventually he found the man he'd been hunting for. Trapped on a small outcrop at the edge of a sheer drop down the mountain. He looked younger than Arthur by a good decade. Though it was hard to tell with all the blood. It appeared he'd been half mauled by some wild animals at some point. The right side of his face was disfigured by deep scratches that were probably infected judging by the redness of the surrounding flesh. Underneath the blood his face was thin, pale and sickly looking. His greasy dark hair was matted with blood and dirt. Surprising, though appearing half dead, his eyes were bright and almost wild as they stared up at Arthur leaning over the edge of the cliff. The gun he held pointed at Arthur was also surprisingly steady, all things considered.

"That's a nasty scratch you've got there," Arthur said softly, slowly holding up his hands to show the man he came in peace. He really hoped his attempts to be a good Samaritan wouldn't end up with him being shot.

"Who are you," the young man asked, his voice soft but surprisingly deep and rugged. The gun in his hand started to waver betraying his weakness. He was probably in a lot of pain...

"Just a traveler. Name's Arthur. You want some help, or are you going to shoot me?" Arthur asked, raising an eyebrow. To his surprise, the man seemed to seriously consider his offer. Who the hell would refuse aid from someone when they were starving and bleeding to death on a frozen mountainside? Someone who'd come to expect bad things from people pretending to offer help, that's who. Arthur felt a pang of sympathy in spite of himself. After a few moments the young man finally lowered the pistol. Either having decided to trust

Arthur, or simply too weak to hold it anymore. Arthur carefully climbed down onto the ledge where the man sat.

“What’s your name?” he asked as he looked the man over from the closer distance. He really was a mess... Arthur began to wonder if he would even make it back to Colter should he try to bring the man that far.

“John...” the man whispered faintly, his head already lolling a bit on his shoulders. His eyes going in and out of focus as he attempted to stare at Arthur.

“Hey, John... do you think you can stand if you lean on me?” Arthur asked, trying to figure out how he was going to get the man back up the edge of the cliff by himself.

“I...” John considered his words, then shook his head, “No... I don’t think so...”

“Alright then... we’ll do it the hard way. All you have to do is stay awake and hold onto me, think you can do that?” Arthur asked. John blinked slowly at him, but finally nodded. So Arthur turned around and grabbed John’s arms to loop around his shoulders. He felt John’s fingers gripping his coat weakly and Arthur really hoped John could do what he said and hold onto him. If he couldn’t there was a good chance John would fall and end up at the bottom of the mountain the hard way.

Arthur slowly got to his feet, pulling John up with him on his back. John’s legs buckled almost immediately but he was able to cling to Arthur at least. Arthur was surprised how light John felt for a full grown man. Not a good sign. But at least that made it a little easier to climb up the edge of the cliff with John holding onto him.

Once they made it to the top, Arthur didn’t hesitate lifting John over his shoulder instead. John grunted in discomfort but didn’t protest the manhandling. Arthur had a feeling that he probably wouldn’t be conscious for too much longer anyway.

Arthur made his way back towards his horse, as quickly and carefully as he could. He hoped he could get John back to Colter and then go back out hunting like he’d originally planned. If he brought in yet another mouth to feed without any actual food, he’d never hear the end of it. When he finally spotted his horse Arthur sighed in relief, but it was short lived. He could tell the animal was agitated even before he heard the first howl in the distance. It was a wonder the horse hadn’t already run off and abandoned them entirely.

“Perfect...” he heard John mutter softly, and Arthur could admit he was surprised the man was even still awake.

“Friends of yours?” Arthur muttered and cursed softly as several dark shapes appeared over the hill in the snow. Both him and John were covered in blood. There was no way the wolves wouldn’t attack and he’d never make it to the horse before the pack reached them. Even if he did, the horse would probably just bolt if he tried getting John in the saddle with the wolves so close. So Arthur reluctantly lowered John to the ground as carefully as he could, eyeing the pack, and drawing his gun.

“Arthur...” John whispered, his voice shaking with either weakness or fear. His fingers curled in the front of Arthur’s coat, but Arthur easily pried them away.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this,” Arthur reassured and stood, putting himself between John and the pack. No sooner had he done so did the wolves charge at them. Arthur was a good shot. No doubt about it. But he only had the one revolver, his rifle still on the horse, and he could only shoot so fast. He managed to take out three of the five beasts as they charged. Unfortunately the gunshots didn’t scare the rest off as he’d hoped.

The closest wolf managed to lunge for him before he could get off another round. It grabbed him by his wrist and the momentum brought both him and the wolf crashing down into the snow. Thankfully his thick coat protected him from the worst of the teeth, but it wouldn’t for long. He managed not to let go of the gun in his hand, but he couldn’t aim it either with the damned creature latched onto his arm.

Arthur tried fumbling for his knife with his free hand, but he knew he wasn’t going to reach it in time, because the last wolf was nearly on him as well. But it never reached him. There was a crack like thunder from behind Arthur and the charging wolf fell down dead at his feet, a perfect head shot. Arthur managed to get his knife free from his belt and stabbed the last wolf in the throat. It yelped pitifully and finally released its hold on him. It bled out a few seconds later.

Breathing hard, Arthur turned to look at John. Because of course the shot had come from him, though Arthur could barely believe the injured man had managed to make it, given how badly the hand holding the pistol was shaking.

"Thanks," Arthur said and John nodded before he crumbled into the snow, the last of his energy apparently spent. Arthur cursed and crawled over to him. He felt his neck for a pulse and he let out a sigh of relief when he felt it. Just passed out then... not that Arthur could blame him.

Arthur got back to his feet, wincing as he examined the damage done to his arm. Not too bad all things considered. He looked around and wasn’t surprised to find the horse gone, but he whistled for it anyway. He hoped the animal would return now that the wolves were taken care of. To his surprise he heard a faint whinny and the sound of hooves approaching.

Not a bad horse after all...

He holstered his gun and kicked at the corpse of one of the wolves. Well, this sure as hell wasn’t what he’d had in mind originally when he’d set out to do some hunting... still...

When the horse finally reappeared Arthur took the time to praise it generously before selecting two of the largest wolf carcasses to tie on the back. Wolf meat wasn’t the best, but it was better than nothing. There wouldn’t be enough room on the saddle for him, John, *and* the wolves, but that was fine. Colter wasn’t that far away, it shouldn’t take too long to get back even with Arthur leading the horse.

He gathered John in his arms and frowned at how chilled the man felt. So Arthur took off his thick fur lined coat and wrapped the unconscious man up in it. It was the least he could do.



Then he picked John up and got him situated as well as he could in the saddle. Hopefully he'd stay put and not fall off.

“Come on, let’s get back,” Arthur said, giving the horse another affectionate pat before starting to lead the stallion back down the mountain.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

John came awake slumped over on a horse.

Wouldn't be the first time... but despite it being a somewhat familiar experience, it was rarely a pleasant one. He was dizzy and disorientated. His head felt all... floaty... and his body numb. He knew he should probably be thankful for that numbness because he'd probably be in a lot more pain otherwise.

If only he weren't so damned cold...

He tried sitting up. To see where he was and where he was going. He needed to be somewhere. He'd already been delayed far too long. Colm wouldn't like that...

John managed to get himself mostly upright, but though he blinked several times he couldn't really focus. All he really saw was a white blur in front of him. Almost immediately he started to sway, and pitch to the side. He tried to grip the saddle horn for balance, but his numb fingers didn't want to cooperate. He wasn't going to be able to stop himself from falling off the horse. Despite how numb he currently felt *that* was bound to hurt...

"Woah, easy there," came a voice he didn't recognize, and a big hand suddenly steadied him. John groaned at the jostling, and slumped over the neck of the horse once more. The horse snorted in annoyance and stopped walking, "Hey, you still with me?"

John turned his head towards the voice, though it felt like a monumental effort to do so. He blinked again but still couldn't see much more than blurred dark shapes against a bright white backdrop.

"Who are you?" he managed to choke out. A warm hand patted his knee in a way that was probably meant to be comforting. John couldn't help but flinch.

"Name's Arthur, remember? I carried you up off the ledge on the mountainside? Shot up some wolves looking to finish the job they started on you? Ring a bell?" Arthur, explained. John couldn't really recall anything about all that... but he did remember getting lost in the storm and some wolves. So he supposed it could be true. He didn't know anyone named 'Arthur' though. He'd expected... hoped... someone from the gang would find him eventually but...

"Why..."

"Why? Why'd I help you? Cause you would have died otherwise," the man replied, as though John was an idiot for even asking. But John couldn't help but recall one of the first lessons that Colm O'Driscoll had taught him.

*“Nothing in this life is free, boy. The sooner you learn that, the better off you’ll be.”*

John had learned that lesson well. Never accept help if you’re not prepared to pay the price for it.

*‘I don’t need your help...’* was what John wanted to say. But the sound that came out was little more than an unintelligible groan instead. The hand on his leg squeezed gently.

“We need to keep moving. Think you can stay on the horse for a bit longer? We’re almost there...” Arthur asked. John managed a weak nod and the horse started moving again before he’d even finished.

The motion of the animal underneath him, jostling his various wounds, wasn’t doing him any favors. John didn’t think he’d ever felt this bad... ever. He was so damned cold but he couldn’t muster the strength to even shiver. His head was pounding and his stomach cramped. It was all he could do not to vomit... even though there wasn’t much of anything in there besides bile. His vision kept going in and out, dark fading into light into dark again...

Arthur kept speaking to him. Maybe... he wasn’t sure of much of anything right now. He certainly couldn’t answer. John thought he even heard singing at one point. But it was too soft... too far away for him to understand clearly. Still it was... nice. Warm. The only thing warm about him right now...

“I don’t feel so good...” John muttered. He wasn’t sure if he spoke the words aloud or in his head. A buzzing noise began to fill his ears and he felt himself tipping to the side again. He couldn’t stop himself from falling if he tried. The last thing he heard was someone cursing sharply before the world faded to black.

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“God damn it!” Arthur cursed, reaching out to catch John as he almost fell from the saddle a second time. At least they’d pretty much reached their destination, so Arthur simply hoisted the unconscious man into his arms rather than trying to keep him on the horse.

“I need some help!” Arthur yelled, as he made his way into the camp, trusting the horse to follow him the rest of the way.

Micah was on watch, and not doing a very good job of it since he hadn’t even spotted Arthur’s approach. Too busy smoking behind the barn by the looks of it. Though he came out with his rifle at Arthur’s shout.

“What the hell is this, Morgan? We don’t need any more strays,” Micah grouched, and Arthur pointedly ignored him as he walked past. Micah was the last person Arthur wanted to deal with right now. Thankfully most of the rest of the gang had begun to emerge from the decrepit buildings to see what all the fuss was about. So he didn’t have to go hunting any of

them down for the help he needed. Dutch quickly took stock of the situation and immediately began issuing orders.

“Miss Grimshaw! Get some water boiling and clean bandages. Reverend, we’re going to need medical supplies. Arthur, bring him inside, hurry now,” Dutch ordered, and Arthur found his feet moving towards the building where his own room was located out of instinct. One, because it was the closest. Two, because John was an unknown and it was best not to put him with the women and children until they knew more about him.

Hosea held the door open and Arthur didn’t hesitate carrying John inside and to his own meager bed. He laid John down as carefully as possible, still wrapped in his thick coat. Arthur was shivering from the long walk in the snow, but he was already starting to warm up thanks to the fireplace going in the next room. John felt like ice... and Arthur’s hands came away tacky red with blood when he put John down.

It wasn’t looking good...

Arthur stepped back as Swanson rushed in with his bag of tonics and medicine, what little they had left anyway. The reverend immediately went to work on the young man, pulling back Arthur’s coat and cutting away John’s ruined clothing to get a good look at the wounds. Arthur winced upon seeing the extent of the damage.

“What happened to him?” Swanson demanded as he continued his examination.

“I don’t know exactly. I found him pretty much like this while I was out hunting. He was attacked by wolves. No idea how long he’s been out there like this,” Arthur said, and flinched a little when he felt something wrap around him from behind. But it was only Hosea settling a blanket over his shoulders.

“Here, Arthur. You need to warm up, you’re practically blue,” the older man said, rubbing Arthur’s arms vigorously through the fabric to encourage the blood flow. Arthur mumbled his thanks and then turned back to John just as Swanson was removing the younger man’s boots. Arthur couldn’t help but curse under his breath. He knew frostbite when he saw it.

Dutch stood nearby watching everything with a troubled frown. Miss Grimshaw hurried in with an armful of bandages and what little spare blankets they had, followed by Tilly with a steaming pail of water.

“Might have been kinder to put a bullet in him to finish the job quickly...” Arthur heard the Dutch mutter and he turned to the older man with wide eyes. Even though he wanted to deny it, he knew Dutch was probably right. There was little chance the boy was going to make it. It was something of a miracle John hadn’t already been dead when he found him, or died on the way back to Colter. The boy was a fighter, that’s for damned sure...

“He saved my life...” Arthur said softly, and Hosea squeezed his shoulders comfortingly. While it was true that he’d only been in danger in the first place *because* of John, that didn’t change the fact.

“I’ll do what I can, but I can’t promise a miracle, Arthur,” Swanson said as he went about tending to John’s wounds.

“I thought miracles was what your god was all about, reverend,” Arthur replied, trying not to feel bitter about the whole thing. He hadn’t dragged John all the way back here just to watch him die... but he knew he’d better prepare himself for that very real possibility.

“You best start praying then, son,” was Dutch’s response as he left the room.

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Arthur sat in a rickety chair writing in his journal by candle light. The wind howled outside, battering the small wooden building, but the fire in the next room kept it decently warm inside at least. He still found himself hunkering down in the thick blanket wrapped around his shoulders, unable to completely expel the chill that had settled in his bones despite having warmed himself by the fire for a good hour earlier. He was beginning to wonder if he’d ever feel warm again...

A soft moan from across the room had Arthur lifting his gaze from the book in his lap to the young man currently occupying his bed. John still looked horrific, despite having been cleaned and his wounds tended.

The bandages covering the right side of his face, and a good portion of his chest were dotted red and yellow with fresh blood and puss. It was no surprise that John’s wounds were badly infected. Damned wolves were filthy animals and their bites were rarely clean. Once they’d managed to get John warm, he immediately became stricken with a terrible fever. His exposed skin was flushed red, sweating, and near scorching to the touch. The reverend came to check on John a few times since tending to him, and his expression alone told Arthur all he needed to hear.

John wasn’t going to make it through the night.

Still, Arthur had volunteered to sit up with the man and tend to him. It was just easier that way, since this was his room to begin with. He wasn’t going to get much rest anyway with the way the small space reeked of blood, herbs, and sickness. Even if it was a lost cause... no one deserved to die alone.

Arthur sighed, setting the journal aside on the table next to the bowl of broth that John probably wouldn’t need. He padded across the room and sat on the edge of the bed. Then reached for the rag sitting in a bucket of snow left to melt. He rang out a bit of the cold water, then began to wipe it along John’s flushed face and chest, though it probably did little to cool him.

John made a small noise of discomfort and his eyelids fluttered but he didn’t wake. Arthur didn’t expect him to. But that didn’t stop him from speaking softly to John nonetheless.

“Come on, kid... this isn’t so bad. Stop making such a fuss. Practically like a dog bite...” Arthur said, resting the cool rag against John’s forehead. John’s fingers twitched and Arthur looked down at them. They were nearly as badly frostbitten as John’s feet. Swanson had mentioned even if John *did* survive, there was a good chance he’d lose the use of his hands. Arthur couldn’t help think what a shame that was. John had nice hands, and the shot he’d made to save Arthur’s life, even while they’d been shaking so badly, was impressive.

It was all... just a shame. A damned shame...

He couldn’t help but recall Dutch’s words. That it would have been kinder just to shoot John when he’d found him. Put him out of his misery quick and clean rather than this slow agonizing death. Arthur hadn’t thought of that at the time, and even now he still couldn’t fathom doing it. Even if it would be easier...

Arthur tossed the rag back into the bucket with a growl of frustration.

“You ain’t going to die. You hear me?” Arthur muttered, taking one of John’s hands in his own and squeezing it tight, even though the younger man probably wouldn’t be able to feel it.

“It ain’t your time yet. I just know it.”

Arthur had never really been the praying type... but maybe just this once.

## Chapter End Notes

Soooo sorry for the major mistakes I made writing this chapter. I feel very stupid right now, but big thanks to those who pointed them out so I could fix them. If I missed anything else please, please, point them out.

Clarifications for anyone confused. Hosea is alive, yes. Since I forgot I killed him off last chapter... but deleting one sentence was easier than changing everything in this one. And, yes, I meant Swanson and not Strauss.

That's what I get for trying to write when I'm half asleep, though its really no excuse. Sorry again.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

Warning: The beginning of this chapter describes the sexual abuse of a minor. Nothing is graphic, but if you feel uncomfortable reading about that, you might want to skip to the second half of the chapter. Long story short, Colm O'Driscoll is a sick bastard.

Colm O'Driscoll had saved John's life.

The outlaws had just been passing through the area when they'd heard the ruckus at the homestead John had tried to rob. Colm was the one who'd shot the rope that had been strangling John. At least, that's what he'd been told later on. John didn't really remember much of the whole incident. Given he'd been beaten half to death and nearly hanged no one could really blame him.

The O'Driscolls took him back to their camp. They gave him food, clothing, and shelter while he healed up. John didn't see much of Colm during that time. It was a little more than two weeks before John felt well enough to start leaving his small tent for short walks around the camp. While he was still much too thin, and still mostly covered in healing bruises, he was still better off than he'd been in years.

John was well aware he owed the O'Driscoll gang a debt he could probably never fully repay. One night Colm came to his tent after dark to tell him how he could start.

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He woke with his heart racing. He couldn't breathe. John sat up sharply in his cot, and kicked at the blanket constraining him. He grabbed at his bruised neck, fingers clawing at a rope that wasn't there... why couldn't he breathe?

"Having a nightmare there, boy?" the sound of a voice not far away made John flinch so hard he nearly fell off the cot. His eyes darted wildly around the dark tent, even though he wasn't fully awake yet. Eventually they settled on a dark shape sitting in a chair near the entrance.

It was Colm O'Driscoll. John finally managed a shaky inhale. Some of his panic ebbing away.

Feeling exhausted, John pulled his bare legs up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, for both warmth and comfort. He finally managed to nod at the older man, confirming his suspicions. Colm hummed softly.

"Well, not much to be done about that. But I came to talk to you about something else, Johnny boy," Colm said, striking a match that lit up his features briefly in the dark, and used

it to light a cigarette. The man took a long drag from it as he studied John with dark eyes. John tried to stop himself from shivering like a scared child. He might not have been with the O'Driscolls for very long but he knew men like this weren't too fond of weakness in their ranks. If John wanted to stay, he was going to have to 'man up' quick.

"It's like this, John. Every man in my gang has to pull their own weight. Pay their dues. Nothing in this life is free, and we're not big on charity here. You understand what I'm saying?" Colm said casually, and John nodded.

"You want to stay in my gang?" the man asked then, and again, John nodded, "Good. So, what can you offer me, Johnny boy? How are you going to start repaying my kindness?"

John chewed on his bottom lip. They both knew he had nothing. Even the clothes on his back weren't his own. The food in his belly had been given to him by the O'Driscolls. John wasn't an outlaw. He didn't know how to be an outlaw. He couldn't ride very well. Couldn't shoot very well either. He didn't have skills to offer...

But John wasn't a complete idiot either. Colm wouldn't have come here if he didn't want *something* that John could give. With a sinking feeling John was beginning to understand exactly what that was. Even though he'd never done anything like that before... he'd been living on the streets for a few years now. He'd heard things...

Swallowing hard, John unfolded from his protective huddle and rose on shaking legs. He crossed the small distance between them, while Colm's eyes watched him the entire time. John knew he was right when he dropped to his knees between the older man's legs and Colm's eyes flashed with approval. John reached to undo his belt with trembling but determined fingers.

He couldn't completely stop himself from flinching when Colm's fingers found their way into his hair.

"Maybe you're not a complete idiot after all..." the older man said.

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For a while it was only Colm who made use of John in that away. The older man was thrilled to be John's *first* and took a great deal of pleasure in teaching him new things. Showing John how to please him best...

Once John was fully healed, he started helping around camp however he could during the day. Chopping wood, carrying bags of feed, tending to the horses, and whatever other chores he could. At night, he was Colm's whore and that was how it went for nearly two years.

Eventually Colm got bored with him and told John to make himself useful elsewhere. But John knew that just helping with simple camp chores wasn't going to be enough to pay his way. John seriously considered leaving the gang then. But he still had nightmares about the noose around his throat, and as he was no better at taking care of himself *now* than he was when Colm first found him... he knew what he had to do.



John started asking some of the other gang members to teach him stuff. *Useful* stuff. Like how to shoot, and hunt. How to ride properly. How to fight. How to *survive*. As Colm told him ‘nothing in life was free’ and John still had no way to pay for what he wanted to learn except with his body. So he did what he had to. He traded sexual favors for knowledge. It was horrible, and some of the men in the gang were more rough with him than Colm ever was, but John got what he wanted in return. He had plenty of motivation to learn fast and he did.

He learned to ride and shoot better than many of the older gang members, and he started going on small jobs with whoever would take him along. Then he started scouting for jobs and bringing in money on his own. By the time John is sixteen he was doing more work for the gang than half the men twice his age, but they still treated him like a whore. He'd been sure that once he started pulling jobs along with the rest of the gang they would stop demanding he get on his back for them, but they didn't.

Eventually John had enough. When a man named Doug grabbed him by the hair at the campfire one night, John twisted out of his hold with a snarl.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” John yelled, earning him quite a few stares from the other men nearby. Doug's look of surprise was priceless, but then his face turned thunderous.

“What the hell do you mean, boy? Do your job like a good little whore, before I give you a beating you'll never forget on top of it,” the man had always taken great pleasure in hurting John while he was fucking him. Once he'd even snapped John's shoulder out of its socket and laughed while he screamed. They'd all laughed...

“No,” John replied, deadly calm. Doug lunged for John, but he was old, fat, and stupid. John might not have been the brightest of the bunch but he wasn't a scared defenseless child anymore either. The fight was over almost comically fast. But Doug still hurled insults at him, even though John had him pinned on the ground, his face a bloody mess from the younger man's fists.

“Colm will kill you for this!” Doug growled at him through the blood in his mouth, and John snarled right back.

“I'll see you in hell then,” John said, feeling strangely calm as he reached for his knife and jammed it straight into his tormentor's throat. He watched dispassionately as Doug choked on his own blood and died. When John finally looked up he was surrounded. Some men were watching him with wariness. Others with anger, probably thinking to kill him for what he'd done. But at that point, John couldn't have cared less what they did to him.

What John *wasn't* prepared for was to feel a big hand land on his shoulder, accompanied by Colm's laughter. John's head whipped around, and he looked up at the older man in shock. But rather than the anger he was expecting to see, Colm O'Driscoll's expression was proud as he stared down at John.

“Well, it's about damn time, boy,” he said, smiling genuinely at John, “Now you're a *real* O'Driscoll.”

While Colm *did* still makes use of John from time to time, less as he got older, he was off limits to everyone else from then on. While some of the men in the gang still referred to him as "Colm's whore" it was only when they thought John couldn't hear them. Because John was undoubtedly their leader's favorite and had got away with killing plenty of men for less.

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Arthur woke slumped in a rickety chair against the wall, with his neck screaming at him for the awkward angle he'd been sleeping in. He groaned and rubbed at his face with a tired hand. He'd been running on fumes ever since Blackwater and the few hours of sleep he'd managed to snatch here and there weren't nearly enough.

He sat up slowly, rubbing at the crick in his neck futilely. He hated getting old...

Old and stupid, apparently, because it took him that long to remember *why* he was sitting in this damned chair instead of sleeping in a bed in the first place. His heart leapt into his throat as his eyes flew across the room. The candle on the desk was out, but he still had plenty of light to see by from the sunlight spilling in through the dirty window. Because it was morning. It was morning and John...

But despite Arthur's negligence, the young man laying in his bed wasn't the corpse that he'd fully expected to find. He didn't look well. Far from it. John was still flushed with fever and his bandages were in a desperate need of changing... but he was alive. His chest rising and falling slowly but steadily. Arthur tried not to feel too hopeful just because Swanson's prognosis of John dying during the night had been wrong.

A soft knock on the door frame startled Arthur from his contemplation and he turned to find Hosea standing there with a steaming mug of coffee.

"Good morning, my boy. May I come in?" the older man asked, and Arthur nodded.

"Course," he replied and when Hosea held out the coffee for him, Arthur took it gratefully. As he drank Hosea turned his attention to the sleeping John.

"I'll admit, I'm a little surprised. Guess you don't make such a bad nursemaid after all, Arthur. Even falling asleep on the job," Hosea teased good-naturedly and Arthur grumbled into his cup.

"Sorry..."

"Oh, don't you worry now, boy. You looked like you could use the rest and I've been looking in on him from time to time," Hosea reassured, gesturing towards the bucket that had fresh snow melting in it, "Though we should get Swanson to change those bandages soon. Charles said he'd go out looking for fresh herbs for a poultice. I have my doubts on him finding anything in this snow, but if anyone can it's Charles."

“Charles shouldn’t be walking around on that leg,” Arthur said with a small frown, even though he was grateful for the help.

Hosea laughed.

“You try telling him that. It was all we could do to stop him from going with you when you went out hunting yesterday,” the older man replied and Arthur knew that was true. Gunshot or not, Charles wasn’t one to sit on his laurels when there was work to be done. But if Charles *had* come with him, Arthur might never have found John in the first place. Charles was a far better hunter than Arthur and definitely wouldn’t have gone all the way up the mountain into wolf country when he was supposed to be hunting deer.

The idea of John freezing to death on that mountainside didn’t sit too well with Arthur. That definitely wasn’t the way Arthur would have wanted to go, if he had the choice... He wondered just how close John might have been to using that pistol he’d pulled on Arthur on *himself* rather than just waiting for the inevitable.

Arthur shivered and drained the rest of his coffee. Hosea studied him carefully for a moment before he spoke again.

“Thought you should know, Dutch rode out earlier with a few of the boys to check out that lead on the O’Driscoll camp nearby. Dutch wanted you to ride along, but I persuaded him otherwise on the account of your arm,” Hosea explained and Arthur frowned. While it was true the arm the wolf had bit had needed some tending and still hurt like a bitch he wasn’t an invalid. He could still ride and shoot...

But then again, after being up most of the night tending to John, it was probably the right call. So instead of being upset about being left behind Arthur mumbled a small thanks to the older man. Even though Hosea could probably see right through him. The man was always too observant for his own good. So Arthur decided to change the subject somewhat.

“Is that a good idea? We’re not even back on our own feet yet, and we’re trying to hit Colm O’Driscoll? What’s Dutch even thinking?” Arthur said, shaking his head in disbelief. Hosea sighed sadly.

“Dutch says it’s not about revenge... but he’s never been able to think with a clear head whenever Colm is involved. Not after...” Hosea trailed off and Arthur nodded in understanding. He’d been there after all. Still...

A soft groan from the bed drew both their attentions and Arthur looked on in shock when John’s eyes fluttered open.

“Holy shit...” he muttered. Thankfully, Hosea was much more useful in the situation.

“Arthur, get the boy some water. Hurry now,” Hosea ordered, and Arthur quickly leapt to his feet. He hunted down a fresh canteen while Hosea sat on the edge of the bed, speaking softly to comfort the boy who was looking around delirious and anxious. Arthur poured some water into his own empty mug and handed it to Hosea. Then Arthur helped ease the boy to sit up a bit so he could drink.

“There now, small sips, you’re doing good...” Hosea continued in a soothing voice. John only managed a few careful sips before he started coughing, and they had to give up. It wasn’t nearly enough for the amount of water John was sweating out with his fever... but it was better than nothing. Once they got John settled back laying down, Arthur reached for the cool rag he’d been using all night and gently wiped down the boy’s face.

“You hang in there, son. You’re going to be just fine,” Hosea reassured, and Arthur tried not to frown at the probable lie. But the fact that John was even awake now was something of a miracle so... maybe...

“Where...” John managed to wheeze out, his eyes darting between Hosea and Arthur in confusion.

“We’re at an old abandoned mining town on the mountain by the name of Colter. We got lost in the storm and took shelter here. Arthur found you yesterday and brought you here,” Hosea explained gently, even though Arthur doubted John understood or would even remember any of this later on. John’s eyes eventually settled on him and recognition flashed in the dark feverish depths.

“Arthur...” John whispered, something like gratitude in his tone, and it hit Arthur like a kick to the gut. Hosea looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, that’s me. Glad you remember this time,” Arthur joked lightly, and offered the injured man a small smile. John blinked slowly, still watching him intently. Hosea cleared his throat softly to draw the younger man’s attention.

“John... when Arthur found you, you were alone. But is there anyone else up here we should be looking out for? Friends of yours maybe?” Hosea asked. Arthur frowned slightly. He had a feeling he knew where this was going, and he didn’t really like it.

“I... was looking... supposed to deliver... a message...” John managed to slur out, but his eyelids were already getting heavier. He wouldn’t be conscious for much longer.

“We should let him rest, Hosea...” Arthur suggested, but Hosea pressed on.

“What was the message, John? Maybe we can help you find who you’re looking for?” Hosea asked. John’s eyes were already slipping closed again, but he still managed to mumble two barely distinguishable words.

“The train...”

## Chapter 5

The train? Train... no... it couldn't be. Just because that bastard O'Driscoll who'd jumped Arthur in the barn had mentioned a train, it didn't mean... Arthur looked over to Hosea and he could see the man was thinking. Putting the pieces together. Coming to the same conclusion that Arthur had.

But it was the *wrong* one. It had to be...

"The boy is delirious, Hosea. It don't mean anything. He probably heard us talking while he was asleep..." Arthur said quickly, earning him a raised eyebrow from the older man.

"We didn't mention the train, Arthur," Hosea stated calmly, and Arthur cursed inwardly. Arthur got up and started to pace agitated around the small room. Hosea watched him with a carefully neutral expression.

"There has to be some other explanation," Arthur said, even though he didn't know what it could be. When the most *likely* one was staring at him right in the face. Considering there weren't anyone else up here in these goddamned mountains besides them and...

"You're making a whole lot of excuses for a man you don't even know, Arthur," Hosea pointed out and Arthur stopped. His fists clenched at his sides. Because Hosea was right. Damn him. John was a complete stranger. He knew absolutely *nothing* about him. They'd barely even spoken. Why the hell was he trying to defend John to Hosea of all people? Why the hell was he trying to protect a man he didn't even know? When he could very well be an... Arthur didn't even want to think it, because somehow it would make it real.

Arthur thought about how he'd tended to John all night long. How he'd given the man his own coat to try to keep him from freezing on the way back to Colter. How he'd risked his life to kill a pack of wolves before they could reach John. How he found John bleeding to death on that cliff, his eyes just as wild as the wolves that had maimed him, fully prepared to shoot Arthur rather than risk accepting help from a stranger.

Arthur thought of doing all of that for a goddamned *O'Driscoll*... and felt betrayed. Even though John had never asked for his help. Never asked for Arthur to risk his life. Never asked for Arthur to tend to him so carefully. But still... had *trusted* Arthur when he had no reason to.

"Fuck," Arthur hissed through his teeth, feeling like he wanted to yank out his own hair in frustration. He thought on Dutch's words, about how he should have put a bullet in John when he'd first found him. Wondered if the words now had a double meaning. If Dutch also suspected that John was an O'Driscoll. Arthur hated himself for the fear that flashed through him at the thought.

"Arthur, calm down. I don't mean the boy any harm," Hosea finally interrupted the downward spiral of Arthur's thoughts with gentle reassurance. Arthur turned back to look at Hosea feeling more hopeful than he knew he rightly should given the situation.

“So you don’t think he’s an-” Arthur started but Hosea interrupted him.

“No. I do. But not just because of what he said, Arthur. I’ve seen this boy before,” Hosea explained and Arthur’s heart sank through the floor. Because if that was true... and there was no reason for Hosea to lie... then that meant... “You have too, actually. But it was years ago, so I’m not surprised if you don’t recognize him. Though maybe you did and just didn’t know it.”

Arthur frowned in confusion and looked at John. Arthur was pretty good with remembering faces. It was the only way he could draw sketches of people in his journal long after he’d seen them. Sure, John was pretty torn up from the wolves that had attacked him, but Arthur was *sure* he would still have known the man if they’d really met before...

Maybe that meant Hosea was wrong after all, and Arthur opened his mouth to deny having ever seen John before, but Hosea beat him to it.

“Arthur, this is John *Marston*,” Hosea said calmly and Arthur’s mouth snapped shut with a click. John Marston... John *fucking* Marston... Not just any god damned O’Driscoll but Colm’s...

Now that Hosea had mentioned it, Arthur could see the resemblance when he looked at John. But he could probably be forgiven that he hadn’t immediately recognized the man. Considering Arthur hadn’t seen John Marston since he’d been a boy of about fourteen.

*Twelve years ago.*

Colm O’Driscoll had been just as much of a bastard then as he was now, but back then the O’Driscolls and the Van der Linde gang still maintained an uneasy truce. They were the two largest gangs working in the same area. But Colm’s gang had far more men and none of the morals that the Van der Linde gang had. They were only in it for the money and to avoid the noose. Full of rapists, murders, and other unsavory folk that Arthur would have much rather never dealt with under other circumstances. Dutch and Hosea felt pretty much the same way, but Dutch insisted on keeping the peace between the two gangs as much as possible for everyone’s benefit.

So one day Dutch went to speak with the O’Driscoll brothers at the heart of their main camp. Something about seeking permission to do a job in their territory. Hosea and Arthur had come along because they’d never let Dutch walk into the lion’s den on his own. That was when Arthur first met John Marston.

The boy was as grungy and gangly as a starving stray dog. Had the temperament of one too. All snarling attitude and gnashing teeth. At first the boy seemed very out of place, though he moved among the big burly outlaws in Colm’s camp with a practiced ease. Performing various chores and mostly being ignored by the men around him. As far as Arthur knew, Colm O’Driscoll had never been in the habit of taking stray children into his gang. That was more of Dutch’s thing... but he supposed there was always a first time.

Something about it hadn’t sat too well with Arthur though he couldn’t put his finger on it. Maybe it had something to do with the pity in Hosea’s eyes every time he looked at the boy.

But Arthur hadn't realized just how *bad* it was until later that night. After sharing a simple dinner around the campfire, the *real* use the O'Driscolls had for the boy became blatantly obvious.

After everyone had eaten John had been busy collecting the various dishes from around the camp to wash. Arthur's offer to help had been rejected with a surprising amount of vitriol from the boy. So he'd gone back to sit with Dutch and Hosea and decided to simply ignore John Marston as most others seemed to be doing. Only some of the O'Driscolls weren't ignoring the boy so much anymore. They were looking at him in a way that made the hairs on the back of Arthur's neck stand on end.

There was an unpleasant tension in the air that was only broken by the sudden crashing sound of falling dishes. Arthur's head snapped up to see one of the O'Driscoll men shoving the boy over a table, his intent clear. Arthur's vision went red and he was on his feet before he really thought about what he was doing. The last thing he expected was for both Hosea and Dutch to grab him and stop him from intervening.

"What the hell—" Arthur hissed incredulously at Dutch standing in his way. There was a matching outrage burning in the older man's eyes, but it was much better contained.

"We *can't*, Arthur," Dutch stated rather calmly, even though his words dripped with disgust. Arthur looked desperately to Hosea for assistance, but was only met with shame and resignation. He remembered thinking how both men must have gone suddenly insane to simply stand by and let something like that happen to a *child*. Arthur didn't want to listen when Dutch hastily reminded him that they were *guests* in the middle of the O'Driscoll camp. Far outnumbered, would probably end up dead should they try to interfere, and it *wouldn't change anything*... Especially when it was something that apparently happened so often that the boy didn't even struggle...

Arthur had felt sick for days. Long after they'd finally rode away from the O'Driscoll camp once their business was complete.

"It's a damned shame..." was all Hosea would say about the matter.

It was ironic that barely six months later, the fragile peace that had been between the O'Driscolls and the Van der Linde gang was broken anyway when Dutch killed Colm O'Driscoll's brother and Colm retaliated by raping and murdering Dutch's lover. At the time Arthur couldn't help thinking if they were going to go to war with the O'Driscolls anyway, he would have rather it had been about John Marston. Leaving that boy behind with the O'Driscoll gang had always been one of Arthur's deepest regrets...

"God damn it..." Arthur muttered as he all but fell into the chair he'd been using for most of the night. He looked at John Marston laying unconscious in his bed. Not a defenseless boy anymore, but a man. A man Arthur had went out of his way to save for reasons he hadn't really been able to explain at the time. But maybe... unconsciously... he'd known all along. Those same dark eyes behind a pistol aimed at his chest reminding him too much of a child's he hadn't been able to save, "What the hell are we going to do, Hosea?"

Hosea's lips pressed into a thin line. The older man looked just as unsure about the situation as Arthur felt. Because it was probably only a matter of time before Dutch figured out who John was... if he hadn't already. But there was no guarantee that Dutch would feel the same pity for the man as they did for the boy that John had once been. Considering John was far from a boy anymore, and apparently still running with Colm...

Dutch would probably want to question John at the very least. John had been in Colm O'Driscoll's gang for *years*. He'd been... close... to Colm. Probably knew things about the man and his gang that no one else did. If John refused to talk... how far was Dutch willing to go for the answers he wanted? Even if John *did* talk, what would they do to him once they were done with him? If he were any *other* O'Driscoll... Arthur knew exactly what they'd do...

Before Hosea could give him an answer they were interrupted by the sound of approaching horses outside. It had to be Dutch and the others returning. Arthur's heart seized in panic and he looked to Hosea imploringly. He knew they had to tell Dutch what they knew but...

"We'll talk about this more later, Arthur. Don't fret so much," the older man said and offered him a reassuring smile before he left to greet Dutch. Arthur stayed in the room with John, giving himself a little more time to process everything before being forced to face the older man. From the sound of things, it had gone well at least. Dutch sounded pleased when he came in and greeted Hosea.

"So, how'd it go?" Hosea asked.

"Very well. None of our boys were hurt, and Colm's men never knew what hit them. We found dynamite and plans for the train the O'Driscolls were planning to rob. This is going to get us back on our feet, Hosea. I know it," Dutch proclaimed loudly.

"Some good news, finally," Hosea agreed. Molly interrupted the two men softly to offer Dutch a warm cup of coffee, which the man gratefully accepted.

"Where's Arthur? Don't tell me he's still asleep," Dutch eventually asked, and Arthur knew he couldn't hide out any longer.

"I'm here, Dutch," Arthur said as he headed into the main room with the other men. Dutch beamed at him.

"Ah, good. You're looking better, my boy. Well, if you're done playing nursemaid then, maybe you can join us hitting this train," Dutch said. Though the man was still smiling, the slight admonishment in his tone made Arthur wince. Dutch made it sound like he was purposely neglecting his duties to the gang...

"Of course..." Arthur replied without really thinking. Before anything else could be said, however, a ruckus and shouting outside drew all of their attentions.

"What's all that about?" Hosea questioned as all three men went outdoors to find Micah Bell riding up with a man hogtied over the back of his horse.



“Found the little shit did you? Good work, Micah!” Dutch praised and an uneasy feeling grew in Arthur.

“Who the hell is that?” he asked as Micah dumped the boy off the horse into the snow.

“Oh, just one of them O’Driscoll boys. Seemed rather close to Colm by the looks of things,” Dutch replied, his voice dripping with contempt, and staring at the trussed up young man like he was vermin.

“Want me to make him talk?” Micah offered with far too much glee for Arthur’s opinion.

“Oh no, now all we’ll get is lies...” Dutch sneered, “Tie this maggot up someplace safe. We’ll get him hungry first...” As Dutch went on to threaten the man not much younger than John, Arthur shared a look with Hosea. A cold lump of lead settled in Arthur's stomach.

“I can’t believe it! An O’Driscoll in *my* camp.”

## Chapter 6

It was god damned snowing again. So much for being spring. Arthur hunkered down in his coat as he trudged through the knee deep snow towards the barn. Smoke from the cigarette pressed between his lips swirled around him wildly from the bitter wind, much like his own thoughts.

Just when had everything gotten so damned complicated? Blackwater... that was when. Though if he was being honest with himself, the slow downward spiral of bad luck for the gang had started long before then, only now it was just easier to see.

Arthur couldn't say when he'd started doubting Dutch's decisions for the gang. Though it was probably around the time Dutch seemed to stop listening to Arthur and Hosea's advice near all together. Arthur didn't know what exactly had triggered the change... only that their questions or suggestions on how to proceed were met with defensiveness more often than not. Or were seen as some kind of challenge against his leadership, in Dutch's eyes.

Dutch had never steered them wrong before, and Arthur didn't doubt the older man's decisions nearly as much as Dutch made it sound. But there had been a time when Arthur had felt like he could go to Dutch with anything and speak his mind openly. Where once they'd been partners, allies, a family... now Arthur often felt like some kind of underling just waiting to be ordered around. At least Dutch still listened to Hosea *sometimes*... but even the older man's words of wisdom were often left unheeded at times when they probably should have been heeded the most.

Which was why this whole damned situation was so... frustrating.

Arthur didn't like the idea of hiding things from Dutch. But... given how things were going, he and Hosea had agreed it might be best to keep John's true identity just between the two of them. At least for now. There was no point in stirring up the hornet's nest when there might not even be a reason to. There was still a chance that John wouldn't even *survive* his wounds... though the fact that the younger man was still alive *at all* was encouraging.

Arthur would even go so far to say that John seemed to be doing *better* today. Charles had returned successful from his venture into the woods with a strange fungus he'd turned into a medicine. Apparently he'd learned the recipe from an old native woman. Arthur reminded himself to ask for it later. It must be working since John's fever had seemed to lessen since then, his wounds oozed less, and he was breathing easier. While he wasn't out of the woods yet, Arthur was far more hopeful than he had been.

Which meant that he and Hosea needed to decide what to do about John. Soon. Even though John hadn't seemed to recognize Arthur or Hosea before, he might once he was feeling better. Surely John would recognize *Dutch*... and Arthur couldn't imagine that would go over very well. Most O'Driscolls had just as much hatred for Dutch as Colm did.

Even if he and Hosea could convince John not to do something stupid with regards to Dutch... What if Mrs. Adler recognized John? Arthur didn't want to consider that John

might have had something to do with the murder of that poor woman's husband... but he couldn't rule out the possibility either. That wasn't even taking into account the *other* O'Driscoll boy they had tied up in the barn who might just as easily recognize Marston...

There were too many damned unknowns. Too many things that could go wrong. Which was why Arthur was on his way to the barn right now to have a talk with the O'Driscoll boy.

Something Arthur might not have bothered with at any other time but... If he could get the boy to talk without much fuss. Get him to tell them something *useful* then maybe he could convince Dutch to go easy on the boy and simply cut him loose. Dutch wasn't completely unreasonable, and it was one less thing for them to worry about.

Arthur pushed open the door to the barn and shook off the snow that had gathered on his hat and shoulders. It wasn't exactly warm in the barn but it wasn't freezing either. His new horse nickered happily at him and Arthur took a moment to walk over pat the animal affectionately before he turned his attention to the young man trussed up in the corner.

He was sitting on the ground, tied to one of the beams, but he'd looked up as soon as Arthur entered. There was obvious fear in the boy's eyes and Arthur wondered just how someone like this had come to be in Colm's gang in the first place. Arthur remembered the boy's loud claims that he wasn't an O'Driscoll. That he'd only been with the gang for a couple months. Arthur had a feeling that, at least, was probably true. It was probably also true the boy wouldn't have lasted for much longer in the O'Driscoll gang either. It took a certain kind of person to survive for very long with Colm O'Driscoll. Arthur didn't really want to think what that might mean about John, but it probably meant *this* boy didn't know much of value... but Arthur was willing to give it a shot anyway.

"You know why I'm here boy?" Arthur asked, his voice gruff but still soft as he scratched his horse's neck. Even from this distance he could see the boy swallow hard. His voice trembled when he spoke. Though that might have just been from the cold, Arthur doubted it..

"N...no... sir..."

Arthur stepped away from his horse and approached the bound man slowly.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"I... I don't know..."

Arthur snorted at that response.

"You don't know what your name is?"

"It's Kieran... Kieran Duffy..." the boy finally managed to stutter. Arthur hummed and knelt down in front of Kieran so he could look him straight in the eye.

"Alright, Kieran Duffy. I'm going to tell you something that might just save your life.

Normally I'd be the one breaking your bones right now to get you to talk. I wouldn't give a rats ass about hurting you... and I still don't really... but given the situation, I'm willing to

be generous just this once and give you the chance to get out of this the easy way,” Arthur said slowly and clearly to make sure the bound man understood exactly what he was saying.

“I... I told you all... I don’t know...” Kieran began stammering and Arthur growled.

“You better shut up and just listen to me boy, before I shut your mouth for you,” Arthur snapped, and Kieran wisely did just that. Maybe the boy wasn’t a complete idiot after all.

“Sooner or later the people I’m with are going to get tired of your ‘playing innocent’ bullshit. They’re going to do things to you that you’re *not* going to like. You’re going to talk, sooner or later. That’s just how it is. Then they’re going to kill you. Maybe fast. Maybe slow. All depends on just how much of a stubborn ass you’ve been,” Arthur stated bluntly and the younger man whimpered in obvious terror. Well, good. Meant he understood the situation then.

“Now... you tell me something useful now? Before we have to result to all that unpleasantness? Well... maybe things will turn out a bit different. All I need is *something* useful. About that train you O’Driscolls were setting to rob... about Colm... *anything*. Then maybe I can convince them to let you go without so much as a scratch,” Arthur said. While he couldn’t promise more than ‘maybe’ it was a much better deal than the boy was going to get with anyone else, and Kieran knew it.

“But... but I told you. I’ve only been with them a little while... I’m nobody! They don’t tell me anything!” Kieran cried.

“Right. You’re a goddamned cockroach. Beneath notice. So no one is going to hold their tongue while you’re skulking around. You’ve heard *something*,” Arthur growled. He could see the boy was racking his brain. He was taking this seriously at least. He could only hope Kieran was as much of a coward as he seemed, and Dutch was wrong about the boy only feeding them lies so early without much *persuasion*.

“Uh... the train. We were waiting for news... Important information about the job... Colm... he was angry. *Really* angry when the messenger never showed... said we might have to scrap the whole job because of it,” Kieran blurted out quickly. That... didn’t really help Arthur very much. Except to confirm what they already knew and prove that Kieran wisely wasn’t going to try lying to him right now.

John was obviously the messenger Colm had been waiting for, and something he knew was *important*. Unfortunately what Arthur *really* needed was something that could divert Dutch’s attention *away* from John Marston, not make things *worse*. Especially if Dutch was really dead set on hitting that train, and put the pieces together that the information John had was the key... If even *Colm* wasn’t willing to risk hitting that train without the information John had... How the hell were they supposed to convince Dutch it was a bad idea without telling him everything?

Arthur growled in frustration. The younger man whimpered like he was about to piss himself, but Arthur couldn’t care less at the moment. What a fucking mess!

“That ain’t good enough!” Arthur snapped, raising his voice to a dangerous level. He didn’t want anyone else to know he was here... but he was quickly losing his patience. His hands clenched into fists, “You need to tell me something else! Anything!”

“I don’t... I don’t...” Kieran stammered, whimpering like a girl. It was all Arthur could do not to reach out and shake him by the neck.

“Boy, I’m warning you...”

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing, cowpoke,” drawled Micah Bell’s nerve grating voice from behind him, and Arthur cursed inwardly. He slowly rose and turned to face the unpleasant man with a fierce scowl which would have withered lesser men, but Micah seemed completely unfazed.

“That’s none of your damned business,” Arthur snapped. Micah tilted his head to the side, like the dumb dog he was, and raised an incredulous eyebrow at Arthur.

“Seems like it’s *someone’s* business... especially if you’re going against Dutch’s orders to wait to question the prisoner,” Micah pointed out with far too much smugness for his position, “Especially when you ain’t been too... involved with what’s been going on lately.”

“You better watch yourself, Micah,” Arthur warned, taking a threatening step towards the other man. Micah hummed and rested his hand, none too casually, on his gun belt.

“Maybe *you* should watch yourself, Morgan. Pay a little more attention to the position you’re really in,” Bell replied.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean,” Arthur snapped.

“It *means*, that you *may* have been Dutch’s favorite son up till now... but things change. When winters are long and hard... hungry wolves will always turn on the weakest members of the pack. I’d watch your back,” Micah said with a knowing smirk. Then turned and walked back out of the barn without an apparent care in the world. Probably on his way to ‘tattle’ to Dutch about what Arthur had been up to... Fuck...

Arthur looked over his shoulder to glare at the O’Driscoll boy who’d obviously been listening to the whole conversation, and who quickly looked away from his withering stare. If Micah had just caused him to lose whatever modicum of credibility and leverage Arthur had managed to gain over the younger man...

“You think about what I said earlier, Kieran Duffy. I’m going to be back,” Arthur snapped, and Kieran nodded quickly. At least he still looked afraid of Arthur, which was a good thing. He stormed out of the barn and headed straight back to the main building. Neither Dutch, nor Micah, were there as far as he could see, but Arthur would deal with the potential problem of Micah later. Instead Arthur headed to his... now more John’s... room where Hosea sat reading in a chair beside the unconscious man’s bed. He looked up when Arthur entered.

“Arthur? Where have you been?” Hosea asked curiously.

“Questioning the prisoner,” he replied bluntly, earning him a reproachful look from the older man. He knew what Hosea was probably going to say, but the last thing he needed was to be scolded like a little boy right now.

“I know what you’re going to say, and you can lecture me all you want later. Right now we’ve got a big problem,” Arthur said, and that peaked Hosea’s interest. He set the book aside on the table and turned his attention to Arthur fully.

“What did he say?” Hosea asked.

“That train that Colm was fixing to rob? There’s something about the job that ain’t right. Information that we don’t have that...” Arthur looked over at John for emphasis and Hosea nodded in understanding. At least Arthur didn’t have to spell things out, “If we try to hit that train without knowing everything, something bad is going to happen, Hosea. We gotta convince Dutch not to do the job.”

Hosea sighed heavily. He understood just as much as Arthur did what an impossible venture that might be. But they had to try nonetheless.

## Chapter 7

“You sure about this?” a gruff, but somewhat familiar, voice asked in a hushed tone.

A soft groan escaped John’s throat as he was unwillingly pulled back to consciousness. He felt like hell, plain and simple. His entire body ached and felt weak as a newborn kitten. His head felt like it had been kicked in by a horse. His face... well, it felt like it had been half eaten by wolves, that’s what it felt like. On top of that it *itched* .

A part of him wanted nothing more than to slip back into peaceful black oblivion, just so he wouldn’t have to feel this way anymore... But the soft voices that had woken him continued to pluck at his attention, even though he had trouble concentrating on what they were actually saying.

“This will work, Arthur. We’ve got time. Just let me handle Dutch.”

There was a softer grumbled response that John couldn’t make out. But again the familiarity of the voice pulled at something in John, and he found himself fighting to open his eyes. The room he was in was both familiar... and not. Like a half forgotten dream. As were the two men talking together in hushed tones over by the doorway. Though one of them was a bit more familiar than not.

Arthur... the mountain, snow, wolves... that’s right. Arthur had saved him. Brought him... here. Wherever here was. The older man he was speaking to... he seemed familiar as well. Though in a more distant way. Ugh... if only his head didn’t feel like it was stuffed full of cotton... maybe then he could concentrate. The older man clapped Arthur on the shoulder affectionately.

“You worry too much, my boy. Just keep an eye on...” the man trailed off as he looked in John’s direction and his eyes widened in surprise at seeing him awake. Seeing his reaction, Arthur turned to face him as well. A slight nervous feeling bubbled in John’s belly. Like he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t... but then Arthur smiled at him. John knew better than to be taken in by something so easily deceptive... But something about the warmth that reached Arthur’s eyes had John relaxing in spite of himself.

The older man patted Arthur’s shoulder again before excusing himself from the room. Arthur approached him and sat carefully on the edge of the bed.

“Welcome back to the land of the living, kid. How are you feeling?” Arthur asked him. Normally John might have been bristling at being called a ‘kid’ but right now he was too tired for that. He opened his mouth, but had to clear his throat several times before he could actually speak. His throat felt as dry as a desert and like he’d been swallowing glass.

“Water?” he finally managed to croak out.

“Course,” Arthur replied immediately, reaching for a canteen and tin cup sitting on a nearby table. John tried, and failed, to sit up. But Arthur seemed to be expecting this and helped

John drink without a word. Unfortunately John had to stop long before his thirst actually felt sated as he began to feel nauseous. But Arthur seemed to expect that too. He carefully eased John back to lay down with surprisingly gentle hands, “Just take it easy now. Don’t rush. How are you feeling?”

“Not... good...” John mumbled, and Arthur chuckled softly.

“*That* is probably and understatement,” he replied, and John nodded in agreement.

“How long... have I...”

“You’ve been doing a pretty good impression of a corpse for near a week now...” Arthur said as he reached over the side of the bed. John heard a soft splash of water and then Arthur pressed a cool damp rag against his forehead. John sighed at the relief it brought, “You seem to be on the mend now though... you probably have Charles to thank for that.”

“Charles?” John whispered in question. Something he knew he was forgetting tugged at him... like a hook in his brain. Fuck... why was it so hard to think? He hated feeling this way...

Arthur paused and got a funny look in his eye.

“Yeah... maybe you’ll get the chance to meet him. We’ll see...” he said. Arthur looked... worried. That didn’t make John feel too good at all. He frowned at Arthur.

“What’s going on?” John asked. Arthur simply shook his head and continued to wipe his face and chest down with the rag.

“Nothing you gotta worry about right now. Just concentrate on getting better. Alright?” Arthur suggested. John couldn’t help but snort softly. Not like he had much choice. He could barely keep his eyes open as it was. A whole damned week in bed and he couldn’t even...

A week... no... he... he was supposed to be... he’d never...

John’s eyes suddenly went wide and he started to sit up, but he didn’t get very far before his wounds stopped him with a hiss of pain. Arthur looked shocked by the abruptness of it all, but he recovered fairly quickly. He grabbed John’s shoulders and pressed him back down to the bed far too easily for John’s liking.

“Woah! Easy there. You can’t be moving around like that, John! If you reopen your wounds...”

“No!” John interrupted, shaking his head frantically, “You don’t understand... I need... I need to go... I...”

Arthur’s expression shifted to understanding... even though John knew he could never *really* understand... and then the man frowned. Though his hands remained gentle on John as he kept him from moving.



“Listen... you ain’t going nowhere right now, John. That’s just a fact, I’m afraid,” Arthur said firmly. John tensed instantly, and Arthur was quick to continue, “You ain’t a prisoner here, got that? What you are is wounded. Sick. You don’t even have a horse, and I doubt you could sit straight in a saddle if you tried. If you go out there, now... you’re gonna die. I can’t let you do that.”

Even though everything Arthur was saying made sense, John still wanted to protest. Because Arthur didn’t understand. Maybe... maybe it wasn’t too late. But soon it would be. He had to... he had to get to the lake. It couldn’t be that far. He’d been close when he’d gotten lost in the snow storm. If John didn’t get there in time... Colm...

“Arthur... please... I need...”

Arthur sighed softly. He appeared truly regretful.

“What you *need* is food, water, and *rest*. Whatever it is you think you need to do... it ain’t worth your life. I didn’t drag you off that cliff just to watch you kill yourself,” while Arthur’s words were blunt, his eyes were surprisingly soft. Kind. John had no idea what he could possibly have done to have Arthur look at him like that. The man didn’t even *know* him. Yet he’d still risked his life to save him... he could just as easily have left John to the wolves and made a run for it... and apparently Arthur had been taking care of him all this time.

As much as John hated to admit it... he owed Arthur. Owed him enough to at least listen to what the man was saying. Slowly John let himself relax and Arthur nodded in approval, removing his hands.

“T...thank you... for helping me...” John managed softly. Arthur smiled again. He had a nice smile... John would give him that. Then, to John’s surprise, Arthur brushed his sweat damp hair back from his forehead with gentle fingers. Arthur seemed to have surprised himself by that action too, because the older man froze suddenly once it was complete, then pulled back quickly.

“No problem. Just don’t make me regret it,” Arthur joked lightly, even though there seemed to be a bit more color to his cheeks. The awkward moment was interrupted when the man from before returned carrying a steaming bowl. He looked between Arthur and John with a raised eyebrow then grinned.

“Well, you two seem to be getting along,” he said, which seemed a bit odd... because why wouldn’t they? “Think you can manage to eat something, John?”

Honestly John wasn’t sure. He still felt a little nauseous just from drinking the water, but the smell from whatever was in the bowl made his stomach clench in hunger. It had been a while since he’d last eaten, even before the wolves. So he gave a faint nod.

He couldn’t sit up by himself. That much was obvious. So Arthur carefully rearranged some of the bedding behind him, propping John up to make things a bit easier. The older man sat down on the edge of the bed and took up the task of actually feeding John, while Arthur hovered nearby.

“My name is Hosea, by the way. Since Arthur doesn’t have enough manners apparently to introduce me to his friends,” the older man said with a teasing note to his tone. Arthur did look a bit embarrassed by this. He grumbled something unintelligible, and probably rude, under his breath. Hosea merely chuckled in response.

The broth was simple and plain. John’s stomach probably couldn’t have handled anything else. Despite how hungry he was, he couldn’t even eat all that much of it anyway. Hosea didn’t look all that pleased by the amount of broth left in the bowl when John said he was done, but he didn’t push him. By the time Arthur helped him get settled back to laying comfortably in the bed John’s eyes were already beginning to drift shut once more.

John couldn’t help wondering who these men were. What were they doing here? How many of them were there? They seemed decent enough people he supposed... Not many would take in a complete stranger like this and care for them. Colm and the O’Driscoll gang had taken in John those many years ago... but this seemed different somehow. John couldn’t remember any of the O’Driscolls looking at him with the same kind of... pity... that seemed to shine in Hosea’s eyes every time they met his own.

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When John woke again he had no idea how much time had passed. It could have been hours, or days, for all he knew. He was hot. Thirsty. He had to piss... and his face was itching. Again.

He lifted a hand... hell... he could barely manage even that. He touched his face. Or... what was left of it, anyway. His fingers unsurprisingly were met with a swath of bandages. Before he could even begin to work his fingers underneath to relieve some of his discomfort a voice from across the room stopped him.

“You don’t want to be doing that.”

It was Arthur. It always seemed to be Arthur looking after him. Right now the man was sitting in a chair across the room by the window. A small candle glowed on the table beside him providing him light. He had a book in his lap, a pencil in his hand, and seemed to be in the middle of writing something... he wasn’t even looking at John. Just how the hell had he known?

“The hell I don’t,” John mumbled miserably as he felt another unpleasant twinge in his face, “It itches!”

Arthur finally glanced up at him.

“That means it’s healing. Leave it be,” the older man said, his tone brooking no argument. John frowned, the gesture pulling uncomfortably at his stitches, and made his face twinge again. With a frustrated sound, he started fumbling with the bandages again, ignoring Arthur’s warning. He heard Arthur sigh heavily as he shut the book and set it aside.

“All right. Let me take a look at it,” he said, grabbing John’s hand and pulling it away from his face. John made a displeased sound at being thwarted, but he stayed obediently still as Arthur went about carefully removing the bandage covering the right side of his face. It stung more than a bit when Arthur finally pulled away the last strip of cloth, stuck slightly to his face due to the dried blood. But it immediately felt a bit better with the fresh air touching his skin.

Arthur looked at him carefully, turning his face to the side for a better view.

“That looks a lot better. But if you mess with the stitches it’ll scar a lot worse than it would otherwise,” Arthur remarked, and John snorted.

“What the hell do I care? I was always ugly anyway...” John muttered bitterly. Not because it was true... quite the opposite in fact. When he was much younger he had *wished* he was less pretty. Maybe he wouldn’t have earned so much unwanted... attention... then. Arthur frowned at him.

“That ain’t true,” the older man said with conviction. John eyed Arthur critically. Wondered if *Arthur* thought he was 'pretty' as so many men had in the past.

*Nothing in life is free, boy...*

Arthur had saved him. He definitely owed the man... but John didn’t have... All his belongings had been on his horse which had been torn to shreds by the wolves. What if Arthur was thinking of having John pay him back for saving him... in other ways than money? So far he hadn't so much as hinted that's what he wanted but... Well... it wouldn’t be the first time. Maybe it wouldn’t even be so bad, if he waited till John was a bit more healed up first. Arthur wasn’t bad looking at least...

Arthur quickly looked away and cleared his throat.

“You need... anything else?” Arthur offered. After a moment John admitted he was thirsty and needed to piss. Arthur nodded without comment and helped him relieve himself first in a pail, then left (presumably to empty it) and returned with water. He helped John drink, then got him settled back into bed once he was done. Arthur’s hands were gentle through the whole thing, utilitarian, didn’t try to feel him up once.

Arthur then returned to his chair and picked up his book once more. John fell back to sleep listening to the scratching sound of the graphite against paper.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad...

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His heart was racing. His throat felt tight. He couldn’t breathe. He could *feel* the rope around his neck... digging ruthlessly into his skin as he flailed. The broken terrified cry that

escaped him barely sounded human...

“John! Wake up!”

He could still hear them. Howling. The scream of his dying horse. It made his ears ring. Blood turned the snow red... the growling was deafening as they tore at him with their teeth... no they were *laughing*... laughing as they pinned him down and took what they wanted... laughing as they watched him suffocate with a rope around his neck. John reached up. Clawing at his neck. His nails leaving red welts behind on his skin but he couldn't get the rope off. There was *nothing* there. Why couldn't he *breathe* !

Hands grabbed his wrists, pulled them away from his neck, and pinned him down to stop him from thrashing. Stop him from hurting himself...

“John! Come on now... easy now... You're alright.... It's just a bad dream...”

John whimpered. He wanted... wanted to believe that... but the rope...

He tried to reach for his throat again, but he couldn't. He was held gently but securely. His head twisted wildly, trying to dislodge the feeling of the noose. A choking sound escaped his constricting throat. The pressure on his wrists shifted to a one-handed grip then warm fingers brushed against his neck.

John was so shocked by the touch his eyes flew open and he finally managed a weak gasp. Arthur was crouched over him, blue-green eyes wide with fear, though there was a flash of relief on the older man's face when John finally focused on him.

“There you are. You're all right. You're safe... just breathe... that's it...” Arthur said softly, his voice soothing. His hand was warm and comforting, his fingers still brushing gently along John's neck. His thumb pressed into John's frantic pulse. His fingers curled around the faint scars left on his neck from where the rope had burned into his skin. That touch... it was real... the rope wasn't...

John managed a shaking inhale. Then another. Arthur kept speaking to him softly as his heart rate slowed. John finally slumped, utterly exhausted, against the covers. The grip around his wrists relaxed. Arthur's hands eventually pulled away. John... missed them immediately. He shivered, feeling cold all of a sudden.

“John?” Arthur said, his voice barely above a whisper. John opened his eyes again... he didn't even remember closing them. Arthur was still there. Still close, though no longer touching him. He looked... concerned was an understatement. John wondered... how much had Arthur heard? Colm had once told him he talked in his sleep. Especially when... that... happened.

John glanced away from the older man, feeling ashamed. His eyes fell on the floor where a bedroll was laid out... hastily thrown aside. Arthur must have been sleeping when...

“Sorry...” John finally managed to mumble.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. I just want to know you’re alright,” Arthur replied. He... sounded like he actually meant it. John’s throat seized for an entirely different reason, and he turned to face the wall before he could embarrass himself any further.

“I’m fine...” he said through clenched teeth that sounded far from convincing. He didn’t want to talk about it. Arthur sighed heavily, then after a long moment of silence, John felt a big hand press between his shoulder blades. John let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding when Arthur began to rub slow circles against his back.

“Want me to stay up with you till you fall asleep?” Arthur offered. John bit his lip. It stung due to his wounds, but at least he managed to muffle the sob that tried to escape his throat. All he could manage was a shaky nod he wasn’t even sure Arthur saw... but he must have. Because Arthur stayed...

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

John woke and cast his eyes blearily around the small room. He'd slept surprisingly well last night after... which was something of a surprise. Usually he had a lot of trouble getting back to sleep after a nightmare that bad. But not only had he fallen back to sleep rather quickly, he'd slept the rest of the night without any more nightmares at all. John couldn't remember the last time he'd slept so peacefully.

But to his disappointment he found that Arthur wasn't there when he awoke. In fact, John was completely alone for the first time he could remember.

It was a little surprising just how quickly John had grown used to the other man's presence. How much of a... comfort it had become. But for once Arthur wasn't there sitting in his chair by the window, or laid out in his bedroll trying to sleep. The few times that Arthur *wasn't* there when John woke, then Hosea was. Keeping an eye on him while the other man was away and making sure he didn't need anything. The change, admittedly, was a bit unsettling.

But he knew Hosea was close by. He could hear his voice coming from the other room. Along with another voice that John didn't recognize. While Hosea and Arthur spoke occasionally about the other people in their group, John had yet to meet any more of them. Not that it really bothered John much. He wasn't here to make friends, after all. He was just lucky that Arthur had found him, and they were good enough people to take in and care for a complete stranger.

While John was looking forward to being well enough where he could return to his gang, he knew things could have turned out much worse. Colm would be angry... really angry... that John had failed his mission. But... at least he wasn't dead. In fact, he was on the mend. And Hosea had promised him as soon as the thaw came and they were able to move the wagons down the mountain, they'd take him to the nearest town and post a letter wherever he wanted.

In the meantime, John got to spend plenty of time with the handsome stranger who'd rescued him, who was becoming less and less of a stranger every day. Arthur was quick witted, and had a sense of humor that sometimes cut, but it was never too deep. His eyes changed like the sky. Sometimes so intense they burned like blue flames, and then other times as soft as a clear summers day. His hands were rugged as any mans who lived hard off the land, but always seemed to touch him so carefully...

John was actually beginning to look forward to whenever Arthur decided to collect on his debt. Just imagining wrapping his legs around Arthur's muscular hips made John begin to stir down below the belt despite the fact that his body was far from ready for such activities. Still it was nice to imagine, and John had gotten some very nice peeks pretending to be asleep while Arthur changed.

Arthur was hung like a stallion... bet he fucked like one too.

John was drawn out of his contemplation when the voices in the other room began to raise.

Hosea was arguing heatedly with somebody. Though they were still speaking too softly for John to make out most of what they were saying, he caught a few words here and there. For the most part that didn't really concern John... it was none of his business and he wasn't in the habit of eavesdropping... unless it was for a job.

But then he heard something that made his blood turn to ice.

"... This isn't about revenge, Hosea! Colm O'Driscoll..."

Why... why were they arguing about Colm? Revenge? John threw aside the blankets covering him and slowly pushed himself up. His arms shook at the effort. So far he'd barely managed moving on his own without Arthur or Hosea to help him, and he knew standing and walking was going to be next to impossible... But John was nothing if not stubborn. He got to his feet, swaying dangerously, and held onto the wall for support. Then made his way over to the doorway as quickly and quietly as he could. He stood just out of the opening where the men in the other room couldn't see him, but he could hear them a little better now.

"I understand, Dutch. But we just can't hit this train. You said yourself, Colm always had good information. If even *he* wasn't willing to hit this train without that message..."

"We don't even know if that's true! The little prick could have been lying. I told Arthur not to..."

"It was a good thing he did! Otherwise we could have been walking right into a trap! We need to be smart about this..."

John's heart beat wildly in his chest. He felt cold down to his core. Even though he knew he shouldn't, he risked a glance around the door frame. He needed to see... to be sure... and to his horror he was proven right. Standing next to Hosea was a man John recognized all too well. Because his face was plastered on wanted posters across nearly every state from here to Mexico. The man who the O'Driscoll gang had been at war with for over a decade. The man who had killed the brother of the man who'd saved John's life... Dutch Van der Linde. Colm's enemy. *His* enemy. That meant Hosea... *Arthur*...

John stumbled back and nearly fell, only barely managing to catch himself on the wall. Did they know about him? Of *course* they did. They *had* to. Why else would the *Van der Linde gang* have taken him in, in the first place? No wonder they hadn't yet asked him for any kind of payment for saving him. He was so *stupid*! Everything... *everything* had been a lie. No wonder Arthur hadn't wanted him to leave. No wonder Arthur had been... kind... to him. It had all just been...

John hated himself for the angry tears that started burning behind his eyes. He hadn't been this close to actually crying since he'd been a boy. He moved away from the wall. Pure adrenaline kept him on his feet, and he ignored the way his body screamed at him, as he scrambled to pick up some of the clothes that had been left scattered around the room. They

were Arthur's... they still smelled like the man... and John *hated* having to put them on. But he would need *something*. He needed... he needed to get out of here. Before...

There was no way he could go out the front way. Not with Hosea and Dutch Van der Linde standing just in the next room. He couldn't wait for them to leave either, because then Hosea would probably be back... or Arthur... he needed to go *now*! Before it was too late. It already was...

He was so *stupid*! If he somehow managed to get out of this, Colm was probably going to kill him anyway. John would deserve it if he did...

The window was his only option. John managed to get it open without making too much noise, which was something of a surprise considering how old it was. The icy air hit him like a train, immediately taking his breath away. He felt the cold down to his bones... he didn't even have a coat... but that didn't much matter right now. He used the chair by the window to climb out of the window and immediately slipped and fell into the deep snow outside. John nearly bit through his lip trying to muffle the cry of pain that almost escaped him.

Desperation got him moving more than anything else. He stumbled, shivering violently through the snow. He had no idea where he was even going... but then he heard the sound of horses and went in that direction. If he could at least get a horse... the weather would probably still kill him long before he made it to the O'Driscoll camp but... maybe that would be the better option, all things considered.

He threw open the door to the barn and all but fell inside. The horses, startled by his entrance, started to make a racket, but John could only hope the sound of the wind covered it up. John quickly surveyed his options. The sturdy black draft horse seemed to be his best bet. It seemed the calmest... But before John could make his way to the horse, a voice stopped him.

The very *last* voice John expected to hear.

"John?! Oh my god! Is that you?!"

John whipped around. Sure he was only imagining things. But Kieran was *actually* there. Sitting on the ground in the barn tied to a post, looking at John as though he'd seen a ghost.

"Kieran? What the hell are you doing here!" John hissed in disbelief, went over to the other man, and began examining the ropes binding him. They were thick and sturdy, tied too well for John to undo quickly. He'd need some kind of knife... he began looking around frantically. His head was swimming and it was getting hard for him to concentrate...

"What am I...? What the hell are you doing here! We all thought you were dead!" Kieran replied. Looking relieved beyond measure to see John, poor excuse for a rescue though he may be.

"Nearly was," John responded bitterly. He finally found a knife and returned to the younger man's side to begin sawing through the ropes, "Hold still."



While John worked Kieran continued babbling at him. The younger man never could keep his mouth shut, but at the moment it was something of a comfort for John to finally hear a familiar voice after so long. Especially with the turmoil his emotions were in. If he could at least get Kieran out of here... maybe this all wasn't a complete waste. Even though he felt sicker by the moment as Kieran described how he was captured, threatened, and questioned... by the Van der Lindes... by *Arthur*. The poor boy didn't know shit, and they probably would have killed him when they were done with him...

John wondered what they'd been planning on doing with *him* when they finally got the information they wanted from him...

"John! Look out!" Kieran suddenly cried, but the warning came much too late for John to do anything about it. Especially considering how slow his reflexes were right now. By the time John spun around and brought up the knife to defend himself he was already being roughly grabbed by a greasy blonde man.

"Just what the hell you think you're doing?" the man sneered in John's face, his breath smelling of cigarettes and whiskey, "I knew you were trouble the second Morgan dragged in your sorry carcass."

Then the man violently twisted John's arm that held the knife. John gave an involuntary cry of pain as the man's hands dug painfully and without care into his wounds. The knife fell from his suddenly numb fingers, and the man laughed before shoving him down hard to the floor. He followed up by kicking John in the gut, making him see white as he curled into a ball of agony.

"Leave him alone, you bastard!" Kieran shouted, struggling against his ropes but it was no use. John hadn't managed to cut them enough to allow the man to get free.

"Looks like we've got *two* O'Driscoll cunts around here rather than one. Just wait till Dutch hears about this," the blonde man crowed, and kicked John again. In the face this time. John blacked out before the pain even fully hit him.

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"God damn you, Micah!" John came awake to the sound of a familiar voice, though hadn't yet heard Arthur sound so angry before. His head hurt something awful. He could feel blood and dirt caked to the side of his face. The stitches had probably been busted open when he'd been kicked... he tasted blood in his mouth... whether from his face or from internal bleeding he couldn't be sure.

"John... John are you all right? John..." he could hear Kieran's frantic voice nearby, but he wasn't able to move or say anything to reassure the younger man. He could barely even breathe through the pain he was in.

“You could have killed him!” Arthur was still shouting. He felt someone touching his neck, feeling for his pulse. It must have been Arthur. John hated how his hands still felt gentle, and how he still wanted to lean into the warm touch, even after everything.

“When the hell did you suddenly start caring about killing O’Driscolls, Morgan?” the blonde man, Micah apparently, unconsciously echoed John’s own thoughts.

“Micah! Arthur! What’s going on here!” John heard Dutch Van der Linde yell as he entered the barn.

John forced his eyes open to see what was going on, despite how difficult that was. Arthur was crouched in front of him... if he didn’t know better he’d say protectively. Putting himself between him and the blonde man who’d been beating him. Dutch took in the scene with a thunderous expression, and Hosea rushed in not far behind, looking horrified. A few other men, the rest of the Van der Linde gang probably, trailed after. Micah turned to face Dutch with a smug expression.

“Oh nothing, just stopping Arthur’s little charity case from freeing the prisoner. Turns out the little bitch is an O’Driscoll too. They were talking nice and friendly like before I stepped in,” Micah gloated. Dutch turned to Arthur. John wouldn’t have thought anything could cow a man like Arthur but he actually saw the older man flinch from the look Dutch gave him. It wasn’t angry. It was betrayed.

“Did you know about this?” Dutch asked Arthur, but the other man seemed speechless.

“Dutch it’s not what you think...” Hosea began, and the look Dutch Van der Linde gave him would have been comical if John didn’t know this whole thing was going to end with himself dead.

“*You* knew about this!”

“Not at first... but Dutch...” Hosea began, but then Dutch suddenly stormed out of the barn. Hosea ran out after him. John groaned in pain and coughed weakly, splattering blood onto the floor. Arthur quickly turned his attention back to him, his eyes wide with fear.

“Hold on, John. Just...” Arthur looked frantically back to the men surrounding them, but even John could tell he would get no aid from them. They stared at John... and Arthur... in varying degrees of shock, disgust, and hate. John could hear Dutch and Hosea yelling outside even over the howling of the wind.

“Bring the O’Driscolls out here! Both of them!” Dutch finally yelled and the rest of the gang moved, ignoring Arthur’s protests. It took three men to drag Arthur away from him, while another bound John’s hands and feet, even though it was unnecessary. He heard Kieran struggling behind him as he was dragged out of the barn and dumped on his knees in the snow. One man had to keep a hand on John to keep him from toppling over. Kieran was dropped next to him.

“I have just about had it with all this insubordination in my camp! The *doubting*. Always *questioning* my orders. It’s this kind of thing led to what happened at Blackwater! The

reason Jenny and Davey are dead! Sean and Mac gone... and just when we're trying to get back on our feet... Arthur... you *betray* me by bringing Colm O'Driscoll's *whore* into my camp!"

"It ain't like that!" Arthur yelled back, looking horrified by the accusation.

"Fine. Prove it then. Prove you're still one of *us*," Dutch said with finality, and Arthur looked confused before the older man took out a revolver and held it out to Arthur. Arthur looked at the gun like it was a snake ready to strike.

"Take it!" Dutch growled and Arthur did so reluctantly. John had a feeling he knew where this was going long before Arthur did.

"Colm O'Driscoll's men are nothing but lying, murdering, *animals*! Animals that need to be put down!" Dutch hissed.

"Dutch!" Hosea protested, but was ignored.

"Shoot one of them," Dutch demanded.

"What?" Arthur whispered almost too soft to be heard.

"*Shoot* one of them! Or I'll kill *both* of them!" Dutch replied cold as steel, "I don't feel like keeping any of Colm's mongrels around anymore, but you seem to suddenly know what's best for this gang. Better than *me*. So, pick one. Which one is more useful? Shoot the other."

Arthur looked like he was going to be sick. Which seemed funny to John considering how many O'Driscolls Arthur had probably killed in the past during this long feud between their gangs. But... he supposed there was something a bit different from killing a man in the heat of a gunfight, and when they were kneeling defenseless at your feet...

John knew how this had to go. Kieran... he might not be the most 'useful' of the two of them, but he didn't deserve a bullet through his skull either. He hadn't even been riding in Colm's gang all that long. He was just a kid... and John was probably as good as dead anyway...

"Arthur..." John whispered, looking up at the older man with pleading eyes, "Please..."

Arthur *had* to shoot him. He owed him that much...

## Chapter End Notes

Drama? You got it!

## Chapter 9

How could things have gotten out of hand so quickly? Arthur had only been gone for a short while. A couple hours at most. Unfortunately the wolf carcasses he'd brought back weren't enough to last a group their large for very long. So he was asked to go out hunting again. This time with Charles along to do the actual tracking, so maybe they'd bring back more than a couple mangy wolves and lost travelers.

Arthur had gone without much fuss, but only because Hosea promised to look after John while he was away from camp. Arthur didn't want to admit just how much John had scared him last night. That nightmare... fit... whatever it had been. It was almost like John had been drowning in thin air. He couldn't even breathe through whatever panic he'd been trapped in. And the words that John had choked out with what little air he *did* have...

If Arthur ever came face to face with Colm O'Driscoll any time soon, he was going to hang that man by his own entrails. Arthur just couldn't understand how John could still be involved with the O'Driscoll gang after everything they had done to him. Arthur had begun to hope that maybe he and Hosea could eventually talk John into leaving the O'Driscolls and joining them instead. Dutch might be a bit difficult to sway, given his feelings on Colm and any man who ran with him. But Hosea was hopeful, so Arthur had begun to hope as well...

All of that came crashing down when he and Charles came back with two good sized bucks tied to their horses to hear the O'Driscoll prisoner shouting bloody murder from the barn. They'd rushed in to find Micah beating John Marston half to death. Arthur might have just killed Micah for that if Charles hadn't been there to stop him.

Now... Dutch was *furious* because he and Hosea had gone behind his back... Keeping John's identity a secret from him... as Arthur knew he would be. Still, Arthur had never imagined that Dutch would ask... demand... he do something like *this* .

"You can't be serious!" Hosea cried, grabbing Dutch by the arm, looking almost as angry as Dutch right now.

"Do I *sound* like I'm joking!" Dutch shot back angrily, shaking off Hosea's hand, before turning his attention back to Arthur, "Arthur! I'm waiting!"

But Arthur couldn't move. He was frozen. Numb. The gun in his hand felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. He couldn't have lifted it if he tried. He was only broken from his paralysis when he heard a barely legible plea at his feet.

"Arthur... please..."

Arthur's eyes snapped from Dutch to John in an instant then. He could tell immediately that John wasn't begging for his own life. John was asking Arthur to shoot *him* . To spare the life of the man kneeling next to him. Maybe Arthur could have done it a few weeks ago. He probably wouldn't have even hesitated. Both John and Kieran would have been nothing

more to him than just another pair of O'Driscolls. Animals... as Dutch had called them. But things weren't so simple now... maybe they never were...

Kieran... he didn't mean much to Arthur. He'd only spoken to the boy a couple of times.

But it was enough to learn that he wasn't like most of the men who ran with Colm O'Driscoll. He wasn't a cold hearted killer. He was just a dumb kid who'd made the unfortunate mistake of getting mixed up with the wrong gang. John... John was a different story. He'd only been a CHILD when the O'Driscolls found him. He'd never had a chance. Arthur didn't know the whole story... wasn't sure he *wanted* to... but what he did know was that he'd been abused by Colm and his men most of his life. Arthur didn't know why John had never run away from them, given how badly he was treated, but... maybe he simply didn't know any *better*. Arthur's own father had beaten him nearly to death so many times, but it wasn't until the man was finally arrested that he'd even thought about trying to get away from the man. It wasn't until Dutch and Hosea took him in, becoming more like fathers to him than the man who shared his blood, that he realized things could be *different*.

Though as he looked to Dutch now, he almost didn't recognize the man who'd raised him.

Dutch had never looked at him like that before. He'd never seen Dutch so angry. So... disappointed. He'd gladly take whatever punishment Dutch decided to dish out for keeping things from him. Arthur deserved that. But this...

"I can't..." Arthur finally said, shaking his head helplessly.

"What do you mean you *can't* !" Dutch shouted back at him.

"This is *wrong* !" he cried. This went against everything they believed in. Arthur was no saint. Far from it. He'd killed plenty in his life. But he never killed *needlessly*. The Van der Linde gang didn't kill innocents... or people that weren't trying to kill them first. That's what he'd been taught. That's what he'd always believed in. Or at least, that's how it was *supposed* to be.

But no one else could see that. Arthur didn't even need to look at the faces gathered around him to know that they didn't understand. Pearson, Uncle, Charles and Lenny... they were probably the least hostile. Looking more confused by what was going on than anything. But Javier, Bill, and of course Micah... there was downright hate in their eyes as they looked at John... maybe even for *him* too. He honestly couldn't blame them. The O'Driscolls and the Van der Linde gang had been trying to kill each other for *years*. So why should now be any different? They didn't know John Marston... had no idea what the man had been through...

But Dutch... he *did* know. He'd called John Colm's *whore*. Meaning he knew *exactly* who John was... he just didn't care. Arthur couldn't even really blame Dutch for that either. After what Colm O'Driscoll had done to Annabelle... Colm had always been Dutch's Achilles heel from then on. But John would have had no part in that. He'd only been a child himself back then. Colm O'Driscoll had wronged John Marston far more than he had Dutch over the years. If there was anyone that Dutch should feel a hint of sympathy for...

"Dutch, please..." he begged. Arthur wasn't above that. Not for this. It might have only been his imagination, but he thought he saw something shift in Dutch's eyes. Some of the hostility drain away.

“If you do this, Dutch, you’re no better than Colm yourself,” Hosea’s soft words struck home. Arthur could see it. He began to hope that this might all end without bloodshed after all...

“Oh, to hell with this,” Arthur heard Micah say, and turned to watch in horror as the man drew his gun and aimed it at the back of John’s head.

“No!” Arthur’s shout was drowned out by the sound the gun going off...

But it wasn’t John’s body that slumped to the side with a hole through its skull. Because Kieran had reacted faster than Arthur and had thrown himself in between John and Micah before he had fired.

...

“Well... I guess that’s that then...” Micah remarked into the deafening silence that followed. It was probably a good thing that Arthur was still too shocked to react to that. Otherwise he might have put a bullet in Micah right then and there, with the very gun Dutch had ordered him to kill the O’Driscoll boy with.

Dutch recovered first and took control of the situation.

“Uncle. Mr. Pearson. Would you kindly take this O’Driscoll and tie him up in the barn. Get Reverend Swanson to see to him. I don’t want him dying just yet. I want a few words with him first. Mr. Escuella. Mr. Bell. Take care of... that...” Dutch said, referring to Kieran’s corpse.

As everyone else moved to obey Dutch’s orders, like it was business as usual, Arthur remained frozen in place. Frozen in shock. John seemed to be in just as much shock. Though when Uncle grabbed the boy to drag him away, it finally seemed to break John from his paralysis. John finally looked up from Kieran's body, and his expression shifted to pure hate... directed at Arthur...

Arthur could only watch him disappear, feeling completely numb. Until Dutch’s voice eventually drew his attention.

“Arthur!” he snapped, and Arthur slowly turned to face him.

“You gonna shoot me now too?” Arthur asked, his voice hollow. That actually made Dutch flinch slightly. But Arthur felt no satisfaction from it.

“No,” Dutch replied simply. Though his tone suggested that maybe he had thought about it, “You’re going to stay away from that O’Driscoll boy, do you hear me? At least until you get your head back on straight. I’m very disappointed in you Arthur.”

Arthur had nothing to say to that. He could tell Dutch was *waiting* for him to reply. When Arthur didn’t, Dutch simply shook his head and took his gun back from Arthur’s numb fingers. Then he turned and left Arthur and Hosea standing alone in the cold next to a wide patch of red snow.



## Chapter 10

Cold wind howled mercilessly through the decrepit buildings of Colter. The fire that Arthur had built flickered pitifully. The small flames barely offered any warmth, and threatened to go out with every bitter gust of wind. Arthur sat on his bedroll, hunched over the fire and huddled in his thick winter coat. His hat tipped low to shield his face as much as possible from the cold. It didn't really help. At this point his entire body felt mostly numb... though he couldn't be sure if it was from the harsh weather or leftover shock from what had happened.

After...

Arthur had only returned to 'his' room long enough to move his things out of it. Dutch hadn't said a word. Hadn't even looked at him. Not that he'd really expected the man to. That was probably for the best. Arthur didn't think he'd be able to control his actions if Dutch *had* said something to him right then. Hosea had simply watched him storm out with sad eyes.

Saying nothing, which was a little surprising. But he'd probably just assumed Arthur was moving into the smaller building with the other men in the gang, or even the larger space that currently housed the women and children.

But Arthur knew either of those options would have only ended badly. Even if he thought he could stand Micah or Bill's needling right now (which he knew he wouldn't without pulling his gun on one of them) he knew he wouldn't be welcome. Since Dutch had banned him from even being in the vicinity of John Marston, Arthur couldn't even sleep in the stable with the horses either.

All the intact and mostly habitable buildings in Colter had been claimed by the gang, so Arthur was left with the far less hospitable options on the outside of town. Barely able to be called shelter at all, as most of the buildings were missing large portions of walls or their entire roofs. He might as well have taken shelter out in the woods under a tree. The tent he'd set up on the snow covered floor offered far more protection than the crumbling walls that barely dampened the freezing wind.

It was a good thing he wasn't feeling all that tired, because if he tried to sleep, he would probably only end up freezing to death. Arthur snorted at the irony as he lifted the bottle in his hands to his chapped lips and took a long pull. The liquor burned down his throat and pooled warm into his stomach. The only real point of warmth in him right now.

Unfortunately he didn't have enough whiskey to get good and drunk like he wanted to right now. Definitely not enough to forget how that defenseless boy's head had exploded in a shower of gore, and painted the snow covered ground red. The horror he'd felt overshadowed by relief. Relief because it hadn't been *John* slumped over lifeless in the snow. Though that relief was short lived and guilt quickly followed. Aided along by the betrayed look John had leveled on him before he'd been dragged away... all because Arthur *hadn't* shot the younger man like John had obviously wanted him to.



Seeing it really made Arthur wonder how he hadn't recognized John from the very beginning. Those dark venom filled eyes had haunted Arthur's dreams for a long time. Guilt and shame made Arthur feel physically ill as remembered how he'd simply stood by and watched the boy being taken by several large men that hadn't cared whether they hurt him or not. Until he'd been unable to watch anymore... and turned away like a coward... simply leaving John Marston to his fate.

He'd let an innocent boy suffer, to save his own skin (well, Dutch and Hosea too), but hated himself ever since. No matter who he tried to help from that day on. No matter how many strangers he went out of his way to offer aid to... it was never enough. The guilt never went away. Finding John Marston again... it was almost like a second chance. Arthur was well aware there was nothing he could do to make things right... to make up for how John had suffered while he stood idly by... but he'd wanted to try. Needed to... Instead Arthur had failed the boy for the second time... and John hated him not because he'd pointed a gun at his head, but because Arthur had hesitated to pull the trigger...

It seemed Arthur could never do right by John Marston...

He heard the sound of approaching footsteps in the snow, but didn't bother to lift his head, even when the other stopped right in front of him.

"Arthur... you need to come inside. You're going to freeze to death out here."

Arthur gave a humorless laugh.

"Well, then I guess that's one less thing for you to worry about, Dutch," Arthur replied, lifted the bottle to his lips again, took a drink, and wiped away the drops that dribbled down his chin with the back of his hand.

Dutch sighed heavily and crouched down beside him, though Arthur still refused to meet his eyes.

"Arthur... I know you don't mean that. I know things... got a little out of hand... but..."

"Out of hand... that's one way of putting it..." Arthur snorted. Dutch frowned and was silent for several long moments before he spoke again.

"I just don't understand why you feel so... strongly about all this. He's an *O'Driscoll*," Dutch said, as if things were really that simple, "You were never responsible for that boy... and you still aren't. You barely knew him then, and you barely know him now, Arthur..."

Arthur closed his eyes and sighed. He almost wished that he'd been wrong and Dutch really didn't remember John Marston from all them years ago. Maybe then he could have forgiven the man for being so damned heartless about the whole thing. Maybe it was the liquor.

Maybe it was the genuine confusion he heard in Dutch's voice. Maybe it was the first time in a long time Dutch seemed ready to listen... or was at least pretending to... but Arthur decided to answer honestly.

"Because... we're the same... him and me," Arthur whispered softly. Dutch frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“He could have been me... just as easily as I could have been him, Dutch.”

Arthur had been barely fifteen when Hosea and Dutch had found him. He'd still had the bruises of his back from the last time his father had whipped him with a belt. He'd just watched the man swing... and good riddance... but it had left him an orphan with nothing. No one. If fate had been less kind to him... Arthur could just as easily have taken up with Colm O'Driscoll's gang... or god forbid... with someone even worse.

Dutch and Hosea had saved him. Had taken him in and they'd become his family. They'd given him a place where he could be safe. A home. They'd taught him to read and write. How to shoot and defend himself. How to survive... But more importantly they'd taught him how to *live*. They'd taught him how to reign in the anger he felt at the world so it wouldn't control him, like it had his father, and how to channel it into something more productive. Life since then hadn't *all* been good, but it was far less bad than it *could* have been.

But if things had gone a bit differently in their lives...

“He didn't deserve what happened to him anymore than I did... so why did I get saved when he...” Arthur asked, finally lifting his head to look at Dutch. There was understanding and a deep sadness in the older man's eyes.

“Arthur, listen to me... what happened to that boy was... unfortunate. But it *wasn't* your fault. You *have* to let it go,” Dutch said, and Arthur looked away again to stare at the flames in front of him, long enough to convince himself that the ache in his eyes was the cause of that.

“What are you going to do to him?” Arthur finally forced himself to ask, even though he was afraid of the answer. Dutch was quiet for a long time.

“If he tells me what I want to know... as soon as the thaw comes and we can leave, we'll cut him loose. Will that make you happy?” Dutch asked. Some of the harshness from before had returned to his tone, proof enough that Dutch had not completely forgiven him yet. Arthur lifted his head to look at Dutch in the eye anyway. Then after a long moment he nodded.

“Good. It's settled then. Now come inside,” Dutch said. He stood and brushed the snow from his knees before heading back towards the camp. Arthur watched him go with a heavy heart. Because despite what Dutch might think, he wasn't an idiot.

And he knew when Dutch was lying to him.

---

Life around camp was far less... dramatic the next several days. Thank god. The snow had pretty much stopped falling and even though the nights were still bitterly cold, the days were

starting to get warmer. The thaw would probably be on them any day now. They were all eager to leave, for one reason or another.

Arthur tried to keep to himself during that time as much as possible. Tried, being the word. Somehow he wasn't surprised when Charles came up to him while he was in the middle of saddling up his horse to go hunting.

"Dutch asked me to go with you," the other man explained, though he didn't really need to. Arthur merely sighed.

"Course he did," Arthur replied, resigned. Charles looked like he was expecting him to argue, but Arthur merely waited as the other man went to get Taima. When Charles was ready, Arthur mounted up and rode out without a word. Charles followed him in silence for a long way. He held his peace for a lot longer than Arthur had expected him to.

"What's going on, Arthur?"

"We're going hunting. Thought you knew that," Arthur replied blandly, and received a scowl from Charles in reply.

"That's not what I meant," Charles said shortly, the 'and you know it' went unsaid. When Arthur remained quiet, the man sighed heavily, "What's going on between you, Dutch, and Hosea? It's got everyone on edge... and that night... with that O'Driscoll boy... what was that all about?"

"Don't really know where to start," Arthur responded, feeling tired of the conversation already.

"How about at the beginning? Who are the O'Driscolls anyway?"

"Huh... I guess we haven't had much contact with them since you've been around. Colm O'Driscoll and Dutch... go way back. A proper blood feud. Dutch killed Colm's brother... and Colm retaliated. Our two gangs have been killing each other ever since, and it don't look like that's going to stop any time soon," Arthur explained wearily. Charles watched Arthur carefully for several moments. Probably processing the new information.

"What's the story with the boy we've got tied up in the barn? You were... trying to protect him... even though he's with the O'Driscoll gang?"

"It's... complicated..." Arthur said softly. Charles remained quiet, waiting. So Arthur told him everything. How he'd first met John Marston. What he'd witnessed Colm's men doing to the boy. The intense guilt he felt when they'd left John with the O'Driscolls. By the time Arthur had finished speaking, Charles looked as sick as Arthur felt recounting everything.

"My god..." the man finally whispered, shaking his head slightly, "What about the other boy? The one who Micah killed?"

Arthur shook his head.

“His name was Kieran, that's all I know... Wrong place, wrong time,” Arthur replied with a slight shrug. Charles hummed softly, watching Arthur carefully.

“What are you planning, Arthur?”

“I haven't decided yet...” he said, and Charles blinked in surprise at him. He was probably expecting Arthur to deny he was planning anything at all.

“You know they'll kill you if you try anything...” Charles said carefully. Arthur knew that ‘they’ could very well mean Charles himself. Arthur nodded.

“I know,” he replied simply.

“Why would you do that? Why would you even tell me anything if...” Charles asked, clearly confused.

“I dunno... maybe I just... wanted someone to understand,” he admitted. Charles was quiet again for a long time.

“Arthur... it doesn't need to come to that. Just... talk to Dutch. He'll understand...” Charles said. Arthur wondered if he was imagining the doubt he heard in the other man's voice.

“Sure...” Arthur replied anyway. Even though they both knew he wouldn't.

In the end, they brought back another deer and a few decent rabbits for the stew. Pearson was appreciative, but there was a noticeable apprehension in the other man's demeanor while Arthur was around. So Arthur simply dropped off their finds and left again as quickly as possible.

He filled in the rest of the hours of the day chopping and carrying firewood. But he didn't miss the concerned to downright wary, looks Molly, Mary-Beth, Karen, and Abigail gave him when he passed them by. Or the outright hostility from Bill, Javier, and Micah... Like Arthur had betrayed them... or like they were waiting for him to. Everyone else pretty much shied away from him as well. Confused, and no doubt unsettled, by the atmosphere that lingered around the camp like a bad stench.

It felt like everyone was holding their breath as they waited for the ax to fall.

That night Arthur sat up late writing in his journal. He started by chronicling everything that had happened since Blackwater, what he knew about the ferry heist that had gone wrong, and their escape... When that was done, he continued to fill the pages with whatever came to his mind at the time. His childhood. What little he remembered of his mother, and the things he wished he could forget about his father. About the time when the ‘gang’ had only consisted of him, Hosea, and Dutch. Things were so much simpler then. He wrote about Eliza and Isaac... more people he couldn't save. Lastly he wrote about John, the time when he'd first met the boy, and more recent events.

He didn't usually do this. Dwell so much on the past. Maybe he was trying to purge some of the regret he felt into the pages. Maybe he was trying to punish himself by dredging up all

his past, and current, mistakes. Maybe it was a little of both.

Maybe he was just trying to justify what he was going to do...

## Chapter 11

It was late in the night, closer to morning, when the smell of smoke came.

Half asleep (and in the middle of taking a piss when he was supposed to be on watch) it took Bill Williamson far longer than it should have to realize something was wrong. That the smell wasn't due to the new cigarette he'd just lit. That the ruckus the horses had begun making in the barn was far from normal.

"Shit! Fuck!" he cursed, frantically doing up his trousers with one hand as he grabbed his rifle and ran to the other side of the camp. Praying he was wrong...

Only to find the barn quickly being engulfed in flames while the horses screamed in terror inside.

Fuck!

"Fire! Fire in the barn! I need some help, god damn it!"

Some of the gang had already begun to emerge from the buildings even before his shouting, drawn out by the increasing ruckus. But the grogginess of being woken in the middle of the night was quickly burned away when the gravity of the situation became clear.

"The horses! Get the horses out of the barn!" Dutch shouted, spurring everyone into action. The barn itself was a lost cause, but some started throwing buckets of snow onto the flames in an attempt to slow the spread while Arthur, Charles, Javier, Micah, and Dutch ran inside the burning building.

The horses were in a panic. Rearing and kicking, and crowding away from the growing flames as much as they could. There was no hope of calming them. That could be done later. The most important thing now was getting them out of the burning barn before it was too late.

The doors to the barn were left thrown open, in the hopes that most of the horses would run out on their own. Several did, and those left outside took on the task of rounding them up. Dutch grabbed the Count and managed to lead the frantic Arabian outside. Bill grabbed a couple of the draft horses since Brown Jack had already made it outside. Arthur managed to force several of the horses to run out on their own, before rushing back inside. The old building was almost completely engulfed in flames when they finally managed to get the last of the horses out.

"Is everyone all right?" Hosea shouted. There were murmurs of assent even though everyone still seemed shaken up by what had happened. Though it became obvious rather quickly that one of their number was missing, "Arthur! Where's Arthur?"

"Where's the prisoner!" Micah piped in immediately after.

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“You’re out of your goddamn mind!” John wheezed, his voice barely a croak due to all the dark smoke he’d inhaled into his lungs before they’d made it out into the open. He doubled over, coughing roughly, trying to catch his breath. Only for Arthur to grab him by the arm and haul him back upright. John snarled, “Get the hell off me!”

But Arthur refused to let him go. All but dragging John through the woods away from the burning barn. Away from Colter. Away from the Van der Linde gang.

“We need to keep moving!” Arthur insisted. Leaving John little choice but to follow since he didn’t have the strength to free himself from the near bruising grip Arthur had on him. His weak legs barely able to keep him upright. He would have fallen several times over if not for Arthur yanking him back to his feet every single time John stumbled. Eventually they made it to a small clearing... where a familiar brown and white Tennessee walker waited.

John stopped cold.

“What the fuck... did you... did you *plan* all this?” John hissed, staring at Arthur in disbelief. When he’d woken the barn was already nearly completely full of smoke. The horses had almost trampled him in their panic, trying to get away from the flames. John just took it as another sign that the entire world hated him. It would be just his luck to die in a fire, tied to a damned post, when he’d already been waiting to have a bullet put in him once the Van der Lindes were done trying to make him talk. Fate really did have a sick sense of humor...

He hadn’t expected Arthur to appear through the smoke and flames like some kind of fucking white knight. For the man to shove a wet cloth over John’s face before he quickly went to work cutting him free from the ropes binding him. For Arthur to yank him to his feet and all but carry John out of the barn, unnoticed by the other Van der Lindes too busy dealing with the horses.

“What does it look like?” Arthur grunted back. He took off the satchel he was wearing and shoved it at John. It felt heavy... loaded with supplies. John stared at Arthur with wide eyes.

“It looks like you’re being a fucking idiot,” John replied, and to his surprise Arthur laughed.

“You’re probably right. Now get the hell out of here! We’ve only got a few minutes...” he ordered. John only continued to stare at him.

“Why are you doing this?”

“They were going to kill you,” Arthur replied simply, as though it explained everything.

“So what? Since when do you care about killing *O’Driscolls* ?” John parroted Micah’s words to him, and Arthur actually flinched. If he didn’t know better, John would say he looked guilty.

“It’s... it’s complicated. I’m trying to... Just go... please...” Arthur said. Not bothering to explain himself. Maybe he didn’t have the words. Maybe they just didn’t have the time. John frowned. He knew he should just do what Arthur said. Why look a gift horse in the mouth? If the rest of the Van der Linde gang caught up with them, he was as good as dead... and probably so was Arthur... But...

“Tell me why!” John growled and they stared at each other for several long moments before Arthur finally spoke.

“Because I didn’t help you before...” he all but whispered, and John frowned in confusion before realization dawned. He finally remembered. The *first* time he’d met Arthur... Arthur Morgan. Not on the snow covered cliff... but years ago.

“Are you... are you fucking serious?” John breathed in disbelief.

“John, for fucks sake... just go!”

John didn’t argue again. He walked unsteadily over to the horse, but turned to look back at Arthur before getting on.

“I don’t know what you’re expecting out of this, Arthur... but if you’re looking for forgiveness... you ain’t gonna get it from me...” John said quietly. Arthur said nothing. He merely nodded in understanding. John moved to get on the horse... only to freeze at the sound of a cocking gun and harsh words.

“Stop right there.”

---

Fuck.

Arthur slowly turned around with his hands raised to show that he was unarmed. He carefully put himself in between John and the gun pointed at him. Gambling that if Charles had not pulled the trigger already, then he probably wouldn’t... maybe...

“Get out of here, John...” he repeated, hoping that this time the younger man would just listen to him. Charles frowned.

“Don’t do this Arthur...”

“It’s already done,” Arthur replied calmly. Or at least it *would* be if John would just get on the fucking horse! They were running out of time...

“Arthur you’re not thinking clearly. If you let him go, they’ll *kill* you. But we can still make things right if you just...”



“Just what? Talk to Dutch? I’ve talked. He ain’t listening. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m not thinking straight... but this whole thing is wrong and I... We’re supposed to be different! I just can’t...” Arthur shook his head. He couldn’t explain it. Charles was right. He was probably out of his goddamn mind. But if Dutch really wanted to kill John Marston... then he was going to have to go through Arthur first.

Charles slowly lowered his gun. Arthur felt a flicker of hope in his chest.

“This means that much to you?” the man asked softly.

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation. Charles sighed and holstered his weapon. Arthur let out a sigh of relief. He looked over his shoulder to John, who still stood there watching them both with wide eyes. Just what was Arthur going to have to do to make the stubborn bastard...

“Arthur!” John suddenly shouted in alarm.

Arthur turned back around just in time for Charles to sink a knife into his belly. At first it didn’t even hurt... which almost seemed funny as he looked down to find the front of his shirt slowly turning red. It wasn’t until he stumbled and went down to his knees, clutching at the blade still sticking out of him, that the agony finally hit him, leaving him light headed and gasping for breath. But then John was there, easing him down to the ground far more gently than Arthur could have otherwise managed.

“You stupid son of a bitch...” John was saying, his voice wavering slightly, as he reached for the knife.

“If you take that out now, he’ll bleed to death in minutes,” Charles remarked almost casually, “But if it’s done carefully, and he’s treated promptly, he should live.”

“Wha... why... why would you do this!” John shouted, still practically cradling Arthur. Charles seemed unfazed by the outburst.

“I didn’t do it. You did. While Arthur was trying to recapture you after you escaped.”

Arthur finally understood where this was going and laughed weakly. He regretted it almost immediately due to the new flare of pain that ripped through his guts even that small movement caused.

“It’s okay, John... It’ll be okay... just go...” Arthur said, doing his best to pry John’s hands off of him, though he was largely unsuccessful. It seemed like John didn’t want to let him go... it eased something in Arthur’s heart. Or maybe that was just blood loss...

“Arthur...”

“Go. Don’t come back. If I see you again, I’ll kill you,” Charles said plainly, earning him a deadly glare from John... but Arthur decided that was fair. Charles had already done more than enough... damn... he’d never thought he’d feel thankful for someone stabbing him in the gut...

John looked down at him and frowned.

“This... doesn’t change anything...” he said softly. Arthur chuckled despite knowing how much it would hurt.

“Get the hell out of here...” Arthur replied, and John finally, *finally*, did. He got on Arthur’s horse and rode away. Arthur let his head fall back against the snow covered ground with a sigh of relief.

“Thank you...” he whispered softly when Charles knelt down beside him. Charles snorted softly.

“Don’t thank me yet... I still have to cauterize the wound...”

Arthur’s scream was still ringing in his own ears when Dutch and the rest of the gang arrived.

---

When Arthur woke again he was in the back of a wagon. He felt like utter hell, and the constant jostling was doing him no favors. A soft groan of discomfort left his lips before he could help himself.

“Serves you right. After the stunt you pulled,” Hosea’s harsh tone broke through the fog surrounding his brain and he slowly blinked his eyes open.

“Hosea...” he whispered, a weak cough escaping him, making him wince. The older man’s hand slid beneath his head and helped lift it.

“Here, drink this,” Hosea said. He still sounded angry. Really angry. The kind of angry Hosea only got when Arthur had given him a good scare. Which was why Arthur did as he was told, drinking from the tin cup Hosea pressed against his lips, despite the way the smell of whatever was in it curled his nose.

“What the hell is that,” Arthur wheezed, trying not to gag, as Hosea eased him back down again.

“Something for the pain... not that you deserve it,” Hosea replied, only sounding moderately less harsh. He fussed slightly with the blanket covering Arthur before speaking again, “Since I’m sure you’re already thinking it, and I don’t feel like hearing you ask. John got away. Dutch sent some of the boys out searching for him in the woods, but they didn’t find him.”

Arthur let out a small sigh of relief.

“That’s too bad...” he replied, and Hosea snorted.

“Oh please... you’re just lucky that Charles is a much better liar than you are,” Hosea said, his voice dropping low enough that even Arthur had trouble hearing him, “Dutch fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Though seeing you screaming and bleeding out with a knife in your belly was pretty damned convincing. It scared Dutch enough I think he’s willing to defend you and Charles’ word regardless of what he really believes.”

Arthur felt a faint flicker of guilt in his chest hearing that. If only it hadn’t come to that in the first place...

“Sorry...” Arthur whispered. Hosea sighed heavily and his fingers gently through Arthur’s hair, brushing back some of the sweaty strands from his forehead.

“I hope you feel it was worth it... Regardless, it’s done now. John Marston... It’s *done*, Arthur. Understand me?” Hosea said firmly. Arthur sighed and nodded. He couldn’t exactly expect Hosea to feel otherwise, given everything that had happened. Losing Hosea as an ally... at least when it came to this... hurt. But it was over now, at least.

He’d probably never see John Marston again anyway... and that was probably for the best. For all of them.

---

By the time John rode into Six Point Cabin he was looking pretty worse for wear. Dirty, bloody, and covered in bruises. He was barely able to stay upright on the horse, his exhaustion was so complete. He managed to get off the horse without falling... barely. But none of the O’Driscolls that had seen him ride in bothered to help him as he slowly limped towards the cabin itself. Not that John had really expected them to.

The door swung open and Colm O’Driscoll stepped out. He looked John up and down like something he’d scraped off his boot. John stood there under the scrutiny, his head lowered, waiting... Finally Colm turned to the man nearest him.

“Take him to the medical tent. Get him cleaned up,” he said before turning to head back inside. John let out the breath he’d been holding.

Their doctor... such as he was... didn’t have a kind touch in him. But he was efficient and mostly knew what he was doing. He redid the stitches on John’s face that had been broken open, and bandaged his various wounds. John cleaned himself up as much as possible from the bucket of cold water he’d been given, and dressed in a clean pair of clothes.

He was quick about it. He knew better than to keep Colm waiting. Eventually he limped back to the cabin and knocked softly on the door.

“Get in here!” Colm’s harsh voice made John flinch slightly, but he obeyed. Pushing the door open and walking inside. Other than Colm and himself, the room was empty. That

could be a good... or bad... thing. All depended on whether Colm decided he wanted to kill John himself or not...

John swallowed and limped over to stand in front of where Colm sat in a chair. He noticed the older man eyeing his face with a deep frown. Colm had always liked his face... but he probably didn't like it too much now.

"Where have you been, boy?" Colm finally demanded.

"I... got lost in the storm. Attacked by wolves. I was... found... by your old 'friend' Dutch Van der Linde," John explained. That got Colm's attention.

"Dutch huh... what did he want?"

"To know what you were doing on the mountain. About the train we were going to rob. I didn't tell him nothing..." John answered, and Colm hummed softly.

"We missed out on a lot of money on that train when you didn't show up, John," Colm said in a low voice that made a chill roll down John's spine. He knew he wasn't going to be easily forgiven for that...

"I know..."

Colm hummed again, and fished out a cigarette from his pocket. John waited, swaying slightly where he stood, while Colm lit it and took several pulls off before he spoke again.

"So... how did you manage to get away from old Dutch looking like a bear chewed you up and shit you out?"

"Arthur Morgan," John said, and Colm raised an eyebrow at that.

"How so?"

"He remembered me. From before. Seems to think I'm some kind of *innocent* in need of saving. He let me go," John replied. Colm threw back his head and laughed at that.

"Well, well, well... we might be able to use that to our advantage..." Colm said, and John could tell the older man already had a plan brewing. A plan that would no doubt bring down Dutch Van der Linde and the rest of his gang once and for all.

John smirked.

## End Notes

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