

## Up Strawberry Way

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# Up Strawberry Way

by [grantaire\\_dont\\_care](#)

## Summary

After all that trouble in Rhodes, Charles takes Arthur on a much-needed hunting trip away from the gang and the bounties on their heads. They head away from all civilization, but trouble seems to follow them wherever they go.

## Notes

This is a continuation of a series, but can be read independently. Please enjoy, and leave a comment if you liked it!

## Bard's Pass

Arthur stood near the cooking fire, two mugs of coffee in his hands and already smelling like horse. Charles knew Beirut and Taima would be brushed smooth and tacked up already without sparing a glance to the hitching posts, and the wasn't wasn't even fully up yet. He shook his head, hiding a fond smile.

"How's that new horse treating you, anyways? I saw you sold that shire." Charles busied himself packing sachets of dried herbs and canned food in his saddlebag. One could never be too careful in the mountains. Arthur looked up from his coffee, metal cup cradled gently in one hand. He smiled, the corner of his eyes creasing at the mention of his horse.

"Oh, this new one's real fine. That shire was strong enough but he was a real bastard. I think he hated me more than I did." He looked to the Hungarian half bred hitched across camp, who was giving it her best to graze around her bit. "Naw, Beirut's a good horse, considerin' the circumstances."

Charles gave him a questioning look over his packing.

"I got her off one of them Lemoyne raiders outside of town. They tried to hold me up while I was on foot, so I relieved him of his ride." Arthur grinned around the rim of his mug, steam curling up around his face. Combined with the mist off the river, the gunslinger seemed to be no more than a mirage. "He won't be missin' it anytime soon, don't worry."

"I wasn't." Charles snorted, tossing his bag over his shoulder. "You ready?"

"Been rarin' to go for days." The gunslinger started walking towards the horses, falling in step beside him. Arthur handed the other tin cup of coffee to Charles, who took it with a smile, and a murmured thanks. It was black and sweet, warm against his hand. They both skirted around the sleeping Uncle in their path, who seemed to have lost his way to his bedroll in the depths of a bottle. Someone had thrown a horse blanket over him, but he snored staunchly on, dead to the world. They were quiet while they walked through camp, lest they wake some hungover fool and incur their wrath.

Charles couldn't help but smile as they got to their horses, all tacked up and shining, free of that red Rhodes dust. Taima deigned to lift her head from the shorn grass, nickering lowly at him in greeting. Or in search of treats, more like. He patted the side of her neck fondly, untying her reins from the hitching post. He saw Arthur move out of the corner of his eye, drawing something from his pocket and feeding Beirut. Taima flicker her ears up and strained forward, towards Arthur.

"You'll spoil them rotten," Charles chided, with no real head behind it. It wasn't the first time he'd caught Arthur sneaking Taima peppermints while he tended his own horse. It probably wouldn't be the last, either. Arthur ducked his head and fussed with his saddlebags. Guilty as charged. "You're as bad a Keiran when it comes to those horses."

"Now you take that back-" Arthur scowled as he mounted Beirut, acting affronted. Charles

smirked and swung himself up onto Taima, urging her onto the forest path before Arthur could wake the whole camp.

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“I think we should avoid that valley by Hanging Dog Ranch if we go up that way,”

The two of them had ridden in comfortable silence for a few hours while they picked their way up the river to avoid the Heartlands, and anywhere close to Valentine. The sky was clear, and the sun beat down on them, though the breeze off the water cut the heat, if only slightly. They had at least another day of riding until they were even near Strawberry, so Charles wondered what made Arthur speak up then.

“Alright,” Charles shifted in his saddle, leather creaking under him. He winced at the sound. He’d have to oil them down when they stopped to make camp. “Something up there?”

Arthur sat back, hands loose on the reins. He was still in the loose clothes they all had grown accustomed to wearing in the heat of the Lemoyne spring, coming on summer. Well, maybe the others had gotten used to it, but Charles was always caught off his guard whenever Arthur stepped out of his bunk with his thin shirt unbuttoned low, and his sleeves pushed up around his elbows, baring his forearms. After that trek through the Grizzlies, it was a bit... different is all.

“Just, last time I was up there after a lead, I went thinkin’ that place was abandoned.”

“Someone was there?”

“Yeah,” Arthur took his hat in one hand, running his hand through his hair distractedly. “And weren’t no ranchers either. Full to the brim with armed men and supplies. I don’t know if they were O’Driscolls or not, but a group as big as them definitely had guards and patrols out. I wasn’t sticking around for long.”

Charles frowned, thoughtful. “If they weren’t O’Driscolls, when who could they be? It’s too far north for any of the hicks here. They stick close to home, if anything.”

Arthur shrugged, but he didn’t seem happy. I don’t know, that’s why I was cautious. There were at least two dozen of ‘em that I could see, and if they’re Colm’s boys then I definitely didn’t want to get caught up in there on my own.”

“Good thing you’re not alone this time, then.” Charles didn’t look over, but he saw the line of Arthur’s shoulders relax, slightly.

“I guess so. Though if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather keep my hunting trip to the animal kingdom.”

They stopped for the night on the banks of the Dakota river, past the crossing. They were official in West Elizabeth now, so hopefully Arthur could breathe a little easier with a state border between him and his bounty. After taking care of the horses and hitching them to nearby trees, they settled down to eat, a small campfire between them. Arthur had some salted meat tucked away, and Charles warmed up some canned vegetables in the coals,

neither in the mood to hunt or fish in the near darkness. They'd get their chance at that plenty in the coming days. It was no feast, but it suited the two of them just fine, eating quietly under the stars.

Afterwards, Charles fetched him leather working tools from his bag, and his saddle from over by Taima. She whickered softly at him, earning a fond pat. Once she realized he wasn't going to slip her an oatcake, she turned back around, dutifully ignoring him. Arthur truly was a bad influence on her. He returned to the fire to work in its flickering light, frowning over the cracks in some of the straps. The leather was suffering under the Lemoyne humidity, not helped by the decreased use he'd had for it these past few weeks. With the gang's situation as it was, Charles didn't think he'd gone five miles away from camp since they'd landed in Rhodes.

So he worked oil into the cracked leather, balancing the saddle across his knee, listening to the fire snap and pop on the damp wood. Arthur had his nose in that journal of his, scratching away in the dim light with his forehead creased with concentration. Charles always wondered what was between those pages. Was he writing a diary, a ledger, the next great american novel? Charles couldn't say, and was smart enough not to snoop unduly.

One time Bill, drunk as ever, sauntered up to the gunslinger at camp one night, while Arthur was sitting by his lonesome at the scout fire, in his journal as usual. From what those that were there said, Bill made a clumsy swipe for the book, and was flat on his face with a mouth full of dirt before anyone could blink. By the time Charles had even heard the commotion Arthur was stomping back to his bunk, a thunderous look on his face and the sound of Bill's cursing behind him. The journal hadn't made an appearance in camp for weeks, and Williamson stayed well away in the interim. One of his rare moments of wisdom.

"So we avoid Little Creek River," Charles started, hands working at his saddle. Arthur's head shot up, wearing a startled expression like he'd been caught doing something embarrassing. Charles raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry," Arthur cleared his throat, tucking his journal away in his satchel. "Lost in thought a little there. I'm not used to traveling with someone else so much anymore, I guess." He shrugging, looking into the fire sheepishly. His eyes darted up for a second, catching the light and Charles' attention, only for a moment.

Arthur looked flushed in the heat of the campfire, despite the damp wood and cool night air. A bead of sweat rolled down the line on his neck to the dip in his throat, disappearing into the curls of hair that only just peeked out from his opened collar. Distantly, Charles wondered if the girls at camp were purposefully misplacing the top three buttons of Arthur's shirts. It was an epidemic, truly. He was feeling a little hot himself. Must be the mugginess of the riverbank. Right.

"I was thinkin' maybe we'd hug the southern trails by Mount Shann. It'd be close enough to the valley for the game, but far enough from that ranch to avoid trouble."

Charles hummed thoughtfully, rubbing his chin with his clean hand. Arthur's eyes followed it, seemingly without his knowledge. "There's a trapper up near there, right?"

“Yeah, he’s got camp set up nearby. Well,” Arthur mused, “Close enough, anyways.”

“Good. We can drop off some of the skins there, make some coin. We won’t be able to carry everything back, and the camp needs money more than anything right now.”

There was a distant look in Arthur’s eye. “That’s a good plan. Guess there ain’t much of a rush then. To get back right away, I mean.”

“Guess so.” Charles didn’t say ‘that’s the point, Arthur,’. He didn’t have to. The gunslinger knew. Just like he knew Charles was sparing his pride by not saying it. If they were lucky, there wouldn’t be any bounty hunters looking for them anywhere in West Elizabeth. Hired men like that rarely crossed state lines to chase bounties, even if they knew enough to want to. The two of them had time to let the heat die down, giving Arthur some peace of mind after the last few weeks of chaos. Last new days, even. Charles could still see the ring of bruises and rope burn around Arthur’s neck, shifting in the flickering light. If the worst they had to deal with up here were wolves and O’Driscolls, Charles would gladly take his chances.

But he knew how Arthur worried. “You think Dutch will keep things in town under control?” Charles heaved the saddle up off his lap, laying it out on the ground to soak in the oils before morning. “Until we get back, at least.”

Arthur snorted and leaned forwards, elbows pressed against his knees. The campfire washed him in warm light and he closed his eyes in it for a moment. His hair and lashes shone like gold reflected. “Best ask if Hosea will.” Eyes still closed, the gunslinger smiled to himself. “He’s the one with his hands on the reins over there, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“I picked up on that pretty fast, yeah. They always been like that?”

Arthur opened his eyes. “Dutch’n Hosea? Oh yeah, as long as I’ve known ‘em. I’ve been with them forever, but those two got a way with each other, I don’t even fully understand it half the time.” he shrugged. “It’s like a whole ‘nother language or somethin’.”

The more tired Arthur got, the more pronounced his accent. Charles always thought it was funny, especially at camp when they were all drinking, to see how far into the night it would take for Arthur to start slurring sentences into single, long words. It wasn’t unintelligible like John or loud like Bill, just amusing to hear the drawl take over.

Charles huffed, pulling himself out of his train of thought. “That I believe. If anyone else tried to speak to Dutch the way Hosea does, they’d find themselves a vulture’s supper.”

“Well that’s one way to put it,” Arthur was shaking his head and grinning down at the embers of the campfire. “You’ve sure got a way with words, Mr. Smith.”

“That’s definitely the first time I’ve been accused of that.”

Arthur laughed at that, finally tilting his head up and meeting Charles’ eye. “Now I don’t believe that for a second- Charmer like you. Those bargirls in Valentine didn’t stand a chance-”

Charles snorted louder than he intended. He and Javier had been a little drunker than what was acceptable at noon on a thursday, but that was after they'd all rolled in from Horseshoe Overlook, after being cooped up for weeks. It hadn't been his finest moment, he'll admit, especially with the spectacular bar fight that started soon after. "You know Taima's the only one for me."

Hiding a yawn poorly behind a fist, Arthur leaned back. "She's a handful alright. Beirut's a lamb next to her."

"Sure cowboy. Spoiling her won't make her like you more. She's just using you."

They quickly devolved into an argument about horses that lingered until the fire had burned out, and the moon was high overhead. Charles fell asleep with his pistol under his bedroll, listening to the Dakota river push up against its banks.

# Little River Valley

## Chapter Summary

Things start to heat up, and Charles and Arthur run into some unexpected visitors.

## Chapter Notes

Arthur's PoV this chapter, I'm going to try switching it up since he's so fun to write!

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

Arthur couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at ease with the world as he did those first two days in the forests of West Elizabeth. After he and Charles had packed up their camp at Bard's Pass, they dug their heels in and headed due north, horses nearly dancing up the trail. It was a relief to feel the biting winds come down off Mt. Shann, cooling the sweat on Arthur's brow and turning his breath to white puffs in the air. Coats and gloves were taken out from their packs as they marched on. The thick blue fabric of his coat was a familiar weight that Arthur allowed himself to sink into it, settled way back in the saddle.

He'd been so wound up these past few weeks -- first with all their running around, then with self-imposed house arrest - that if he stayed put one day longer he might've just snapped. Arthur eyed his travel companion, the one to thank for their impromptu hunting trip. Charles had noticed how wound tight he'd been when no one else had, like he noticed everything, for better or worse. A part of Arthur burned with embarrassment to know that his weakness, his discomfort had been so obvious that Charles felt like he had to step in. *You're getting soft, old man.*

But Charles wasn't cruel, didn't tease or hold it over his head, he'd tried to spare Arthur his pride. He kept the reason for their absence vague without outright lying, which would've been an exercise in futility. Dutch'n them at camp could sniff out lies quicker than anything' - takes a liar to know one, after all.

Now that they were out here under pine trees, in air that had *bite* to it rather than soupy humidity, Arthur felt like he could breathe again. It felt good to be back on Beirut without being on the lookout for a chase, and the Hungarian Half Bred could feel his renewed energy. She tossed her mane energetically despite the long ride, keeping easy pace with Taima on her long legs. She seemed just as happy to get out of the heat as he was.

Arthur weren't used to the company either, but it was nice not being alone. Just this once. Charles was, as always, a good riding companion. They didn't talk much, but the quiet



between them was comfortable, not stilted. Arthur didn't feel the itch to fill the silence with small talk as he sometimes did, fumbling over his words and cursing at himself. He managed to look a fool without needing to open his mouth anyway, he thought wryly, tilting his hat to avoid a stubborn ray of sun that was set on blinding him.

They picked their way through the foothills and pine forests for the better part of the second day, finally stopping north of the valley to water the horses in the river. It was nearly a stream so far up, but the water was fresh, and cold from snowmelt. Arthur rocked back on his heels, fingers itching for his journal as he took in the view. It was the best one this far east, in his opinion. The way the dark forests funneled for miles until it finally opened out - into a sprawling sun-soaked valley ringed on all sides by the Grizzlies. This time of year the mountain heather and burdock was blooming in full force, too, blanketing the clearing in purple and cut through with the gleaming Little River. It was nice to look at even on maps, the line of the river twisting like a snake up to the mountain peaks.

"I got challenged to a horse race here once," Arthur said suddenly, the view sparking an odd memory he'd half forgotten. Charles paused in the middle of taking out one of his hand-rolled cigarettes, so fragrant that Arthur could smell it half a dozen paces away. "From here all the way to Owanjila."

"Oh yeah?" there was amusement hidden in the low rumble of Charles' voice, and in the flash of his teeth. "Did you win?"

Arthur snorted, tossing over a box of matches that rattled when Charles caught it out of the air. A quick nod of thanks. "Naw, it was some rich feller with a new horse to show off and somethin' to prove. That big shire I had couldn't keep up and he could tell. Probably figured me for a hot-headed hick he could feel good about beatin'."

Charles raised an eyebrow, striking a match and holding it up behind his cupped hand. "So...?"

"So I robbed him, what do you take me for?"

Charles chuckled, shaking his head as he fought against the wind to light up.

"Tied that expensive Nakota of his to my saddle and took off with her." Arthur peered down the path, seeing if he could spot the exact place it went down- it hadn't been too far away. "That little thing was fast, I'll give him that. Spirited too, she fought me like the devil all the way to Valentine. He'd been treatin' her bad though, beating her, the like. Spurred her bloody, poor thing - I'm glad I didn't race 'im, might've killed her the way it was going. Sold her to a farmer near town, needed a good horse for his daughter. Probably being spoiled rotten and getting fat as we speak."

A puff of smoke curled around Charles' face. He was smiling awful fond, at Arthur. Seeing that made his chest ache somethin' fierce, so he turned back to the water. "You're always surprising me, Arthur."

And well, he didn't rightly know how to answer that.

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Only a day had passed in Little River Valley before their luck changed with the wind. An unseasonable cold front blew down from the mountains on the dawn of the second day. The sudden change threw all the game in a right awful mood; most of them retreated back into the forests and hills for shelter. The bighorns all but scattered into the mountains, and the pronghorns moved too quickly and skittishly to bother chasing. That left a few herds of deer and the odd group of elk braving the biting wind and clouds, greedy for new spring greens after the long winter. They clumped by the river, one or two always on dutiful watch.

Arthur cursed at his rotten luck. Figured that even the weather would turn against him the second he got a moment away. Charles was as unruffled as ever, settled down in the pinestraw and leaves on the tree line by Arthur, just out of sight of whatever game remained in the clearing. A pile of arrows grew steadily beside Charles - he'd insisted on using their bows instead of rifles since they were in no rush. *And you need the practice*, he had deadpanned, probably only half joking. Besides, arrows were quieter and easier to retrieve than buckshot. Arthur would never live that particular story down. Especially after Hosea had decided to entertain the whole camp with him retelling that night after Sean's return. Not that he hadn't deserved it - they'd been spittin' buckshot for days after that poor rabbit.

"Should we even stick to this spot, ya think?" Arthur mused lowly, rubbing at the lense of his binoculars with a sleeve. It was dotted with condensation from the sudden change in temperature. "Seems all the animals went down South to get some sun."

"Be easy, Arthur," Charles said, amusement coloring his voice. Better than exasperation, Arthur figured; he's seen what the huntsman could do with a blade. Things a lot less nice than fletching arrows, as it was currently. "See that bull elk over there?" Charles gestured with an arrow while putting them away in the quiver. "By himself, to the right?"

Arthur picked up his binoculars dutifully, bringing them up to his eyes — only to have gentle hands press them down again.

"You can see him from here, look—" Charles was awful close, pressed up against Arthur in a pillar of heat to point down the elk. It was a big one alright, a bit away from the rest of the small herd, grazing on the other side of the valley. Enormous horns, probably close to seven hundred pounds. But Arthur was having a hard time focusing when Charles was three inches away, so close that his exhale ruffled the collar of Arthur's heavy coat.

"Should we, uh... move closer?" Arthur stumbled over his words a bit, latching onto the scent of hand-rolled cigarettes and coffee from this morning. He nearly got lost in it.

Charles hummed low, thoughtful. Arthur felt like he couldn't breathe, the air was so still between them. "Too close and he'll catch our scent, or hear us. They're all too on edge to risk it right now." He reached behind him, pressing the smooth curve of a bow into Arthur's hand. The wood was warm from his body heat, freshly restrung just a moment ago. "You can hit him from here."

"Hit 'im, maybe," Arthur scoffed, careful to keep his voice low. "Takin' him out in one? I don't know, it's been a while since—"

“Cut the excuses, Arthur,” his face was serious, but the huntsman’s eyes shone with something. Amusement, challenge, the thrill of the hunt? Something else, a little deeper and wilder than all that? Arthur cut his eyes away, ears burning.

The bow was light in Arthur’s hands, far lighter than his normal rifle, even lighter than his pistols. It’d been a while since he’d had cause to use arrows rather than bullets; might’ve been their last hunt together at Horseshoe Overlook. Arthur winced to himself — best not to compare the two given how that excursion ended.

Arthur shook the cold out of his limbs and settled into a crouch, readying the bow. Charles pressed two arrows into his hand before shifting away to give him room. Arthur felt the absence of his body heat like a splash of cold water. *Focus, Arthur.*

He sighted down the length of the arrow, aiming a few feet above his target to accommodate the distance. His back and shoulders ached as he drew back, but he breathed through it, like Charles. Breathe in on the drawback, hold to aim, exhale on the release. His lungs burned while his eye followed the arrowhead, and he finally exhaled, letting the arrow fly.

It struck between the elk’s neck and shoulder, and for a moment Arthur felt elated just to have hit something. But the shot wasn’t well-placed enough to kill the elk in one; instead, it bellowed in pain and charged into the woods, head swinging wildly. Charles and Arthur leapt up at the same time, the latter cursing all the while. There were a good couple hundred feet between them and the tree line, but once they ran up the trail was hard to lose. Charles hung back while Arthur went to crouch over the downed animal, not quite dead yet. With a quick movement of his hunting knife, the gunslinger put the elk out of his misery. He tossed the knife to the side and reached for the arrow, leaning hard on the elk to wrest it out.

“A few inches further down would’ve done it, I think,” Arthur mused, rolling his shoulders to relieve the stiffness — they’d be sore tomorrow, he could tell already. “The pelt should be good enough though. Near perfect, actually, if you could just—“

“Arthur.”

Something in Charles’ voice stopped him cold. It was totally emotionless, cold and hard as ice over a river. Arthur’s hair stood up on the back of his neck, he heard branches snap loudly. Under heavy boots, from all around. His hand dropped the arrow, reaching instead for the discarded knife beside him.

“Leave it.” A stranger’s voice barked from behind him. “And put your hands up.” *Shit.* Arthur obliged slowly, mind racing a mile a minute. Who could’ve found them all the way up here, when they hadn’t even told the gang where they were? And how’d they manage to sneak up on the two of them when they hadn’t seen another person in days? Sure they hadn’t exactly been on high alert, but —

“Stand up. Slowly. Don’t do anything stupid.”

That was a laugh. He stood. Slowly, facing ahead. It wasn’t over yet, though. What were the options? He had a bow (too slow and unwieldy), his hunting knife (far away, useless at a distance), and his pistol in his side holster. That could work if he could draw quick enough.

Arthur could see boots in his periphery's and again wondered how at least three strangers could have snuck up on them. There'd been no gunshots, no sound of a struggle, so Charles should be unharmed—

“Turn around and keep yer hands up.” That was the sound of someone not used to giving orders, but totally relishing in the opportunity.

Charles was standing behind Arthur, face towards him with his expression thunderous. He didn't seem hurt, but wasn't happy with the shotgun pointed at his back by the rat of a man behind him. The man wasn't familiar to Arthur, but it didn't make him any less dangerous (even though part of him was glad it wasn't a Pinkerton). The man had a pistol in his other handed trained at Arthur's head, along with at least four others, dressed for the cold and armed to the teeth.

Arthur tried to catch Charles' eye, but the stranger would have none of it. He gestured to one of the others to his right, and before Arthur could open his mouth his gun was wrenched from his holster, and the knife kicked away from his feet.

“What do y'all gentlemen want with a couple of hunters?” Arthur asked, fighting to keep the snarl out of his voice. “We ain't got nothin' to steal.”

“Cut the shit, Morgan, ya know we ain't here fer that.”

“Fraid I don't. We've not been introduced, and somehow you know my name.” Arthur had a sinking feeling that he might know what was going on, though. He thought they'd be far enough away...

“Well imagine our surprise,” The man behind Charles said, jabbing the air with his pistol and smirking around his greasy mustache. “When we found two Van Der Linde boys skulking around so far away from the rest of yer gang. And ahead 'a schedule, too.”

One of the men by Arthur laughed unpleasantly, while the other examined Arthur's gun like he was thinking of keeping it. Charles had his fists clenched, knuckles white, but he didn't make a move. No matter how fast he moved, a throwing knife couldn't outrun a shotgun slug. The five of them were stuck in a strange standoff, even though two of them had no weapons, no upper hand. Just tension ready to snap.

“Whaddya mean?” Arthur growled, wanted to keep them talking, give himself more time to think. There was a way out of this, he just had to find it. He thought suddenly about their horses, their camp, half a mile away. Did they track them from there, had they been watching for hours, waiting until their backs were turned? These weren't average thugs if that was the case.

“Just that we can tell Colm ta cancel his meeting with yer man Dutch.” O'Driscolls. Figured. The man who'd been doing all the talking grinned, jerking his head to one of his men. Arthur wanted desperately to look but refused to break eye contact with the stranger. “We've got what we need from him now, and ya did us the favor of coming to us of yer own free will.”

There was movement behind Arthur, and before he could turn to look, a loud crack sounded in the quiet forest. Pain exploded behind his eyes, and Arthur distantly heard Charles' voice cry out before the world went dark.

## Chapter End Notes

How's that for a cliffhanger? This is going a bit off-track of canon missions, but I'll be taking bits from them to tie the plots together in canon.

Hope you all enjoyed this chapter! I have the sneaking suspicion that this might turn out longer than expected so I might split the next chapter up or post one long one!

Please comment and let me know what you think, or what you'd like to see; I love hearing from you all!

Also if anyone caught that Ancient les mis reference congrats my 2014 phase will never truly leave.

# Hanging Dog Ranch

## Chapter Summary

Charles and Arthur find themselves in the middle of it all.

## Chapter Notes

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

Arthur came back to himself slowly. There were a few long moments where it felt like bags of sand weighing down on him. They crushed him steadily into the earth his head was fit to burst. Hay and bits of gravel bit into Arthur's face, stone sharp points of cold against his hot face. With eyes heavy and a head stuffed with cotton, Arthur twitched his fingers, since the muscles in his arms and legs currently refused to cooperate. His fingers moved, slightly, and he reached for something to ground himself, digging into the earth and fighting against the dizziness threatening to send him down again. Something warm and rough pressed against Arthur's clenched fist, and squeezed gently. He fought not to flinch away, but again, his body wasn't listening to him at the moment.

There was a low rumble, like stones falling over each other, that sounded almost like words. If only Arthur could just *focus*, just clear away the dizziness and pressure coming from that stabbing pain at the back of his head. Each throb made him lose track of each thought that went through his head, and it was so frustrating he could just scream. In some herculean feat of strength, Arthur managed to pry his eyes open, blinking away the dust and grit to be greeted with darkness. A terrible fear of blindness nearly stopped his heart for a beat, but he ignored it.

Arthur struggled up onto his elbows -shaking but stable- and shook his head to clear it. He immediately regretted it, the rattling around doing nothing good to his scrambled brain. The darkness spun like water down a drain, and he was almost lost to it, eyes falling closed against to focus on those low rumbling words. That spot of warmth left his hand and landed on the high point of his back, between his aching shoulder blades to radiate heat. He might not've noticed if it weren't so damned cold. Where had his coat gone? Didn't he pack his coat specifically? Where had he been going...?

Little by little the fog shrouding Arthur's memories lifted, and he straightened to a slumped sitting position, though his head complained the entire way.

“Arthur,” the low sound finally fell into words he could understand, loud against the cotton in his ears. A rush of heat near his face, the voice was closer. He could almost recognize it...

“Are you awake? You need to get up-” The hand at his back pressed insistently, urging Arthur upright. He wished that every stray thought didn’t slip through his fingers, like glasses after a night of too much whiskey. If that’d been what caused this hell of a hangover, it must’ve been some sort of whiskey, that’s for sure.

“M up,” Arthur managed, words comin’ out rusty and hoarse. He sounded like he’d swallowed half the dust in New Hanover. More was coming back to him, and the yellow wash of a lantern filled his vision, backlighting a dark figure crouched down beside him. If Arthur really focused he could make out features- broad shoulders, long hair, tied back, a furrowed brow - Shit. “Charles,” Arthur rasped out the name like a prayer. “Where are we?”

Charles reached out to keep Arthur from probing at the back of his head- the source of that stabbing pain. Even that small movement sent fresh waves of pain down his spine, and could do nothing but ride it out, wincing against it. Charles didn’t look hurt at least, but that wasn’t a surprise. After Arthur had been knocked out, it probably didn’t take much to convince him to give in without a fight. Arthur winced at the thought - he didn’t much appreciate being the damsel in distress.

“Hanging Dog Ranch. You were right, there’s a whole mess of O’Driscolls holed up here.”

“M always right,” Arthur tried to joke, but he couldn’t keep the tired bitterness from creeping in. He blinked more grit out of his eye, hyper-aware of every inch of contact Charles had with him. “Whether I like it or not.”

“Keep it down in there.” A sharp voice snapped at them from a few feet away, scaring Arthur half out of his skin. He was really off his game if he couldn’t hear a heavy-footed lackey so close. Charles scowled, but held his tongue, even when it seemed to cause him physical pain. The guard had an Irish accent deeper than even Sean’s, and Arthur cursed their rotten luck. Definitely O’Driscolls then, no two ways about it. He craned his neck to get a look, squinting against the light of the guard’s lantern. It seemed to be the only source of light in the place, wherever that was. Last time Arthur was out this way he hadn’t done much recon, being too eager to leave.

Whatever building they were in was cold as all hell, worse now that the sun had gone down, and the wind blew straight in like there weren't any walls at all. Arthur wondered how long the sun had been down, how long he'd been out. Memory was coming back bit by bit, but it was still a complete blank state after he'd been hit with the butt of an O'Driscoll shotgun. The fact that they were caught by surprise bothered Arthur more than anything else. Had they just gotten unlucky, or were just being careless? O'Driscolls weren't exactly known as expert trackers, but they moved as a gang constantly and were plenty paranoid thanks to Colm. Possible that a patrol strayed a bit off their path and saw the two of them chasing' down that stuck elk. Which was probably rotting in the forest, unless the O'Driscolls had seen fit to drag it back with them, trussed up like Arthur had been.

While Arthur was stuck in a quickly spiraling train of thought, the guard had walked out of sight, taking the buttery light of his lantern with him. Across from him, Charles tracked him with those dark eyes, looking nothing short of murderous. In the cold dark, that sight sent all sorts of strange heat to the pit of Arthur's stomach. *Now was absolutely not the time* . Fantasizing around the firepit or alone on the range was one thing, this was life or death. Worse, this was *O'Driscolls* .

So Arthur distracted himself by letting his eyes adjust to the darkness, and soon he realized where they were being held.

"A horse stall, really?" Arthur scoffed, keeping his voice low at Charles' sharp look. "They couldn't give us the decency of a cellar, or tying us to trees at least? You'd think they knocked my knees out too."

Charles relaxed fractionally, no doubt relieved that Arthur had more to say than concussed nonsense. Well, might be still concussed, but he was speakin' English at least. "You weren't exactly in fighting shape, Arthur," he spoke gently, but some of the concern had left his voice. "They didn't even bother tying us up."

"Their mistake then." Arthur moved to stand, ignoring the dizziness that sent the ground spinning beneath him. He leaned against a rotting post by him heavy, trying to keep his feet. Dark spots ate at his vision like flies on a corpse, no matter how much he tried to blink them away. Seems like he wasn't quite back to fighting shape, then. In his periphery he saw Charles rise in a smooth motion, grabbing at Arthur's shoulder as if to hold him back. *Don't worry, friend, I'm not going anywhere with the ground movin' around like this* .



“We can’t go storming out there guns blazing.” Charles leaned in close, maybe to keep his words from spreading. Arthur was awful distracted. He also blamed the concussion for that. “First off, I don’t even know what they did with our weapons-”

“-Probably crowin’ over them by the campfire,” Arthur grumbled, turning his attention to the dark barn around them. The walls were more hole than wood, he could see snatches of flickering light through some of the planks. Not a good sign.

“Second,” Charles’ voice went sharp, and he squeezed Arthur’s shoulder, drawing his attention back. Like it had ever left. “There are at least two dozen men here, Arthur. And those are just the ones I saw coming in. There’s a camp set up right outside,” he gestured at the firelight. “And scouts set up around the ranch. We need to be smart about this.”

Arthur frowned. The whole situation was getting worse by the second. “Well, they haven’t killed us yet,” he mused, leaning heavy on the post. “They must need us for somethin’.”

Charles made a sound low in his throat but didn’t disagree. “Maybe. I don’t really want to be here to find out, though. We need a plan.”

Arthur snorted, itching for a cigarette somethin’ fierce. He’d even go for one of Charles’ hand rolled ones. “Careful, Charles. You’re startin’ ta sound like Dutch.” That earned him an exasperated look, but they both new Charles was right. Arthur just appreciated a little humor under duress, that was all.

They didn’t get much of a chance to concoct any sort of plan before the guard was back, knocking open the barn doors. And he came with friends.

“Mister Morgan,” One of them boomed, voice so familiar that they must’ve crossed paths before. That didn’t go well. Seeing the same O’Driscoll twice was askin’ for trouble. *Sorry, Kieran* . Even with the lantern light, their features were too dark to make out - could’ve been the fault of Arthur’s swimming vision, too. But he didn’t need to see straight to know ugly when it was right in front of him.

“What do y’all want.” Arthur fought to keep his voice neutral, pushing off the post. There was still a stall door between them, but better to face them on his own two feet. Charles took his hand off Arthur’s shoulder, but his presence at his back was comforting in its own right.

“Well, it’s not what *I* want with ya, and ya better be glad of it!” The loud man laughed, egged on by the snickers of his gang around him. They kept coming up towards the stall, and it set Arthur’s hackles up like Cain when the mutt saw a rabbit. He had the feeling that this wasn’t going to be a simple conversation between them. “Nah, Colm’s been itchin’ to talk to ya, since you did ‘im the favor of comin’ all the way out to us.”

*Shit*. Colm O’Driscoll was *here*? To be fair, his location wasn’t exactly common knowledge and he moved more often than Dutch was wont to, but for Arthur’s luck to be so awful. The others would have a field day with this one, given the two of them survived to tell the tale.

“Well I’m awful sorry gentlemen,” Arthur let his voice fall into the low growl he put on when collecting debt or bounties. He didn’t like the person he was when he did those jobs, but it had its place. Like putting up a bold front against greasy gang members who had the upper hand. “I don’t seem to have any chairs to offer, but I’m sure I can find some horse shit around for Colm to sit in.”

One of the smaller O’Driscolls snarled, face contorting in the flickering light, but the others just laughed. They had reached the door now, and Arthur fought the urge to fall back. They all had pistols at their hips, and shotguns in their hands. Even if he managed to get one away, he’d get a bullet from the other before he could blink.

“That’s a real nice way to treat yer hosts, Morgan,” The big one with the loud voice smiled, gold where half of his teeth should be. “But Colm’s expecting’ ya elsewhere. We’re ta *escort* ya.”

Two of the O’Driscolls shouldered their way into the cramped stall, one training his shotgun on Charles, who had been quiet for most of the interaction. He was not a man quick to action, not in such a volatile situation as this, but Arthur could read him loud and clear. His whole body was coiled to strike, fists clenched, weight shifted to the heels of his feet. He was looking for an opportunity where there wasn’t one. They both knew it. Rough hands took Arthur by the arms, nearly wrenching them out of their sockets. The dizziness didn’t let up, but Arthur struggled against it, fighting to meet Charles’ gaze. *Don’t do anything stupid.*

Stupid to ask, like he didn't even know the man at all. But Arthur wouldn't be able to live with himself knowing that Charles died trying to save his fool ass.

"Don't worry," One of the men noticed how Arthur was twisting in their grip as they dragged him out the barn doors, trying to get one last glance in. "Yer friend won't be lonely. Tommy will keep an eye on 'im."

The big O'Driscoll snorted, turning them down a dusty path that was once used for horses and cattle. The old ranch looked about the same as Arthur remember it, but now it was infested with O'Driscolls like rats in the St. Denis dockyard. Sure enough, there was a raging campfire right outside the barn, surrounded by tents and crates full of supplies and weapons. The rundown cabin looked lit up inside, and a few scout fires peppered the limits of the ranch land, but that was only what Arthur could see.

They weren't headed towards anywhere half as cheery, however. Arthur was marched past the campfire -to jeers and shouts from those who caught sight of them- and past the cabin to a dark shed. Might've been a farrier, or a blacksmith when the ranch was in its prime. But now it was empty, and cold with one door and windowless walls.

"Get 'im set up in here," the big O'Driscoll said to the other, moving to shoulder his sawed-off shotgun like it was a fishing pole. "I'll get the boss. Laurence will be waitin' outside for ya, so don't take too long." He winked at Arthur, kicking the door shut behind him. Well, there went one option. As if taking on a whole camp of O'Driscolls with a single pistol would get his even out the door.

The other guard shoved Arthur towards the far wall, sending a fresh wave of pain and dizziness ricocheting through his aching skull. It was so encompassing that Arthur didn't notice the ropes around his wrists until they were tight enough to burn, biting through his thin flannel. He tested them once the dark spots went away, but they didn't budge, and kept him against the wall, no doubt tied to the metal hoop digging into the small of his back. The metal was rough though, unpolished. Arthur wondered if he could fray the rope if he could just get the right angle-

The door to the shed burst open again, lantern light spilling over the dirt floor and planks like water. But it wasn't the big guard from before, or even the Irish one from the woods. It was someone Arthur hadn't seen in years. Nearly a lifetime ago.

“Arthur Morgan.” Colm O’Driscoll sauntered into the room, looking like a tired old man. But he looked up from under the brim of his hat, and there was the same wickedness in his eye that there'd always been. “I missed ya.”

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I wanted to put something out there for you guys before my finals, so I split the last chapter in half! I'm going to try and finish quickly so there's not so long a gap for the last bit, but I've really enjoyed writing this! I appreciate each kudo and comment, so please let me know your thoughts and reactions!

# East

## Chapter Summary

Out of the frying pan.

## Chapter Notes

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

Charles watched Arthur get dragged away, and felt his heart sink like a stone. He'd already watched him drop like a dead man in the woods hours before, blood on his face and still as a corpse. He'd done nothing then, just stood there and watched it happen. Then he'd been marched to the hollowed out barn surrounded by O'Driscolls- ignoring their jeers and prodding. He didn't dare take his eyes off Arthur, pale and unmoving on the back of a horse, then dumped onto rotten hay while they waited for their fate. Hours passed before he'd stirred, and now he'd been snatched away again. But Charles wasn't going to stand by this time. O'Driscolls didn't have an excess of patience, he knew that much from Dutch and Hosea. If the two of them were being kept alive this long, there was a good chance it wouldn't keep 'til morning.

The rotten wood of the stall was soft under his hands, and Charles took a moment to think. Though it felt like he'd done nothing but since they'd been captured. He was outnumbered for sure, but the O'Driscolls in the camp were self-assured and ill-prepared. They hadn't been expecting trouble and still weren't, despite stumbling onto two members of a rival gang so close to their camp. That sort of oversight made them lazy and overconfident. He could use that.

Charles peered out at the guard at the front of the barn, shifting impatiently on his feet. Only two men were guarding the barn after the rest retired to the campfire after sundown. The bawdy songs they sang were a lot less charming without Javier strumming along to them, or Uncle interjecting raunchier verses.

Their taunts had been right about something- there was no way any rescue was coming anytime soon. He had been vague enough about their plans in camp so they wouldn't be called on whenever Arthur was needed to run an odd errand. But that meant no one at camp knew exactly where they were, or how long they were going to be gone. Which meant that Charles had to get themselves out of this mess. First out of the barn, then to wherever Arthur had been taken.

After that, Charles would be happy to head west and keep riding until the sun set at their back, without even a backward glance.

The way he saw it, there were two options. Neither of them very nice. Charles could try to take out the two patrolling guards silently and risk raising the alarm, or try to sneak out without being seen at all. There was still a risk of his absence being noticed, but the two were currently shooting the shit and smoking outside the barn door. He'd have a few minutes at least before they came in and checked.

Slipping away was embarrassingly easy. The stall door was locked, but the widow wasn't. It didn't even have glass anymore, just a few boards rotting around the nails holding them to the wall. They gave way without a sound, the soft wood crumbling in his hand. Charles slipped through the hole, twisting to fit his broad shoulders through and only just making it. Luckily the northern face of the barn backed up to the hills and dense forest, and not the open valley. He could see faraway lights between the trees where a road meandered, lanterns on coaches and fixed to saddled like fireflies. It was a strange sight, people traveling late and going about their lives while he was caught in limbo in this godforsaken ranch. He kept close to the wall of the barn, picking his way around various crates and junk discarded around it.

The guards at the barn door hadn't moved, but had been joined by a few more men from the campfire since Charles had last checked. Eating from tin plates and laughing, the group passed a pair of pistols around themselves. The guns were well polished and caught the moonlight in flashed like salmon in a snow-fed stream. Charles saw the texture of engravings in the wood panel and gritted his teeth. They were Arthur's pistols. The same ones he'd had since Charles had known him. Even longer, no doubt. But there was no use lingering. The group of O'Driscolls here meant less wandering around the camp, so he'd better take advantage of it.

Charles headed towards the only other standing buildings on the plot, past dilapidated corrals and an old water tower that looked like a still breeze could send it over. There was a cabin and a small shack left, so Arthur had to be in one of them. Hopefully not the cabin, all lit up and well-guarded as it was. Small, too. There'd be no getting in and out of that unseen. He paused behind a collapsed wagon, torn between watching and moving in before someone noticed his absence.

Luckily, it seemed the O'Driscolls weren't too concerned about hiding their plans. And why should they be, tucked away in the mountains away from any law or civilization? Two men were stationed outside the small shack by the cabin, and a third was going in. That had to be

where they'd taken Arthur. It was too dark for Charles to recognize the men that had taken him, but he'd bet anything that's where they'd ended up. The third man had a dark, wide-brimmed hat, and Charles could just see lanky grey hair under it. Could that be Colm O'Driscoll in the flesh? Charles had only seen him once before, in the mountains. But even with his binoculars, the snow and heavy winter clothes hadn't afforded him a clear look.

The two guards turned their heads to watch Colm go in, and Charles took his chance. He crossed the open clearing between buildings as quickly and quietly as he could, heart beating fast enough to burst. Given the cloudless night, Charlie was sure the cold moonlight was painting a beacon on his back. He pressed against the back end of the shack in moments and held his breath.

No shout broke the silence. No shots were fired. Outside the shed, quiet conversation and various camp sounds continued on without a hitch. But now Charles was pressed right up against the rough wood of the shack, and he could hear someone speaking through it.

"Why you still running around with Dutch, Arthur? You could ride with me and make some real money."

Arthur's voice was low and ragged. He didn't sound scared, or even mad. Just tired. Worn down. "It ain't about the money, Colm. It never was."

Colm O'Driscoll scoffed, and even that sounded mean. "I don't believe that for a minute, Morgan. You've been running wild, killin' my boys all over the damned country. And I'm supposed to lay down and take that on top've everything else? If it ain't about money, then what?"

"We got real problems now, this revenge plot needs to be put to rest before we all go down for it," Arthur must be stalling for time. Charles knew from all he'd been told that there was no way a man like Colm would listen to reason. Not when pride and profit were on the line. But if it came down to it, would Dutch? Arthur continued, voice urgent. "The Pinkertons have been combing the country for the both of us, they ain't about to leave off until we all hang."

"Not my problem." Colm crowed. "They get Dutch and your gang, they forget about me."

“They ain’t the forgetting sort. I’d run if I were you.” Arthur pitched his voice low. Charles knew that rough edge to his friend’s voice, knew it was the one he put on to sound mean. But in the dark night, in the middle of a wasp’s nest like this, he just sounded tired.

Charles kept one ear on the conversation and another on the camp- still all quiet by some miracle. Colm needed to leave quickly before any hope of escape was gone. But he and Dutch were more alike than they probably liked to admit- each loved the sound of their own voice.

“I know you would, Arthur. That’s why we ain’t the same type of men, you and I. Ain’t that right?” Colm did something that made Arthur grunt in pain- kicked him while he was down, like the coward he was. Charles felt his nails bite into his palm. “But we had other ideas, *plans* for you, but you had to go on and show up early.” Colm tutted, and the leather of his boots creaked like an old saddle.

Arthur was quiet, either catching his breath or biding his time.

Colm was happy to continue. “Guess you couldn’t wait ‘till our meetin’ like gentlemen an’ all, but it’s no skin off my nose. You gettin’ here early, well that’s just more time to let ol’ Dutch stew.” Colm’s voice got quiet and mean. Charles strained to hear. “You really think anyone’s missin’ you yet, you and your big friend there back in the barn? What’d you tell them- that you were both off on a hunting trip? So far away?”

Arthur kept his silence. That wasn’t the answer Colm wanted.

“Fine, then. You don’t feel *talkative*?” The last word was punctuated with another kick, and Arthur wheezed sharply. “I’ll try your friend, then. We only need you to lure Dutch out, to get him mad enough to do somethin’ stupid. I sure don’t need a *spare* -” Colm stormed out of the shed with that, slamming the door hard enough to shake the whole thing. His hand was at his holster and his face was twisted up with anger.

There was a cold, hard pit in Charles’ belly, and he was incredibly glad he broke out when he did. Pressed against the splintered wall he watched Colm stalk past, counting the seconds



until he couldn't wait for the coast to clear any further. Colm was halfway to the barn - where Charles surely *wasn't* - so he had only moments to think of his next move.

In the end, he never quite decided on one. His blood was rushing too loud in his ears to even think, and so he let the adrenaline do the work for him. Before Charles could even blink he was inside the shed, shadows all around.

“*Charles?*” Arthur's voice was low and sharp with pain and surprise. The bright of the moon had ruined Charles' night vision, and he could only see shadows in dark shades of grey in the shed. But he knew that voice, could follow it anywhere. He felt his knees hit the cold packed ground before his brain even knew what had happened, and his hands went to the slumped shape before him.

“You shouldn't be here,” Arthur hissed, always pragmatic. He shifted to peer up at Charles while the hunter scrambled for a hidden knife in his boot. The time that Colm had been gone weighed on his shoulders, only getting heavier each moment the alarm hadn't been raised. They were running out of time. Charles made low, soothing sounds while he reached around Arthur, feeling for ropes, or blood. “I'm not a damn *horse, Charles,*” Arthur hissed, careful to keep his voice down even in his panic. “You need to get out of here before one of them comes back-”

Charles' eyes had adjusted to the dark and since their faces were inches away, he was able to meet Arthur's wide eyes. “And do what, leave you here? Surrounded by O'Driscolls and tied to the wall?”

The cold pressed in at his back like a blanket of snow, but the space between them was warm and charged like Scarlett Meadows before a storm. Arthur was tense, Charles could feel the shake of his tired muscles, pressed together as they were. The silence was broken only by the scrape of Charles' knife against metal when he cut away the rope tied to a metal ring on the wall. Arthur's hands were free, but Charles didn't move except to speak. “I'm not leaving you here.” In the dark, Arthur's eyes were just pools of black, none of the deep blue they would be in the light. Charles had a sudden, overwhelming need to see that blue again, preferable against the rising sun. Far away from here.

He stood up, clasping Arthur's cold hand in his and pulling him to his feet. “Are you hurt?” Charles asked lowly, searching his friend's face for tightness, any sign of pain. He

remembered Colm kicking at him, and the bloody temple he had gotten from that O'Driscoll with the shotgun.

"I'm fine."

"*Arthur*"

"I am-" Arthur looked different without his hat, and guns on his hip. They'd even taken his coat, leaving him nothing but a thin flannel to keep the wind at bay. Charles furrowed his brow and looked out the crack in the door. He'd come back for those guns. And he'd come prepared. There was a touch on his shoulder, bringing his attention back to Arthur. His friend's voice was low and urgent "You have a plan? Do they have our horses?"

Charles thought of Arthur's old mare, Boadicea, lost to a bullet during their flight from Blackwater. He put up a tough front at camp, but Arthur had loved that horse more than anything, and it spoke to that when he asked after Beirut and Taima before anything else.

"I didn't see them on my way here," Charles said, moving to the window facing the valley. If they could just stay out of sight long enough to get through the open field and into the woods, they just might make it. "They might still be back across the valley if they weren't spotted. Taima's smart, and Beirut will stay with her."

Arthur was quiet while he rubbed feeling back into his hands. His breath caught a bit on what was probably a bruised rib. Hopefully, it was bruised, the last thing he needed was a punctured lung while they made their escape. Charles turned back to Arthur, face deadly serious. His mind was made up. Dangerous or not, they only had one way out.

"Are you able to run?"

"Of course."

Their eyes locked for a moment. Arthur was pale and shivering slightly against the cold, but his jaw was set, and he held himself up straight as he could. Proud to the end. If Arthur was lying, it wouldn't matter. They could run, or die here, in a drafty wooden shack in the middle of nowhere. Charles nodded and felt the odd urge to smile, baring his teeth against the dark like a wild animal.

“All right.”

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A decade's worth of bad luck had finally turned on them. They clutched at each other the moment they broke past the treeline on the foothills of Mt. Hagen. Charles saw their breath steam in the air around them, and yet he could barely feel the bite of cold. Dark pines surrounded them like arms, and the darkness felt safe for the first time that night.

“Did we make it?” Arthur wheezed into a tree trunk, sweat glinting on his forehead. He still looked strange without his hat and shivered in his thin shirt, but Charles could see the helpless grin half hidden away. “I don't even want to look.”

“Yeah,” Charles felt himself smile too, adrenaline jittering through his veins. He felt like he'd just taken a swing of whiskey, he could feel the burn of it through his body. They were barely two hundred meters away from the farm, and all was quiet. But it wouldn't be forever. “We need to go.”

Arthur grunted, pushing himself off the trunk. His ribs were obviously still bothering him, but the grin was still on his face. He had the look of someone waiting on the punchline of a joke, whether it was at his expense or not.

“Yer right, let's go find the horses and get the hell out of here.”

For a few minutes, that's all they did. The dark underbrush worked to trip them up at often as possible, and the wind bit at them through the trees, but they kept on. Branches whipped at their faces and caught their clothes, but no wolves ambushed them, no mountain lions dogged

their trail. They took the long way around the valley and kept their eyes pricked for any sounds from Hanging Dog Ranch.

Arthur stopped suddenly, putting a hand out to halt Charles' quiet steps. "I think I saw somethin'," he murmured. His eyes were trained on the entrance of a clearing Charles remembered passing with their captors. It was still far from where they had set up, so it could be an animal that braved the cold front. If he squinted between the trees, Charles could almost make out a large shape, maybe two, dapped from the dim moonlight. Could be a pair of elk, but they were too big for deer-

Arthur let out a low whistle, soft and strong enough to carry across the clearing. Any wild animal would alert to a sound like that and startle away, especially at night, but these didn't move. In fact, one answered with a high whicker.

Beirut.

Charles barely had enough time to see Arthur's tired face split into a relieved grin before the man was crossing the clearing. The big Hungarian Half-Bred tramped through the underbrush to meet him, blowing out big puffs of air and tossing his mane. Taima was a few steps behind him, and much less pleased to see Charles, it seemed. He could already tell it would take a lot of currants and oatcakes to make up for their abandonment, given Taima's turned head and careful side-eye. But it only took a little coaxing to get her close enough to run a careful hand over her flanks, and to stroke at her soft nose.

Charles looked over to Arthur, and couldn't hold back a snort. Beirut was dancing around the other man, nosing at any pocket or fold he could find, while Arthur tried to fend off some of the more insistent nudges that almost sent him to the ground. He looked happier than Charles had seen him all week. Relief was a good look on him. The tense, unhappy lines around his eyes and between his forehead were gone, and the exertion and cold had given a healthy flush to his face that was far better than the sickly heat of Clemens Point.

"He's gonna be insufferable," Arthur said when he caught Charles staring. The horse was proving true to the letter, pushing Arthur around with his whole body now. Bossy as ever.

"Good luck with that." Charles heard an offended snort when he turned to inspect Taima's saddle, reaching down to tighten the cinch. "We need to head back east to camp. Dutch will

want to know what Colm just pulled.” The thought of going back sat like a stone in his stomach, but there was safety in numbers. The two of them would be easy to track if the O’Driscolls put a mind to it, and unarmed as they were, Charles didn’t like their chances. Especially since they’d decided he was a ‘spare’.

“Hang on,”

Charles stilled at the cautious hand on his shoulder. He turned and Arthur was closer than before. He had a strange look on his face, different from the helpless euphoria of running for their lives through the woods.

“I just wanted to, uh, thank you.”

“What?”

“For... for coming back for me, I guess.” Arthur tried for half a smile like it was a joke. He must have seen some of the confusion on Charles' face because he backtracked quickly, snatching his hand back. “Not that you would’ve left me, or anything’, though you probably should’ve, a mess like that- I just thought that-“

“ *Arthur,* ” even Charles was surprised by the hurt in his voice. His friend stopped digging himself a deeper hole, discomfort on his face and in the line of his shoulders. Charles reaches out for those tense shoulders but curled his hand around the back of Arthur’s neck instead, bare skin ice cold without his usual kerchief. He had half a mind to shake some sense into him. They were inches away from each other, cold breath like smoke in the air between them. “That wasn’t an option.”

Arthur parted his lips to argue, Charles could see it in the furrow of his brow.

“ *It wasn’t an option* , you hear me?” he did shake Arthur a little then, just enough to jostle him out of his thoughts. They ran across his face like shadows across a field. Had Arthur always been so easy to read, so cracked open like this? Charles didn’t think so. This was new. This wasn’t something others got to see. Not John, not Javier, not even Dutch or Hosea. This openness was something only they had. After a night like this, Charles felt cracked open too.

“You wouldn’t leave me like that, would you?”

It wasn’t a question Charles expected an answer to, but Arthur shook his head anyways, dazed. He looked a bit like he’d been slapped across the face. Without realizing, Charles’ thumb stroked at the soft hair at the nape of Arthur’s neck. It was getting long, and curled up under his touch. Charles expected to get shrugged off- the other man wasn’t comfortable with touch, not like this. Not when it couldn’t be laughed off. But Arthur stood there, eyes wider than anything in the dark of the forest, not moving. He kept himself drawn up and tight, not leaning in, or swaying back. Like he was afraid to move, or breathe.

But Charles had been afraid enough that night. He didn’t feel like keeping himself upright and unmoving, he’d been doing that for months. He moved closer, pressed the warmth of their foreheads together. They were so close that Charles couldn’t see anything else, and his hand tightened in Arthur’s hair.

“I’m always going to come for you, Arthur. And next time we’ll burn that place down behind us.”

There was a pause, a silence between heartbeats where Charles thought he’d gone too far. Said too much. But that heartbeat passed, and there was suddenly no space between them. Arthur made a sound low in his throat, and surged forward to press their lips together. It surprised Charles so bad that he forgot to react, standing unmoving while Arthur drew back, a stricken look on his face.

“Charles, I...” His eyes were wild, and the flush darkened his face like a splash of paint. He stepped away, back against the wall at the back of his neck, and Charles felt a stab of fear to his core. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think-“

He didn’t waste any more time. Charles pulled Arthur in again, and kissed him proper, fisting his flannel shirt to keep him in place. He made a surprised noise but didn’t move away, reaching for Charles instead. Arthur wound his around Charles’ back, pressing in like he couldn’t get close enough. The angle was a little awkward, and Arthur hissed a little into the kiss when he jostled bruised ribs, but it was perfect.

Charles broke away, cold air rushing in and shaking some sense into the two. Far beyond Arthur's flushed face, Charles could see spots of light on the other side of the valley, dim orange lanterns swinging on horses. Patrols. He cursed lowly. Their absence had finally been noticed.

"They sent out patrols finally?" Arthur's voice was a little hoarse, and he cleared it quickly.

"Yeah."

"It's a miracle they get anythin' done."

Charles didn't pull away quite yet, relishing in the closeness, stroking the prickly stubble on Arthur's warm cheek. He could feel the muscle under his thumb pull into a smile, and Arthur shook his head, puffing out an amused breath. Charles couldn't help but smile back, eyes soft.

"Pair of fools we are," Arthur murmured, tightening his grip on Charles for a moment. Then he stepped back, ducking his head. The wind bit even colder than before. "We need to get out of here before our luck runs out."

"You're probably right," Charles smiled wryly, swing onto Taima's back before he could do anything stupid like kiss Arthur again. There was a lot of ground to cover from here to Clemens Point. They had time to talk, and... continue. Enough time to figure this out before the politics of Dutch and camp took over again. Arthur mounted up and steered his horse close to Charles.

"We're good, right?" he asked, cutting his eyes to the side carefully. His accent was a little stronger now, slipping smooth and lazily through his lips like honey. Charles could stand to make him sound like that again.

"Yeah, Arthur." Charles' voice was painfully soft. "We're good."

Taima picked her way through the dark woods, eyes swiveling at every snapped twig. The lights of the O'Driscoll patrols were far enough away that they were as worrisome as fireflies.

"*Shit*." Arthur cursed suddenly, running a hand through his hair. Charles caught his eyes and raised his brow. "Those som' bitches still have my guns."

Charles could help but laugh. “We’ll get them back. Just wait until Sadie gets wind of this. Those O’Driscolls will never see it coming.”

Arthur grumbled, but seemed pleased at the thought, and they kept quiet conversation while they rode out of Big Valley. With any luck, they'd leave the O'Driscolls behind, but what they started here in the dark forest would follow them all the way home. And so they rode. Eastward, and homeward.

## Chapter End Notes

And that's the end! Thank you everyone for your comments, they really motivated me to finish this thing! Sorry for the wait, but I didn't want to leave this story unfinished, so leave a comment telling me what you thought!

Thanks for yearnin' with me.



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