

That One Time Andrew Got Cursed

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That One Time Andrew Got Cursed

by [jingerhead](#)

Summary

Andrew is working at a blacksmith's shop when he runs into the biggest change of his life: he looks exactly like Prince Aaron Minyard. Now he's suddenly moving into the palace and learning how to run a kingdom and meeting nobles and...

Well, life in the country had never been easy, but sometimes he thinks it was better than this.

~*~

Or, Andrew's journey through loss and healing as he works his way to becoming King of Palmetto.

NOTE: This is a prequel to my series, 'That One Time Neil Ended Up In a Fairy Tale'.

Caged Animals

Chapter Notes

Hello my darlings!! I'd like to apologize again for my big mistake, but I promise this is going to be 100x better than it would have been if I didn't correct it. I decided to take my time with these, but at the same time I really wanted to get them out there. To everyone who left me beautiful comments and kudos on the previous work, I really appreciate and love them, I'm sorry they got deleted and I love you all!

PLEASE PAY ATTENTION TO POSSIBLE TRIGGER WARNINGS! I'll always include a list of them before each chapter if they are there. I'll be writing a bit of heavy stuff before we move on to the healing and happy parts. This is rated E partly because of future heavy stuff I'll write but mostly just because there will be eventual smut. Thank you all so much, I hope you enjoy!

TW for: Drake Spear exists

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

Everywhere around Andrew was stone and steel, but he supposed that's what made prisons so secure.

This wasn't his first time in one. Sometimes, when he was younger, he'd purposefully get caught stealing in the colder seasons so that he'd have somewhere relatively warm to stay, protected from the wind and snow. Those jails had always been small and flimsy: just a couple of cells with steel bars for walls and a potato sack to sleep on. *This* wasn't a jail. This was a proper prison, with thick walls that muted noise between inmates, heavy doors with hinges that never squeaked and cots hung from the walls. These were made to be more permanent, and already Andrew had wasted three months trapped inside.

But it was better than what was out. Andrew would choose this place over any other he'd stayed in. Here, he didn't have to put up a mask in order to not be thrown out by the end of the night. Here, if someone swung at him he could swing back twice as hard and the guards would only interfere if someone was close to death. Here, nobody cared, and Andrew was alright with that.

Andrew's cell had one small window, covered with glass and bars that gave him a view of the prison courtyard. Since the increase in inmates, the courtyard has almost always been constantly filled as the guards keep rotating everyone. Andrew had been stuck with one of the smaller cells, most likely due to his age and size, but he counted himself lucky because the larger cells had up to five people living inside. The warden was trying to free prisoners who've committed minor offences, but if he couldn't he ordered executions. Andrew was hoping to get released soon, but it was more likely he'd meet his death within the prison.

Inmates that caused trouble could be beaten to death or taken to solitary and forgotten. Since his arrival, Andrew had only had to physically fight three people before he was given a fairly wide berth. The rest he could deal with threats and the thin pipe he'd carved to a point, kept hidden up his sleeve. The guards didn't care enough to take it from him.

Currently, Andrew was alone in his cell. There were two cots, one of them higher up the wall than the other that Andrew had claimed to be his, allowing him to look out the window. He was basking in the silence until he would be getting a new cellmate, since his last one had been taken to solitary two weeks ago and had yet to return. To keep his hands busy, he took out the pipe he'd turned into a shiv and practiced moving it between his fingers. There wasn't much to do in the cells, especially since he'd never been taught to read. Once in a while he'd steal a book from the library and tear out some pages, keeping them to himself and folding them into shapes he then stuck between the bars on his window.

Three months, and all he had to show for it was the paper on his window. If he were someone else, Andrew might've laughed.

"Doe," someone called outside of the cell. Andrew turned away from the small light he could see to stare through the bars, recognizing the guard calling for him to be one of the very few he could tolerate in this place. His last name was Taylor and he was a large man that, unlike the others, never used his power over the inmates.

"Food?" Andrew asked, because he was hungry as shit and had to skip breakfast because the prison didn't have enough for everyone, anymore.

"Soon," Taylor promised. "You have a visitor."

That caught Andrew's attention. He raised an eyebrow, because he knew exactly who it would be. "Joy of joys," he said in as bored of a tone as he could. In reality, his heart was pounding faster in both anticipation and fear. Visitors had to pay to come to the prison, which meant that rarely anyone did, and the Spears weren't exactly wealthy.

"It's a woman," Taylor added as though that would gain Andrew's interest. He raised a key and began to unlock the cell door, swinging it inwards and raising a pair of cuffs. "I'll take you there, then lunch."

"Is that what time it is?" Andrew asked, sliding off of his cot. He slid his makeshift-shiv into his sleeve, kept tight to his forearm due to the strip of fabric he kept tied there. Taylor didn't bat an eye and just fastened the cuffs around Andrew's wrists, directing him out of the cell and down the hall of loud inmates.

"More people are arriving this afternoon," Taylor mused as they walked. Andrew hummed in response, but it was barely heard over the yells from the cells they walked by. "You'll have a new roommate by the end of the day."

"Cellmate," Andrew corrected. "What happened to Smithy?"

"Died, probably." Taylor paused to open the door out of the rows of cells, leading Andrew down a different hallway. "I'm surprised you remember him."

“I remember everyone,” Andrew mused, rotating his wrists in his cuffs to make them jangle.

He was taken to where inmates could see their visitors. It was an empty hallway with five small cells that were about the size of a closet, which would allow privacy. Taylor opened one in the middle, holding out an arm and letting Andrew walk himself inside. The cuffs were kept in place and the door swung closed again. Andrew wished he could have a place to sit, but all he could really do was lean against one wall and stare at the other.

“I’ll bring her in,” Taylor said.

Andrew wanted to tell him not to bother, but nobody would listen.

He was painfully aware of every noise he heard while standing alone. He tried to fill the silence by jangling the cuffs again, but when he heard the soft clack of shoes as they hit the stone floor, Andrew could hear his heartbeat the most. Every step closer only gave him more dread, and when they stopped moving just outside the cell, Andrew forced himself to keep breathing through his nose. It wasn’t a quiet noise.

“Andrew?” called a soft voice. He didn’t want to look at her, and had tried to convince himself that he wouldn’t, but Andrew couldn’t resist looking up at Cass Spear. She was dressed just a bit more formally than she would’ve around her farm, in a floor-length beige dress and dark brown shawl. Her hair was covered by a white hood, and she was nervously tapping her fingers together.

It hurt to see her. Andrew had hoped she’d just let him rot in here instead of coming inside, but he should’ve known that wouldn’t happen.

“Are they treating you well?” Cass asked after Andrew didn’t respond. He took a moment to watch her face, seeing the anxiety there, and maybe just a bit of guilt. “Are you hurt?”

Still no answer. But Andrew couldn’t look away, either. Cass was a patient woman, and Andrew knew that she had actually cared for him. Cared enough about him to give him a place to live on her farm, as more than just extra help. But in the end, choosing to stay there had been just the same hell that he’d gone through in the past. And yet, he clung to it.

He was still clinging to it. He didn’t know why.

“We are...trying to work on a deal to get you out,” Cass explained. “Drake told me what happened. He said the other guards attacked you first, and that it was just self defense - “

Andrew kicked the wall at the mention of Drake Spear because he couldn’t punch it. Drake fed Cass a version of the story that would benefit him. Of *course* he’d try to get Andrew out of here, and *of course* Cass would go along with it. Drake could pull as many strings as he wanted, but beating a member of the royal guard until he was half-dead meant life imprisonment, no matter what reason Andrew had to do so. He wondered if anyone would care to hear it, or believe him in the first place.

“I’m not getting out,” Andrew growled, mostly to himself.

“Andrew, we want you *home*,” Cass said quietly.

He couldn't leave. He wouldn't go back there, no matter how much he wanted to cling to Cass and her farm. “That place was never home,” he said as harshly as he could, looking back into Cass' eyes. He could see something in her break as they filled with tears, and he wanted to take back what he said if it meant she wouldn't cry, but he wasn't lying. Her farm was meant to be a place for him to stay to work during the summer. He wasn't supposed to stay for over two years.

He should've kept moving. Should've stuck to what he's always done, because if there's one thing Andrew has learned over time, it was that he couldn't trust anyone around him.

“I can't give up on you,” Cass breathed, her tears falling down her cheeks. “Drake's trying to round up enough money to get you out. He's spoken on your behalf.”

Andrew wondered if her tune would change if she heard what Drake had done to him. But he wasn't stupid enough to think that she would pick some orphan over her own flesh and blood. “You don't want me out of here,” Andrew said slowly, getting close enough to the bars as he dared. Cass flinched and took a step back. “You let me out, I'll do it again. Only this time I'll finish the job.”

“Why are you saying this?” Cass asked, raising one hand to brush away the tears. “You never used to be like this.”

“I was always like this,” Andrew argued. “Don't come back.”

She sniffed loudly and turned on her heel, but she barely took one step before stopping. Andrew hated how awful she looked when she was crying, but most of all he hated himself for being the cause of her pain. Because even after everything that had happened, he'd let Cass in and she hadn't pushed him away. Nobody else had done that.

“I'm not giving up,” she said quietly. She sounded nervous, like she was waiting for Andrew to scream at her to leave him alone, but he couldn't get his mouth to work. “I'm *not*.”

He wished she would.

~*~

The food served was always the same thing: a slice of bread, something they tried to pass as broth that Andrew was convinced was just cabbage water, and a single slice of meat. Today it was some kind of fish that left a bad taste in Andrew's mouth, but it helped settle the hunger he felt, and he wasn't one to complain about the type of meal he could get. He's had too many days without food to not appreciate anything he could get his hands on, as shitty as it was.

Due to the sudden increase of inmates, the guards kept everyone on a constant rotating schedule. The day was supposed to start with breakfast - which they haven't been able to have because of the food shortage - and then move to working around the prison. Andrew knew he got out of some work due to his age, but his small size also let him crawl into spots

others couldn't. He was sixteen years old but barely stood five feet tall(a fact he knew only because the prison doctors had measured his height when he first arrived), which was advantageous at times, and annoying at others.

They were given some time outside if the weather was nice, and then returned to their cells after dinner, if there was enough food. After the disaster of a visit that Andrew had never wanted in the first place, he was taken to the dining hall to eat and then to the courtyard while the sun was still in the sky. There were a few activities to do, such as board games or exercise equipment that he'd use to pass the time. Usually, he'd find a wall to lean against and use his shiv to draw in the dirt, which kept others away and gave him something to focus on.

He was still out there when he heard the new inmates arrive. Just about everyone in the courtyard made their way towards the fence to get a look, but Andrew wasn't interested. It would just be a bunch of new people to take up space and apply to the food shortage, and eventually add to the amount of dead there already were.

Andrew brushed away the squiggly mountains he was drawing in the dirt to start something new when someone sat at his side. Glancing to his left revealed it was another teen named Paris, who was tall and scrawny for his age and scared of everyone in the prison. Andrew let him gravitate closer than others because Paris didn't know how to defend himself but had been bold enough to ask for help. That, and it helped keep things around here a little interesting.

Paris sat at least six feet down the wall and didn't move to get any closer, bringing his knees to his chest and staring at the fence, where everyone else was jeering and yelling. Andrew looked back at his dirt, starting to draw a few flowers that looked more like clouds on lines than anything else. "Rough day?" he asked Paris.

The other teen managed a snort, which was better than nothing. "Yeah. Dropping a hammer on my foot was the *good* part."

"Hmm," Andrew hummed, brushing away his flowers. He wanted some of the paper he had in his cell instead, because the drawing was starting to get boring.

"Do you think there'll be anyone new like us?" Paris asked after a full minute.

Like us, Andrew thought, glancing at the fence and trying to figure out what Paris meant by that. He frowned and looked back at the ground when he didn't like any of the things that came to mind.

"It would be nice to have someone else our age here," Paris continued, letting go of his legs to stretch them out.

"Nice'?" Andrew echoed.

Paris slowly nodded. "You know what I mean."

They were the youngest at the prison, but they were there for specific reasons. Andrew was here because he had attacked a royal guard. And Paris... "You've killed someone, Paris,"

Andrew reminded him.

“Self-defense,” Paris quickly snapped.

Andrew wondered if Paris kept repeating that to try and appear not-guilty, or if he was telling the truth. He had yet to find out, but with how timid Paris was all the time, he was starting to believe that it really had been an act of self-defense, and Paris felt incredibly guilty about it. Either that, or he was a good liar.

Good liars are problems. Andrew has had more than enough experience dealing with them in his life.

“They’d have killed someone, too,” Andrew argued for the sake of arguing.

“Maybe not.”

“You don’t get in here without something like that.”

Paris didn’t argue, but he didn’t seem happy about the truth thrown his way. A few moments later, the guards started breaking up the crowds by the fence and rounding up everyone in the courtyard to get back inside. Andrew slid his shiv back under his sleeve and followed the mass with Paris sticking close to him. He’d been hoping they would go to the large dining hall for some food before bed, but quickly recognized the way back to the cells.

“No dinner, Paris,” Andrew mumbled, tapping one foot while they waited for some guards to stop a fight further up in the crowd. “More people arriving...smells like trouble.”

“Smells like shit,” Paris argued, grimacing to himself.

They parted ways a few minutes later. Andrew was taken into his cell, which wasn’t unoccupied like he had hoped it would be. Taylor had said so this morning, so Andrew hadn’t forgotten that he was supposed to be getting a new cellmate, he’d just decided to ignore the information. Especially when he’d been thrown off by Cass’ visit.

The man in his cell had a few inches on him, but not many. He was clearly muscular but not huge, eyes thin and dark enough they were almost black in color. His hair was very dark green and straight, long enough to be kept tucked behind his pointed ears. If Andrew had to guess, he’d suppose his new cellmate was half-elvish.

And annoying.

“You have *got* to be joking,” was the first thing he said.

Andrew contemplated drawing his shiv to shut him up.

Hi again.

Thank you all again for reading! I really appreciate it and I hope you enjoyed. Apologies for the amount of ocs that are here, I hope it doesn't take away from the story. I don't have much to say in an ending note so I'll just say to leave a comment telling me what you thought if you'd like, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well.

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

Come talk to me on tumblr if you'd like! [@jingerhead](#)

Planned Escape

Chapter Notes

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

“This is ridiculous,” the man huffed, turning a few times in a circle as though he was trying to pace. The cell wasn’t large enough for that, and Andrew supposed this guy was justified in his anger and annoyance at the state of the prison, but if he was going to be this loud all the time, it would become a problem. “How old are you?” he asked, stopping in the middle of the cell.

“Sixteen,” Andrew answered. He pushed past and pulled himself into his cot.

“Bullshit. You look twelve at most.”

Andrew pulled his shiv from his sleeve and let his new cellmate get a good look at it. “Are you done making meaningless observations?”

The man frowned, but didn’t flinch back at the sight of the shiv. “You can just carry that?”

After letting his new cellmate stare at the shiv for a few seconds more, not offering a response to his question, Andrew put it away again and reached under his pillow for the few pieces of paper he had left, starting to fold them absentmindedly. His cellmate sighed loudly and then sat down on the cot below.

“So, what’re you in for?” he asked.

Andrew didn’t say anything. He folded the piece of paper into a triangle, then unfolded it and made as tiny of squares as he possibly could.

“I’m Lake,” the man introduced himself.

“I didn’t ask,” Andrew pointed out.

Lake whistled. “This is going to be an interesting few weeks.”

A few weeks. Lake seemed optimistic about how long he was going to last. Andrew wasn’t sure whether to respect that or think he was pathetic for accepting death so quickly. In the end he decided to ignore it and him, laying down on his cot as he continued to fiddle with the paper in his hands.

They were silent until the next morning. No breakfast, as what was becoming the usual, but instead straight to work. The first place they went was the laundry room, where there was a constant rotation of bedsheets and clothing. It included poorly designed assembly lines that broke all the time and large barrels of water people used to wash anything that came along. Andrew stuck near the assembly line more often than not because of one specific reason.

“Hey,” Lake spoke up, the first thing he said that day and the first time he tried to get Andrew’s attention. “Do you know anyone here who’s tall, big nose, has a stone for a tooth?”

Andrew gave Lake his stare that has been known to make people ‘uncomfortable’. “Do you have any idea how little that narrows it down?”

Lake huffed as a nearby guard called for Andrew. “He’s got a rock in his mouth.”

Ignoring his cellmate, Andrew ducked under the assembly line to get to the large vent on the other side. It had already been opened by the guard who didn’t have to say anything for Andrew to start lowering himself into it. The vent was in a horrible place because the assembly line broke all the time. When someone went to get the tools needed to fix it, they usually ended up dropping something down the vent. Andrew was the only person small enough to fit down it.

Luckily, laundry duty only happened during the morning, because Andrew was sure he’d be stuck in the place the entire day otherwise.

There were a few places to grip he was used to holding, knowing the familiar path to the bottom of the vent, where it was much less claustrophobic inducing. This time the only thing that had fallen was a thin drill, but he glanced around just in case. To the right was a small pathway that led to another vent opening that Andrew knew was the kitchens. He could smell something coming from there that made his starving stomach growl.

He quickly started pulling himself up the vent again. What he wouldn’t give for something to eat right now.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to wait much longer until they were taken to the dining hall for food. To Andrew’s annoyance, Lake sat right across from him. “Are you sure you haven’t seen anyone with a stone tooth?” he asked while eating his stale bread. “It’s kinda hard to miss.”

“No,” Andrew said, hoping he’d get left alone.

“Mrgh,” Lake choked, putting the bread down. “I’ll find him.”

Whatever. It was strange that Lake was searching for someone, but Andrew didn’t know enough people to figure out if that was uncommon in a prison. He decided to ignore it for now.

The second suspicious thing that Lake did, given that the first was how he was searching for someone, was spread the blanket kept on his cot underneath it, on the floor. It was like he was trying to cover something, but the one time Andrew had peeked underneath it he hadn’t seen anything interesting. Just some weeds growing between the cracks in the stone floor.

The third suspicious thing he did was continuously write letters. Andrew didn’t know how to read or write, so letters had no meaning to him, but he knew that inmates were allowed to send one each week if they wanted to. Lake seemed to take advantage of that, and each time he wrote one he had a serious and calculating look on his face.

Other than that, Lake seemed to make a conscious effort to make sure nothing about him was off, which in itself was the fourth suspicious thing. After initially talking to Andrew and getting nothing but silence on a good day, or a difficult response on a bad one, he backed off without completely shutting Andrew out. Lake would ramble once in a while, but not in an annoying way, and easily started calling him ‘Kid’ after Andrew had refused to hand over his name.

Everything pointed to Lake planning something. The letters, looking for someone in the prison, and making sure he didn’t stand out? Andrew was pretty sure he was trying to break someone out. And once the idea got stuck in his head, he just had to figure out if he was right.

Andrew didn’t care about subtly bringing the topic up. He wanted answers and was determined to get them. After sharing a cell for three weeks, Andrew cornered Lake when the guards called for lights out, leaning over the side of his cot to stare down at the man. He was clearly uncomfortable with it.

“You’re planning something,” Andrew began, watching Lake’s face carefully.

“Yeah. Obviously,” Lake replied, eyes darting towards the wall.

“Tell me.”

Lake didn’t say anything for a few moments. One of his feet began to tap against a chain keeping his cot attached to the wall and he wouldn’t stop fidgeting, all clear signs that he was nervous. “How about a deal?” Lake finally asked, sitting up and settling his feet on the stone floor. Andrew continued to stare from his cot. “I’ll tell you why I’m in here if you tell me why you’re in here.”

“Why would that matter?” Andrew asked.

“I want to know why a sixteen year-old is in a prison instead of home with his family,” Lake explained. “Tell me why, and I’ll explain my plan.”

It was a strange kind of *quid-pro-quo* : a truth for a truth. Andrew took a moment to think about it, and decided telling Lake why he’d ended up in the prison wouldn’t be the worst thing to give away. “I almost killed a royal guard,” Andrew said, shifting so that he could rest his head on his folded arms, still looking at Lake.

“Why’d you do that?” Lake asked, frowning.

“Ah, ah,” Andrew said as snarkily as he could. “Your turn.”

Lake clearly wanted to argue, but he relented for now. “I got in here on purpose. I’m trying to find someone who’s part of my group of raiders. I managed to find him yesterday, so now I just need to get a message to my boss so that we can bust out.”

“A prison break?”

“Yeah. It won’t be hard with the amount of unrest that’s already here.”

It wouldn't be, especially if there was organized help on the outside, but there were still guards to fight and walls to scale and cuffs to break. "What've you planned so far?" Andrew asked.

"Well, we're planning on attacking this upcoming solstice," Lake began, standing up and walking until he stood right underneath the cell's window. "During dinner. Most of the guards will have put in to celebrate, so not many will be patrolling. We just need to take care of everyone that could respond."

"With?"

"Drugging them." Lake glanced over his shoulder, pointing at his ears. "I'm half-elvish. I'm not technically a magic-user, like some, but I can summon plants to me if I concentrate. I've been working on this."

Andrew got out of his cot when Lake motioned him to, kneeling on the floor to look underneath the blanket Lake had put there not long after first arriving. Underneath were some plants, not very large in size but clearly not fully grown yet. A couple of dark green leaves surrounded one that stood tall, lighter than the rest. Andrew didn't recognize it.

"This is a cuckoo-pint," Lake whispered, covering them again quickly. "Poisonous. The berries should grow by the time the solstice hits, so I'll crush the berries up and get them put in the wine."

"How?" Andrew asked.

"Haven't quite figured that out yet," Lake admitted, sitting back and crossing his arms. "I'm not sure if I can sneak into the kitchens. Because of the food shortage, the cooks have a lot of time off, but it would be impossible to sneak inside."

"Except for the vent in the laundry," Andrew said.

"The vent in the laundry?" Lake asked.

"It connects to the kitchens. People drop tools down it all the time, and I'm the only one that can fit inside."

The news was welcome. Lake slowly smiled and nodded a few times. "Okay. So, if I happen to drop an entire box full down the vent..."

"I guess I'd have to go get them," Andrew replied.

"And, you'd just help out?"

"Just promise me you can get me out of here," Andrew said. There wasn't a place out there waiting for him, like some other inmates certainly had, but Andrew liked the idea of not *having* to go anywhere. He wanted to start traveling the land again, even if he had nothing.

"I swear," Lake promised, holding out a hand. "Shake on it?"

Andrew glanced at the hand, then got to his feet and climbed back into his cot. “You should work on growing your plants.”

“Right,” Lake huffed. Andrew rolled so he was facing the wall, trying to think of where he would go if this actually worked. Lake moved around on the floor, opening one of the small dresser’s drawers and slamming it closed a little too hard. “You know, I think you’d make a good raider, Kid.”

The idea wasn’t immediately off-putting, but Andrew had no idea what raiders did or how they worked. He glanced over the side of the cot with the intention to either shut the offer down or ask a further question, but accidentally caught the moment Lake took off his shirt. He didn’t mean to stare, but even in the dark he could make out the cloth and bandages wrapped around Lake’s chest. “You’re not a man,” Andrew blurted out.

Lake turned. “No,” he - she - *they* agreed. “Not a woman, either. Somewhere in between.”

“Okay,” Andrew replied, and turned around in his cot to give them some privacy. He didn’t care about how they presented or what they wanted to be referred to as, because it was their problem, not his. Things like ‘social norms’ or structure didn’t apply to the streets. Tons of orphans would take advantage of being whatever they could to get some more food or coins. Some girls chopped their hair and dirtied their faces to get simple jobs, and some boys grew theirs out to get more money.

“Goodnight,” Lake said while climbing into the bottom cot.

“Hmm,” Andrew hummed, closing his eyes and trying to fall asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

Thanks so much for reading! I absolutely ADORE Lake, they weren't supposed to have a huge role and technically they still don't, but they will make more than 1 appearance because I love them. Let me know what you thought in the comments, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well.

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

Come talk to me on tumblr if you'd like! [@jingerhead](#)

The Land is My Home

Chapter Notes

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

Another week passed before the plants were ready. If he didn't have an internal clock thanks to his memory or every guard around the prison excitedly chattering about the upcoming solstice, Andrew might've been afraid they'd missed it. By now he's known Lake for a month, and the past week after talking to each other about the escape plan was the most comfortable he'd had. No fights or words could stop him from thinking that he was close to getting out.

Which was why he was on his absolutely best behavior. He couldn't afford to get into solitary when freedom was so close.

The days were still full of work and too little food, but the sun had shone brightly every day in the courtyard. Andrew and Lake were still kept on the same rotation, and ever since Lake had found their friend they came to the prison for in the first place, they had been trying to find him every time they had the chance. Andrew didn't go along, mostly because he didn't want to be around anymore people and preferred his current routine.

The cuckoo-pint plants had only just completely grown. They had clusters of red berries that Lake had pointed out, explaining that they were going to crush them up so that they'd be easier to slip into the wine. They had to be explaining the last of the plan to their friend, because Andrew had a clear look at the two from his spot sitting against one of the courtyard walls, and noticed that the man Lake was talking to had glanced his way seven times already.

He wasted time by scribbling in the dirt with his shiv.

After Lake's friend looked Andrew's way two more times, Paris sat down against the same wall Andrew was against, only this time he was much closer than usual. Paris had a black eye and split lip, and his dark hair had been messed up because he kept grabbing it. Andrew couldn't keep an eye on both him and Lake, so he chose the closer problem and looked Paris over.

"I can't keep doing this," Paris huffed, repeating the phrase under his breath over and over.

It got annoying quickly. Andrew stopped scribbling in the dirt, more on edge from the strange behavior Paris was showing. He'd been like that for weeks, but this was much worse than usual. "Shut up before I make you," Andrew warned, watching Paris' movements out of the corner of his eye.

Paris grit his teeth and jerked sharply to face Andrew. "Will you?" he asked, letting go of his hair and forming poorly-made fists. "And how would you? Wave your little blade around and make threats all you want, but I know you don't know how to use it."

Well. Andrew turned his head, giving Paris his full attention. “What’s wrong?” Andrew asked, holding more tightly to his shiv. He couldn’t afford to get into a fight, but he’d defend himself if he had to. It was looking more and more like Paris was a good liar.

The other teen seemed to settle just slightly, as though he was rethinking his challenge. “Sorry for blowing up,” he growled. “This place is hell.”

“Why?” Andrew asked, watching the small group that walked by, close enough to hear their conversation. “Not easy to kill someone with so many around, huh, Paris?”

“What?” Paris choked, stiffening.

It was a guess, but one that was probably true at this point. “I’ll bet that first one felt good,” Andrew taunted, watching Paris’ eyes waver with panic. “Good enough that you wanted to keep going. And there’s so many around here you can kill, but there’s no opportunity to do it, huh?”

He could see the moment Paris’ mask broke. The boy yelled and scrambled to lunge at Andrew, but Paris was clumsy and still lanky, so Andrew easily avoided his grasp. Paris stumbled into one of the men in the group that had been passing, who didn’t hesitate to throw Paris to the ground. Andrew got to his feet and slid away, watching from a distance as Paris got the fight he wanted, the guards quickly rushing forward to break it up.

Taylor was on duty, ordered to direct the rest of the inmates away. He waved a hand at Andrew’s side and said, “I knew that kid wasn’t right.”

“Hmm,” Andrew hummed in agreement. He slid his shiv into his sleeve and watched as some guards pinned down and cuffed a screaming Paris’ wrists behind his back. “Taylor, maybe you should watch your cold. It would suck if you were sick on the day of the solstice.”

Taylor frowned, but it only took a moment for him to understand what Andrew was talking about. “Oh, right,” he said, clearing his throat. “My wife’s been on me about that. I might need some of her cooking to put it straight.”

“Feel better soon,” Andrew said, raising one hand to give the guard a two-fingered salute. He then turned on his heel and found Lake in the crowd, who was frowning at the sight of the fight being broken up.

“Your friend?” they asked, clear concern on their face.

“I don’t have friends,” Andrew replied.

“Oh,” Lake mumbled. “Then what am I?”

“A nuisance,” Andrew decided, turning away to get ready to go back inside.

~*~

Lake had ground up the red berries until they were soupy. There was enough that they fit in two vials that Andrew could fit under his sleeve, kept to his forearm with the strip of fabric

he kept tied there. He hated to do it but had given his shiv to Lake so he could keep the vials there, grudgingly heading to the laundry room early the morning of the solstice. Lake hadn't stopped vibrating since they'd gotten up and headed there.

"You're going to give us away," Andrew whispered to them as threateningly as he could while loading sheets into a large basket.

"No I'm not," Lake argued as they did the same. "Everyone's too busy thinking about the solstice celebrations. They don't want to work."

That was true, but Andrew hated Lake's movements anyway. They spent some time actually working, until one of the conveyor belts inevitably broke, as usual. Lake had jumped to fix it, and if they hadn't planned on dropping tools down the vent Andrew thought they would've done it anyway, because they seemed to genuinely trip and spill all the tools down there. One guard that was nearby simply shook his head and sighed loudly.

"Doe," he yelled, snapping his fingers.

"Guard," Andrew replied, not moving.

The guard huffed again. "We don't have all day. Get down there."

Andrew stood still for a bit longer, just to be difficult, but Lake's wide and somehow glaring eyes got him moving. They had already pulled the vent up, so Andrew knelt down by it and squeezed down. When he reached the bottom, Andrew walked over the tools Lake and dropped, sliding the short way to the vent opening in the kitchens, which were clearly empty. The vent there, which was in the wall and not bolted, just like the one in the laundry room on the floor above, allowed Andrew a view of the empty space. He easily opened the way and snuck towards the things set out for the celebrations.

There were many bottles of wine that were already opened. Andrew took out the vials Lake had given him and took the cap out of them both, pouring just a bit of the mashed berries into the wine bottles. When everything had been poured, he slid the vials back into his sleeve and returned to the vent, putting it back in place and rushing back to the tools, quickly gathering them and climbing back up the vent, where Lake was sitting, tapping one foot nervously.

"Had to go looking for a few," Andrew mumbled to them, dropping the tools back into the box.

"But you found them all?" Lake asked, grinning.

"Hmm," Andrew hummed, walking back to the sheets he'd been folding up for the baskets.

Everything had been set. Now, they just had to wait.

Lake whispered to Andrew that the attack would come when they were in the courtyard, which would be after the guards had their solstice feast, and that he should stick near them so that he could get out during the chaos. Andrew listened, and as annoying as it was he stood by their side the whole day, glad to have his shiv returned to him while walking down a

crowded hallway. They had lunch and then did some more work around the prison, poorly cleaning and avoiding fights whenever they happened. Finally, they were let outside into the courtyard.

“What time?” Andrew asked.

“Like, what time is it?” Lake asked, looking at the sky. “I’d say early evening?”

“No. When are they coming?”

“Oh, soon,” Lake said, leading the way towards their friend. “I hope.”

Lake’s friend wasn’t talkative, which was a good thing for Andrew’s sanity. They quickly planned that, once the attack started, they would rush towards the fence, where the raiders would be waiting to help anyone over that they could. Andrew glanced around, counting only ten guards on duty. The rest had to be at the feast.

“Black-Beard would time it with the toast,” Lake’s friend grunted, looking down his nose at Andrew. “Provided you did what we needed.”

“Hey,” Lake snapped, taking a step between them before Andrew could say anything back. “Leave the kid to me, yeah? He’s coming with.”

The man grumbled nonsense and took a few steps away, heading towards the fence. Andrew didn’t like him, but he was willing to work with these people if he could get back to the country. He still hadn’t figured out where he wanted to go, which could become a problem if he just started wandering.

“Sorry about Rock-Head,” Lake spoke up, crossing their arms. “He’s been in here for too long. I’m pretty sure he thinks we were going to leave him here.”

“His name is Rock-Head?” Andrew asked, because he *had* to.

“Not his real name. In our group, we don’t usually share our names. Everyone else knows me as Swift-Foot.” Lake pointed to their ears. “Elf genetics. I have heightened senses, more stamina, and I’m light as a feather.”

“Then, Black-Beard has a black beard,” Andrew guessed.

Lake blinked once, then nodded. “Yeah, it’s huge. You’d think he’s part dwarf if it wasn’t for his size. People with dwarf blood never grow that tall.” They grinned to themselves, as though they were telling some kind of joke, but it faded quickly. “Let’s go. It’s going to start, soon.”

Andrew followed them to the fence, where Rock-Head was waiting. They stood in silence for a few minutes, which was only broken when three guards at the watchtowers were struck with arrows at the same time. Silence fell in the courtyard as one body fell down the roof, gaining the attention of everyone else.

“Dammit, Bushes,” Lake grumbled under their breath. “Learn how to shoot an arrow.”

“Bushes,” Andrew repeated.

Before Lake could explain, the guards were suddenly overrun by at least twenty people rushing down the rooftops. Most of them were taken out before they could fight back, leaving the courtyard open and defenseless. Two of the people on the roof dropped down and rushed to the fence, stopping in front of the trio standing there. One was covered from head to toe in cloth, hiding their face behind a mask and under a dark hood. The other was gripping two silver daggers, stood at least a foot taller than Andrew, had a bald head and the biggest beard he’d ever seen.

“We’re leaving,” Black-Beard said, his voice deep and almost booming in the silence of the courtyard.

The person completely covered at his side unsheathed a sword and swung it at the fence. It shouldn’t have, but the sword cut through the metal like a knife to butter, quickly creating a large opening. “Ready, Leader,” they said when they finished, voice raspy sounding from beneath the mask.

“Move,” Black-Beard commanded.

Lake and Rock-Head rushed through the opening. Andrew followed with the other two raiders close behind, and they led the way out of the front gates that were devoid of guards as well. A bell had begun ringing, but it was too late to stop anyone, and the guards that had the wine were surely poisoned by now. The rest of the raiders that had attacked on the roofs rushed away, disappearing into the crowd. Andrew kept an eye on Lake, especially when they veered away from the main path, running towards the small woods just outside of the prison.

“To camp!” Black-Beard boomed, hopping on the back of a huge black horse. The rest of the raiders hopped on horses as well, creating a mush of noise that would surely attract the attention of the guards that could move.

Andrew wondered if this was where he should leave.

“Kid!” Lake yelled, gaining his attention. They were on the back of a white horse, holding tightly to the reins and frowning down at Andrew. “We don’t have enough horses. We weren’t expecting extra cargo.”

“Then I’ll find my own way,” Andrew called back, half turning on his heel.

“The hell you will,” Lake snapped. “You’re one of us now, Kid!” They held out one hand in offering, having to lean down to get anywhere near Andrew.

Getting further than this on his own would be difficult, but not impossible. But even so, Andrew didn’t know where to go from here. The land was huge, and there would always be places to steal from and streets to sleep against, but he didn’t want to leave Lake just yet. He’d let himself open up again, just slightly, and once again he hadn’t been pushed completely away.

He was letting himself get too attached. Andrew reached out and grabbed their hand, letting them pull him up on the horse behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you're enjoying, and I do apologize for how short some of these chapters are. They are definitely going to get longer in the future, I hope y'all don't mind. Apologies for any ooc-ness. I still love Lake and all of these raiders, we've got a few more chapters with them before Andrew heads off and learns...things lol. Let me know what you thought in the comments, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well!

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

Come talk to me on tumblr if you'd like! [@jingerhead](#)

A Place of My Own

Chapter Notes

TW for mentions of scars and past rape.

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

The raiders lived in a forest not too far from Foxhole, the capital city of the Palmetto kingdom. The ride from the prison lasted the entire night, of which Andrew had spent too close to Lake on the back of their white horse. Nobody rested until they arrived at a specific spot in the forest, full of large tents between trees, lots of decorations hanging from branches and a huge firepit in the center of it all. The horses were taken towards some kind of stable built near the largest tent, which was much bigger on the inside than the outside would suggest.

“Lots of magic,” Lake explained while removing their horse’s saddle. “There’s a witch that lives here, and she lets us stay so long as we keep giving her pretty things that we steal. Nobody finds our camp because of the charms hung around.”

Andrew figured the charms they were talking about were the things he’d mistaken for decorations when they first arrived. There were lots of ropes with things hung from them, some of them trinkets and others fabric. They appeared to be hung around the perimeter of the camp, making sure every tent was inside the large circle they made.

“Well, welcome, I guess,” Lake said with a shrug. “I can show you around, if you want.”

So, Andrew followed them around the camp as they pointed things out to him. There were more tents that had been enchanted to be larger, storing goods like food and stolen items that the raiders were planning on selling. Lake warned Andrew to keep away from some tents and finally pointed to the largest one, explaining it was not only Black-Beard’s place but where meetings happened.

“I’m Black-Beard’s second,” they said proudly. “Oh, that’s my tent.”

Their tent was near the largest one and didn’t appear to be very special. There were a few things that gave it some personality, like the wind chime that was barely moving and the stump clearly fashioned into a seat next to it. The cloth the tent was made of was stained but not falling apart, a faded white color with splashes of brown that could’ve been from mud.

“We’ll get you one, too,” Lake assured him, walking away from their tent. “Come on, let’s get you some *real* food.”

Some meal had already been cooking, and most of the other raiders had already dug into it. Lake passed Andrew a bowl of meat and potatoes, which was the best thing he’d eaten since

he'd first arrived at the prison. Lake sat next to him on one of the benches they had and started going on about what they usually did: plan raids, hunted and cooked, practiced with their weapons and traveled for trade. Lake took Andrew's shiv when he took it out at their request, frowning at it and declaring they'd get him a proper weapon after he talked with Black-Beard.

It was just the afternoon. Andrew wasn't sure if he liked this place or wanted to run from it.

When he finished eating, Lake brought him to Black-Beard's tent, walking inside without bothering to announce their presence and leading him to the large desk the man was sitting at. Andrew stood stiffly, itching to hold onto the shiv that he hadn't let Lake take just yet as they exited the tent, leaving him alone with Black-Beard. He'd be lying if he claimed he didn't think the man was intimidating in the slightest, keeping an eye on how close the silver daggers were to the man's hands.

"Swift-Feet mentioned you in the letter," Black-Beard began, small eyes watching Andrew from the other side of the desk. "I'd like to thank you for your help getting them out."

Andrew didn't reply. He didn't want a 'thank you' for what he'd done, and he wasn't sure what to make of the leader quite yet. These people may have gotten him out of the prison, but it didn't mean he was indebted to them, and he didn't want *them* indebted to him, either.

"How old are you?" Black-Beard continued.

"Sixteen," Andrew replied honestly.

Black-Beard didn't seem happy. He got out of his chair, body towering over his desk and Andrew, but he didn't move to circle around or reach for his daggers. "I'm not interested in letting children join my group of raiders," Black-Beard said. "You should find honest work."

"I was in a prison," Andrew pointed out.

"You're a child," Black-Beard argued.

"I'm *not* a child," Andrew shot back. He hadn't been a child for a very long time - had never been given the chance to be. In this world, you had to fight to live. Andrew learned that the hard way at every place he traveled.

Black-Beard paused for a moment. "I believe you," he said, which surprised Andrew just slightly. He tried not to let it show, but Black-Beard most likely noticed. "You're not to come on raids unless I say so. We'll teach you how to fight in the meantime."

"What if I want to leave?" Andrew asked.

"You can at any time." Black-Beard sat back down heavily and continued, "People come and go all the time. You're not stuck here - in fact, if you left, I'd be happy. You should go to a kingdom and find some work instead of staying here."

He could, but Andrew had only been able to work on farms all his life when he wasn't living on the streets of some village, and he wasn't going to go back to that ever again. And

learning how to properly use a weapon wasn't a bad idea, either. He didn't say anything, but when he crossed his arms and stared Black-Beard in the eyes, Andrew must've given away his intentions to stick around.

"Alright," Black-Beard huffed. He reached for a drawer in his desk and opened it, pulling something out in his large fist. "Here, this'll work much better than whatever you have up your sleeve."

Andrew took it. It was a black holster of some kind with a thin knife inside that was about the size of Andrew's hand. The holster looked like it could wrap around his arm, meaning he could keep hiding his weapons beneath his sleeves. He didn't move to put it on but nodded once, not quite in thanks to the man in front of him but in acceptance.

"Lake is finding you a place to stay," Black-Beard said after a moment, looking back at the papers on his desk. "You should get some proper sleep."

Andrew hadn't had proper sleep in years. He left the tent before he could think too much about that.

Lake had gotten Andrew a tent that seemed cleaner than their own. It was put up a short distance from their own tent, in a place Andrew remembered being empty earlier. It was hung up between two trees with a single entrance that was left open while Lake led the way to it. More tents were set up a few feet away, but Andrew's was pretty secluded from the rest. He didn't mind that.

"It's not new, but it'll keep you safe from the wind," Lake said, opening the flap to the tent. "Here. We even got you a bed."

'Bed' was a generous term. It wasn't a cot like back in the prison, but more of a bundle of blankets and hard looking pillow. Andrew had slept on worse, so he wouldn't mind it. The only other thing inside the tent was a huge chest that Lake sat down on, patting it twice.

"You can store your stuff in here. You'll add more to the space the more raids you go on." Lake pointed to a few pieces of thick leather that were hanging over the entrance to the tent. "Those are charms to keep this place your own. We'll need to add some of your hair to it, so right now they don't work. But once the charms are complete, you'll be the only one allowed in. It's so nobody steals from each other."

That was the first moment Andrew realized that this was really *his* tent. When the charms were complete, nobody else would be allowed in, and *that* - well, after what he'd gone through in the past, that was the thing that finally made him relax just slightly. "How do we complete them?" he asked.

Lake helped cut off a small lock of hair, sealing them in the small vials tied at the tops of the pieces of leather. "There," they said, "once I leave I can't come back in without your permission."

Andrew nodded. They waved once, exited the tent and closed the flap to the entrance and Andrew finally *breathed*. He sat down on the heavy chest and took some time to bask in

being alone and knowing that nobody else could come in. He could hear some chatter outside, probably leftover people eating at the large fire pit, but it was soft enough to ignore. Andrew wasn't sure what to do.

He glanced down at the holster he was still holding. Might as well do that.

He pulled back his sleeve and untied the cloth from an old shirt he'd put there, which held the shiv in place. His arm felt strangely bare when it was gone, but the feeling was covered up again when he strapped the holster in place, the sheath to the knife strapped firmly to the underside of his forearm, covering up every mark there.

But Andrew didn't breathe easily again until his sleeve was pulled down once more. He closed his eyes and listened for a little bit, resting his eyes and finally realizing how tired he was from the journey after the prison break. Black-Beard had told him to sleep, which wasn't a bad idea. He just didn't know if he'd be able to settle enough to do that.

Still, he tried. He laid down on the blankets and hard pillow and closed his eyes, waking up to any loud noise outside his tent, but aware this was the most sleep he'd gotten in years.

~*~

Black-Beard had stayed true to his word, and Andrew hadn't gone on a raid since coming to the camp.

He'd met some of the others that lived there, all nice enough if rough around the edges. They all called him 'Kid' after hearing Lake call him that enough, which had annoyed Andrew at first until he decided he didn't care enough to give them his real name. They probably wouldn't start calling him that, anyways, since he hadn't forgotten Lake explaining that real names were rarely shared or used in camp.

Andrew learned how to properly use his knife in combat from the person that had been masked from head to toe during the prison break, who had what others boasted to be the sharpest sword in all the lands. Everyone called her Quick-Blade and it turned out she was a troll, which explained the need to cover up during the day so as to not turn into stone. The first time Andrew saw her take her mask off, showing off tough rock-gray skin and large fangs, it felt like he was seeing something he wasn't supposed to.

Quick-Blade was a good teacher, and the knife quickly became Andrew's preferred weapon of choice. Lake tried to convince him to pick up a bow, but after trying to use it multiple times, Andrew decided he didn't like the feel of the weapon. Lake used the bow everywhere: hunting, fishing, on raids and to give warnings to other people at the camp once in a while. Andrew learned how to throw his knife on hunting trips, which annoyed Lake to no end.

"You can't always rely on traps or luck to get a kill," they would grumble.

"I don't like it," Andrew always said back, because it was true. If he was to fight, he wanted to do it up close, winning while watching his opponent fall.

Andrew hadn't made friends, per say, but he'd come to an understanding with a few of the raiders. He was invited to meetings about future burglary attempts in Black-Beard's large tent, but still not allowed to actually go on any. One day, Black-Beard had given him an old pipe and taught him how to properly smoke. They did it regularly, finding a quiet spot in the evenings and sitting in silence. Smoking helped to relax Andrew and clear his mind for a time.

But they couldn't keep him away from raids forever, and after staying at the camp for months, learning how to fight and survive, he'd finally been allowed along. After that, he'd helped rob more people than he probably should have, but when living with nothing one had to do what they needed to survive. He'd made multiple trips with Black-Beard and other raiders to sell what they'd stolen, buying food and other supplies for the rest of the group.

Most days were uneventful, filled with training skills and hunting, cooking and trading stories. Andrew got used to smoking with Black-Beard and cooking food at the bonfire, able to pick out what was the most valuable and what should be left behind. His trunk in his tent had slowly begun to fill with random trinkets that he either liked or planned to sell one day, when he finally left. For now, he was comfortable.

Until one morning seemed to bring reality back.

Andrew exited his tent to find a thin sheet of snow covering the forest. He could see his breath and a few people in the camp messing around, tossing the snow at each other and running around. Andrew couldn't forget the day or time of year, but he'd let it pass by without much conscious thought, and therefore it had felt like barely any time had passed before winter arrived.

And suddenly, Andrew wasn't sure what to do.

"Snow's early this year, Kid!" Lake shouted as they ran by, heading for the bonfire. "It's too cold! Get a fire started!"

The snow may have arrived early, but that didn't mean it wouldn't stick.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

Thanks so much for reading! We're starting to get places, Andrew is learning how to fight and survive on his own. This will be important when he has power as prince and king lol, I have plans I can't wait to write. Let me know what you thought in the comments, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well!

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

Come talk to me on tumblr if you'd like! [@jingerhead](#)

Winter

Chapter Notes

TW for: mentions of suicidal thoughts, past rape, and Drake Spear existing in general

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

The days were getting colder.

The months living with the raiders had passed so quickly, and the next thing Andrew knew, the first flurries of snow had begun to fall. Everything continued as usual, but there was constantly a lingering thought in the back of Andrew's head as he debated on whether or not he should stay for the winter. It had started distracting him while trying to practice, to the point that he finally gave up trying to use the bow Lake had given him. They seemed to notice when he messed up three times while hunting some rabbits, and Black-Beard had taken him aside for smoking almost daily.

The smoking helped. He'd made his own pipe by this point, sanding the wood down during meals and any other time he could get a break. He'd always felt like he needed something to do with his hands, be it making something or fiddling with it. The only reason he didn't ask for advice was because this was a decision *he* had to make.

Living without a secure home and living from coin to coin was not a life Andrew wanted. There had been many sleepless nights where he'd hold tightly to a knife, listening for any creatures or people to attack. In the past, every coin he made went to food or clothes if he could afford it, and he seemed to be permanently cold and hungry no matter what time of year it was. It didn't matter if it was summer and the sun beat heat into the earth, or if he'd managed to find shelter in a barn for the night and have been offered a meal as repayment for working in the fields. Sometimes Andrew wondered why he kept pushing on - what he was looking for, or what made him keep getting back on his feet no matter what pushed him down.

He supposed that there was a certain kind of freedom he could get when he traveled, because while he might not have a place to stay or family at all, he'd always have the land he walked on. And that had yet to test his trust.

Andrew never considered himself to be homeless the way others saw it. He lived on the streets and traveled, taking work on farms during the warmer seasons and finding some kind of orphanage to stay in while it snowed. He'd been doing it since he was seven years old, when he finally realized he could do such a thing in the first place, and hadn't looked back since. He'd take pickpocketing and stealing to survive over false smiles and filthy people any day. So long as he could still see the sky, he considered himself to be at home.

And though Andrew had witnessed and experienced the worst in people, he was able to understand that there were few out there that seemed to do what they wanted without asking for things in return. When he was ten, he lived on the streets of a large village near some farmland, unable to find work for the season. The days had started to turn colder, but Andrew loathed finding somewhere to stay for the winter, and for the first time in his life he wondered if anyone living in the village would care if he got buried in the snow and froze.

That's when a random noble woman came to the village, took one look at all the children living on the streets, and started *giving* them things.

Andrew hadn't trusted her at first, and to this day he's sure he never really did, but the woman was stubborn and a strange sort of motherly. She always arrived in a horse drawn carriage, came in an expensive looking dress and veil, and *every* time she stepped on the streets she would frown and insult the very air the village gave off. The only reason Andrew knew was because he always happened to be around every time she got out of the carriage.

The village wasn't poor by any means, which was why so many orphans lived on the streets there and the people ignored them. The first time she came, the woman probably didn't have the intention of meeting any of the children living on the streets, but that's what ended up happening. She would stomp through the mud and filth to round up all the children she could find, bringing them to a large, empty alley. Some servants would bring out some chairs and then pass out warm meals, and the woman would sit among them and force them to talk to each other. When she noticed the rags they wore and how cold it was getting, she started bringing them new things to keep warm. Sometimes she would pull out a handkerchief and clean the faces of whoever she could snatch.

Usually, Andrew would try to sit as far away from her as possible. He'd never say no to a meal - especially one that was warm - or clothes without holes in them, and the only way he'd be able to get those things would be to go to that alley and deal with everyone else. He could tell that some of the other kids were going along with what she wanted, talking to each other and maybe even becoming friends. But Andrew couldn't do that, and he was sure that woman could see it, because she would stare at him and try to ask him questions. Andrew did a good job at ignoring her until she wouldn't let him anymore.

She sat next to him as the meals were passed out - some kind of warm stew - and wouldn't give him a bowl until he told her his name. And when he finally cracked and did so she *still* wouldn't give him any, grabbing one of Andrew's arms and pulling him close with that dreaded handkerchief, eyebrows furrowed at the sight of his face. At that point in his life Andrew hadn't known how to use a knife, but he'd almost bitten off one of her fingers when she wiped some dirt off his cheeks, and she had the audacity to scold him for it! She pinched Andrew's nose and told him to stay clean, or else he would die of some illness before the snow would reach them.

He'd never learned her name, but she never asked for anything in return, other than their company. She always apologized for not giving them money, explaining that she couldn't since it wasn't hers to give away in the first place, but she still tried to help them. Andrew had once asked why she continued to come almost every day, and she explained she had lost

her daughter not long before she first showed up, and she had no one to turn to for comfort, so this was what she decided to do instead.

Andrew almost thought it was sick: she'd lost her child, so she'd started trying to help the homeless orphans out of a guilty conscience, using them to replace her daughter.

But he didn't say that to her face. When the snow finally arrived, he'd found a place to live during the winter, and he never went back to that village again.

Like everything else in his life, he was unable to forget even the simplest of memories, recalling things like that woman, the names and faces of everyone he's ever met, and every other horrible thing he'd lived through. One beggar woman, who had shared an apple with Andrew, told him he must be some sort of royal lucky enough to have been given a magical gift at birth. The woman was most likely delirious from starvation and dehydration, explaining when Andrew dared to ask for more information that every royal baby got magical gifts when born, usually from fairies.

He'd still scoffed at the idea, because if Andrew was a royal baby, he wouldn't have grown up on the streets.

Andrew had understood that he lived in the Palmetto kingdom, and that he was at the very bottom of the social ladder. But even the kids starving on the streets knew they were ruled by Queen Tilda and that the capital was Foxhole, situated in the center of the kingdom. Andrew had never gone there, mostly because he heard warnings from kids that once had, telling anyone who would listen that the homeless were usually rounded up and put to death so that the nobles and merchants wouldn't have to see them or deal with their begging.

So instead he stuck to the villages and farmland, and it got easier to move around to find work the older he got. By the time he was a teenager, Andrew had gotten offers from farmers to live with them year round, but he wasn't stupid enough to be swayed by anything. And by now the land felt more like home than staying in one place did. He liked traveling: hopping on the backs of carriages and carts, looking at the scenery. Large portions of Palmetto were farmland, but the further into the country he walked there were more open plains, lakes and forests he could find. Andrew discovered that the west border of the kingdom was lined with mountains, and was warned not to travel past them into the E'Allen kingdom.

For some reason, Andrew never left Palmetto. He wasn't sure why, since he wasn't particularly attached to the kingdom, and at times he found himself wondering what Trojan or Vixen looked like. At one point he considered going into the Enchanted Forest, but even Andrew wasn't suicidal enough to actually step foot inside. He made it as far as the trees marking the entrance, ignoring the nymphs that starred and tried to trick him into stepping inside.

When he was thirteen, Andrew had begun traveling the eastern border, which was barren of mountains and instead mostly large open fields, except for a single city marking the central trade route between Palmetto and Trojan. While there, he heard stories about the ocean from merchants and decided to see it for himself, wasting most of the spring season he should've been searching for a job to see water that expanded beyond the horizon, beautiful and yet underwhelming at the same time. He found a job at a village not far away that smelled like

fish all the time and had little to catch that year. Summer had barely begun before Andrew was off again, following the roads that felt right to go down.

He'd needed a job, and quickly. And he'd managed to find one at the Spear Farm.

The bad places always appeared that way. People take care of their home the same way they'll take care of others, so run down places full of garbage were expected to have people just like the interiors. But the worst places are the ones that don't give such things away at first sight. Cass Spear had needed another hand at her farm, Andrew had needed a job, and she provided. Instead of sleeping in the barn with the animals, she'd given him his own room in her home.

She'd treated him like her own. Which is why it had hurt so much when she hadn't been able to see what was going on in that very house, caused by her *real* son.

Andrew had clung to the good memories, trying to block out the bad ones that he'd never be able to forget for as long as he lived. He'd clung to Cass, and then had forced himself to let her go in the prison, which is why he'd ended up with the raiders in the first place. At least here he had a space he could go to and be safe. He wasn't stupid enough to not realize that people like Lake and Black-Beard didn't care about him, but they couldn't see past how young he was to really let him into the group.

Maybe that's what he had to realize.

But would it really be worth it to leave *now*?

Andrew blew some smoke out of his lungs as Black-Beard did the same. He'd been mulling it over for a long time, trying to weigh the pros and cons of each decision. Leaving now, right before a winter storm hit, would be stupid. If he wanted to leave, he should've done it earlier. Here, he could be sure there would be a warm meal and shelter. Here, he could continue to learn how to hunt and defend himself.

Staying was definitely better.

He couldn't tell if Black-Beard noticed he'd made his decision, but after he had, the air between them seemed to relax until it felt normal.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

Thank you for reading! I found a use for my old writing lol, Andrew just can't make up his mind. He can't stay here forever 'cause he needs to go meet Wymack and Aaron and Nicky and the rest of the foxes, and I'm honestly not prepared to leave these raiders

behind. BUT I also went back to add all of this for a reason, they will return at some point. Let me know what you thought in the comments, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well.

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

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Parting

Chapter Notes

TW for: mentions of past rape

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

One year had turned to two before Andrew started feeling the itch to start moving. He usually felt that way after staying in one place too long, wanting to start traveling the country again. The only thing that would be difficult to give up was the privacy and safety he'd managed to secure while living at the camp with the raiders. He knew he'd be taking the charms hung at the entrance to his tent, especially after he learned that the magic stayed in them no matter how far away he was from the witch that created them.

He wasn't sure when he'd leave, only that it would be soon after this raid he was on.

The group kept the roads where they'd steal from unsuspecting travelers different just about every time, but there was a general area they stuck to. Any roads near the camp they stayed in was fair game so long as there was some kind of cover. They always wore hoods and masks to keep their identities hidden, which was stuffy but necessary. Andrew never liked wearing the mask but kept it on in case there were other people out there that could remember a face the way he could.

Being a raider wasn't very exciting. There was a lot more waiting they did than anything else, which was what they were doing right now. Lake had started entertaining himself by hanging from a tree, still hidden in the foliage. Quick-Blade was carving something into a rock with her huge sword, and Rock-Head was watching them both with a huge frown on his face. The rest of the people on the raid were whispering amongst themselves.

Andrew was leaning against a stump next to Black-Beard, who was waiting for a signal from a scout further down the road. So far three groups had gone down the road, but the scouts hadn't spotted anything truly valuable to steal. Black-Beard never wanted to rush in without there being something of value to take.

To get everyone's attention, he hit his daggers against a nearby rock. The noise wasn't very loud, but with how quiet everyone was already trying to be, it may as well have been a bell. Everyone immediately got into position, getting as close to the foliage as they dared to get a look at who was coming down the road. Andrew pushed off the stump and crouched near the bushes, spotting a large carriage pulled by two horses. It was decorated expensively.

"Swift-Feet," Black-Beard called.

Lake readied their bow. During raids they always tried to avoid killing people, so the arrows that flew only hit the carriage to cause confusion and panic. After the initial ones were shot,

the rest of the group launched themselves from the trees, rushing the carriage. The horses neighed loudly in fear and the people inside the carriage started screaming. There wasn't much of a fight, there never was, so Andrew kept to the job he usually had: free the horses.

They couldn't move much, but the coachman had leapt from his seat to try to escape and had been easily caught. Andrew found the buckles on the saddles that kept the shaft of the carriage and set them loose, allowing the spooked horses to sprint away. Without the horses, the passengers and whatever cargo they carried wouldn't be able to go anywhere.

Andrew turned around just as the door to the carriage opened. The yells from inside got louder, but the person that walked out looked anything but scared. The first thing Andrew noticed was the large wooden staff, and the second was the navy blue robe that covered the person from head to toe. Dark hair had been drawn up into elaborate arches around the wizard's head, thin glasses resting on the bridge of their nose. They raised their staff high and let it strike the ground once, gaining everyone's attention and bringing them to a stop.

In all the raids he'd been on, Andrew had been fortunate enough to not have to deal with a magic-user. Royal families and some nobles made oaths or deals for protection, which had to be the case here. Lake had already lectured Andrew about how some magic-users are dangerous, and if he met one he should be at the very least wary until he learned their true intentions. Andrew was pretty sure this wizard was going to fight tooth and nail to make sure the nobles inside the carriage were safe.

It didn't matter if the raiders avoided killing whenever they could. They were in trouble.

"I'll give you one chance to return what you've stolen," the wizard said, tone bored.

"Run," Black-Beard ordered, his voice echoing loudly.

There was immediate chaos. Some of the raiders were still trying to take things, but most followed the order to run and sprinted for the forest. Andrew turned and ran for the trees, but not before hearing the wizard cackle and shout, "You won't get away that easily!"

If they could get back to camp, they would be safe. When he just entered the forest, Andrew hesitated for a moment, glancing over his shoulder at the raiders that had yet to run. Quick-Blade and Black-Beard had started fighting the wizard, trying to go for the staff. After a few misses, Quick-Blade managed to slice through the wood, which caused the wizard to scream in rage. Andrew could feel the magic in the air.

"Kid," Lake hissed once they entered the forest and saw Andrew standing still. "Move, go!"

They grabbed one of his biceps to get Andrew moving again, and it was pure instinct that made him fight to push them away. It didn't matter that they were very much running for their lives, or that this was *Lake*, the only thing that mattered was getting their hands off of him. He didn't think Lake noticed while they were running that Andrew was trying to get them to let go, and after too long Andrew's arm was released.

They didn't stop moving until they got back to camp. Those that had stayed behind had a meal cooking, but they were clearly caught off guard by the sudden arrival. Some raiders

began to take off their masks and hoods, still breathing heavily while trying to catch their breaths. Andrew kept his on, needing something in place while he felt so numb, needing to rush back to his tent where nobody could come inside unless he wanted them to...

He paused when he heard one of the raiders break the silence. It wasn't somebody new, but Andrew hadn't spoken with him long enough to learn his name. "Damn magic-users!" he shouted, drawing everyone's attention and a few gasps from the people still cooking at the bonfire. "We could've gotten *so much*, but they have to - "

"That's enough," Lake immediately snapped. They pulled down their mask and rushed forward to confront the raider, tall enough that they could look him in the eyes. "There are magic-users in this camp. Keep your mouth shut."

"You aren't upset at all, are you?" the raider asked, throwing his hands in the air.

"If you don't like this, *leave*," Lake growled.

Andrew turned on his heel and rushed to his tent.

~*~

The only thing keeping the tent lit up was the single lantern Andrew kept in it. He'd emptied out his chest that had a spare set of clothes, a blanket, and whatever trinkets he'd kept for himself instead of selling. He also had some money and his knife, which he used to cut down the charms kept at the doorway to his tent. The leather was wrapped up in a spare rag and added to his bag, because they were too useful to lose.

He'd originally come into his tent to be alone and try to calm down, but Andrew couldn't stop hearing Lake's words over and over again. *If you don't like this, leave*. It sounded simple because it was, and the itch to get moving had only gotten worse by the hour. Andrew didn't want to do this for the rest of his life: he didn't want to live on stealing from others, or with the only safety he could feel from behind a few charms. No, he wanted to do something else.

Once everything was packed away in his bag, Andrew blew out the flame in the lantern and left it behind, exiting the tent. He didn't want to suddenly disappear, but he wasn't sentimental enough to want to say 'goodbye' to anyone that lived in the camp. He'd never forget these people, mostly because he couldn't but also because he didn't want to. So, Andrew walked through the small pathways made in the leaves and dirt to get to Black-Beard's huge tent.

He wasn't the only one inside. Lake was standing near his desk, whispering something in a different language, but the moment Andrew stepped inside they both stopped talking. Lake took one look at the bag on Andrew's shoulder and clearly understood, their eyebrows drawing together like they were concerned.

"I'm leaving," Andrew told them both.

"Good," Black-Beard grunted, getting out of his seat. Lake sighed loudly through their nose, eyes falling closed for a moment. "Have enough with you?"

“I can take care of myself,” Andrew replied. He shifted on his feet, ready to leave the tent and start towards the road.

“Wait,” Lake called before he could move. “Where do you plan on going?”

Andrew shrugged. “I’ll figure something out.”

“That’s...” They shook their head. “Foxhole isn’t too far from here. I’m sure you could find a job there.”

It felt like that was the last place Andrew had left to travel to in the Palmetto kingdom. He was wary to go there only because of the rumors he’d heard, but he really didn’t have a destination in mind. He nodded, mostly to try to reassure Lake, who visibly relaxed.

“Here,” Black-Beard spoke up, walking to a different table in his tent. He uncovered a small hand-held mirror, decorated in silver. “This is one of the things we got today.”

“I have enough money,” Andrew argued, looking from the mirror to Black-Beard’s face.

“It’s not to sell. It’s enchanted, connected to another mirror.” He pointed to another that was left on the table, identical to the one in his hands. “I want you to use this to contact us if you ever need help.”

Andrew wanted to argue against taking it, but anything he thought of saying died out when he saw the looks on Black-Beard and Lake’s faces. He slowly reached out and took it, holding it gently with both hands. He could see his reflection in it, and the first thing that came to mind when he saw his own face was that he could use a haircut.

“If you want to use it, you need to wipe the glass three times,” Black-Beard explained. “Use it if you need to. We will be there.”

Andrew couldn’t think of a reply, so he didn’t say anything. He added the mirror to his bag, wrapping it up in his spare shirt. Having a direct line of communication like this would come in handy, but Andrew didn’t want to use it. He wasn’t sure why he was taking it instead of outright refusing and leaving the mirror behind. Or smashing it the moment he walked beyond the camp’s borders, the chatter from those around the bonfire and sight of the tents disappearing the moment he walked beyond the charms that marked the borders.

He didn’t look back. Andrew held tightly to the strap of his bag and walked through the trees, the silence of the forest at night almost chilling. Thankfully, the only animal he ran into before he left the trees was a single fox that eyed him once before leaving him alone. There was nobody on the road at this time of night, and the breeze was stronger without the trees to block it.

Taking the road to the right would take Andrew to Foxhole. To the left was further into the country. He hesitated for one moment, and then turned right.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

Thanks so much for reading! Andrew is finally on his way to Foxhole, where there will be many revelations. I'm sorry for a shorter chapter, it's more of a transition that probably could've been left in the last one, but I wanted to make it its own. I'm excited for what's to come, because I decided to go back and change some stuff I spent more time on Andrew bonding with Wymack because I felt that was important. Let me know what you thought in the comments, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well.

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

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Foxhole

Chapter Notes

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

When he finally made it to Foxhole, the capital city of the Palmetto Kingdom, Andrew was eighteen years old.

Winter was coming again, so he'd need to find a place to stay before the snow started falling. Foxhole appeared to be built on a huge hill, surrounded by multiple walls inside of the city in case of attack. At the top of the hill was the palace, built out of cream-colored stones and dark shingled roofs. Even from a distance it was huge, like a giant fortress rather than an elegant castle. The road leading to the capital's entrance was lined on either side by large farms. Andrew walked by them, aware of the guards stationed at either side of the large archway and along the walls, dressed in silver armor that bore a crest of some kind on the breastplate.

Andrew held more tightly to the strap of his bag, not about to let anyone try to snatch it away from him. The streets were flooded with people trying to get to shops and markets and whatever homes were in between. It made sense that there would be so many people, because this was the capital of the kingdom, but there was a slight feeling of claustrophobia when surrounded by so many. Andrew pushed past many in search of an inn of some kind, deciding to use the money he had to get a room while he tried to find a job.

He didn't go to the first one he found, deciding to travel past the first gate and see what was beyond the second. There were about the same number of markets, but there were just a bit fewer people. Andrew stopped outside of an inn called Eden's Twilight that seemed to have a tavern inside that was filled for the evening hours. It wasn't hard to get a room for a few nights: it was bare with one large wardrobe, a bed and a large window with thin curtains that offered him a view of the next door building. Andrew took out the charms he'd taken with after leaving the raider camp behind, hanging two above the door and one over the window, not able to breathe easily until that was done.

The tavern had decent food, and so long as Andrew left his knife on display, nobody approached except the bartender. Andrew asked him about possible jobs, which Roland told him were hard to come by as winter settled in, but if Andrew was desperate he may be able to get some pay working around Eden's Twilight. Deciding to use it as a last resort, Andrew set out to find work in the capital.

But finding a job proved to be more difficult than he thought it would be. The past jobs Andrew had - other than stealing with the raiders - were working around farms and helping merchants with heavy lifting their goods. He managed to get a few, but nothing stable enough to provide steady pay, and after a few weeks the money he hadn't spent to get to the capital in the first place was almost completely gone. Deciding to save the rest for food, Andrew packed up his things and left the room he'd been staying in at Eden's, looking for a safe spot to rest on the streets.

He hadn't forgotten old rumors he'd heard about the homeless being rounded up and cast out, but Andrew had either been lucky enough to not encounter such a thing, or the guards had stopped doing it. He had been staying in different streets to sleep in during the nights, but ended up returning to one in particular since the stone it was built out of was warm. Andrew figured there was a fireplace or furnace of some kind on the other side, so he kept coming back to warm up as the week went on.

That schedule was broken when one night, while he leaned against the wall and tried to relax enough to sleep, a man walked into the small alley. He was tall and intimidating, but Andrew had taken down people his size in the past. His hair was short and graying, eyes brown and eyebrows furrowed. He didn't appear to have any weapons on him, but Andrew didn't let his guard down.

"Come inside," the man demanded. His voice was rough and deep, and seemed to demand obedience. Andrew didn't budge from his spot, one hand reaching for where his knife was kept. "If you're going to loiter around on my wall, you might as well come in and eat. You look like you haven't had a meal in days."

After hesitating some more and the man repeating for Andrew to come inside, he relented, deciding he could defend himself if he had to. He *was* hungry, and the man's assumption that he hadn't eaten in days wasn't that far off. After walking out of the alley, Andrew saw that he'd been staying next to a blacksmith shop, which explained how warm the wall was. The place was two stories tall, but the base was wide open so as to not trap too much heat inside a closed room. There were racks displaying tools and weapons, the ground was covered in a thin layer of straw, and there was a single staircase that led to the upper floor, which the man walked up. Andrew followed when he smelled some kind of meal.

The stairs led to a modest kitchen that had three doors that led to other rooms. In the middle was a large table, where a woman was sitting. She had blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, wearing a simple blue dress and a smile. "There, Abby," the man huffed, sitting down at the table. Andrew hovered near the stairs, holding to the bag that had everything he owned inside. "Sit down, kid," the man said, pointing to the open seat with a bowl in front of it.

Still not unconvinced he wasn't in danger, Andrew narrowed his eyes at both of them and walked forward, putting his bag down on the floor and looking at the bowl. They were having some kind of stew that smelled incredible, especially to someone starving, but it could've been drugged for all Andrew knew.

"It's safe," Abby said, understanding why Andrew was hesitating. But her attempt at reassurance only made him more on edge.

"Do you two let in every person that walks through your alley?" Andrew asked them.

The man gave him a flat look, sipping some of the stew broth. "No," he answered.

Andrew wasn't sure if that made him feel better, but he finally reached for the spoon and ate as slowly as he could manage. If it *was* drugged, he wanted to consume as little of it as he could. The room was silent other than the clinking of cutlery on bowls.

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

By that point, all of the food had been eaten. Abby got up and collected all the bowls, bringing them to the sink and starting to wash them. There was no point in lying or being difficult, so Andrew wasn’t silent for long. “Andrew.”

“David Wymack,” the man replied. “That’s my wife, Abby.”

“Nice to meet you,” Abby said, smiling over her shoulder.

Andrew didn’t return it. He wasn’t sure if this was the moment he should get up and start to leave, but Wymack started talking before he could make his move. “You’ve been sleeping on my wall for a week now.”

“It’s warm,” Andrew tried to justify.

“Our spare room is warmer.”

A meal and offer of a room for the night? Andrew gave the man his best glare and asked, “What do you want?”

“To not have any kids loitering around my walls,” Wymack responded. His face gave nothing away, which didn’t help Andrew’s distrust.

“You’re just giving me a room?”

“If you want to pay for it, then help around the shop.” Wymack shrugged once as he stood, nodding towards one of the doors. “Use it if you want it.”

After a long internal struggle, Andrew had made the choice to stay. He still had the charms that would only allow him inside, so he hung two over the door and one over the window in the spare room. Like the room in Eden’s Twilight, there was only a bed and wardrobe inside. Even with the protection the charms had, Andrew couldn’t fall asleep that night, awake and sitting on the single bed in the room with his knife in hand. But in the end, he didn’t have to use it.

Wymack got up early to go to work, and Abby was moving around in the kitchen. Tired from barely any sleep, but determined not to show it, Andrew left the spare room exactly thirty minutes after the couple had started moving around the home. When he entered the kitchen, Abby smiled and said good morning, grabbing a plate and setting it on the table.

“There, eat that before you meet David downstairs,” she said.

On the plate was a slice of bread and meat. Andrew watched Abby with narrowed eyes as he sat down, but she stared right back until he ate the food, nodding to herself as though in approval. With nothing else to do, he walked down the stairs to the blacksmith shop, where Wymack was lighting the furnace.

“About time,” he said gruffly, wiping the sweat that had already formed on his forehead. “Ever work as a blacksmith?”

“No.”

“Then let’s stick to cleaning.” Wymack grabbed a broom and tossed it over. Andrew caught it easily but wasn’t happy about it.

The shop wasn’t dirty, it just needed some upkeep that Wymack couldn’t always handle while trying to make more merchandise. He showed Andrew where to wipe down and what to avoid, telling him to keep away from the furnace unless he wanted to get burned. He also showed Andrew how to polish and sharpen his weapons for sale. Andrew also cleaned the small stables to the right of the shop, and the work soon became easy.

The plus was the room and food he was given. Other than that, Abby and Wymack rarely bothered him and never tried to enter the spare room. Slowly, as the weeks went by, Andrew was able to fall asleep easier each night, and the itch to leave never came.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

He's made it!! Time for some bonding. The next chapter is all about Dad-mack because I love it too much. Thanks so much for reading, let me know what you thought in the comments. I read them all and try to reply to them all as well!

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

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Blacksmithing

Chapter Notes

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

Getting used to life at the raider's camp definitely helped Andrew adjust to life living with Wymack and Abby. The charms he'd brought with remained over the door and window, but he was never asked about them, which meant that neither had tried to go into the room. The first week staying there had been hard and full of sleepless nights as Andrew adjusted to the new environment and tried to trust the people that had let him into their home.

Working around the shop was different as well. A majority of Andrew's days were spent cleaning up after Wymack, polishing his weapons he left on display and once in a while running to the market for supplies. If any customers came around, Wymack never let Andrew deal with them, which was just fine with him. Travelers used the stables built on the right of the shop to temporarily house their horses, so cleaning those was familiar work to Andrew.

Abby worked as a nurse and midwife, but she was usually around the home more often than not. She made sure that Wymack and Andrew took breaks during the day, bringing water and food down periodically and ordering Wymack to step away from the furnace. Wymack constantly sweated through the clothes he wore, even though the days were cooler, but the heat was nothing but comfortable to Andrew. He supposed that had to be because he wasn't near it for a majority of the day.

After spending winter with them, Andrew certainly felt more at ease, but not enough to take down the charms just yet. The land had warmed enough so that it rained instead of snowed, but that kept people indoors just as much as the snowstorms had. Wymack still went downstairs to work, claiming that a little rain wouldn't stop him, which caused Abby to roll her eyes. Andrew went to the shop as well, but he'd already decided that he didn't want to clean up anymore.

He'd spent a long time watching Wymack work. He wanted to make a sword himself, or maybe a couple of daggers like Black-Beard had.

So, when Wymack started looking over the steel he had, just starting to light the fire on the furnace, Andrew approached. "Have you taught anyone?" he asked.

"A few times," Wymack replied. He paused after a second, looking over his shoulder at Andrew.

"I want to learn," Andrew told him.

Thankfully, the blacksmith didn't ask him if he was sure or any other pointless questions. "Alright, if you want to learn..." Wymack turned to the table next to the furnace and grabbed a few things, laying them down on the anvil. "I have different tools I use. That hammer is used for the first hits: shaping the metal, welding things together. The smaller ones are used after."

It seemed pretty straightforward. Andrew grabbed the largest hammer and tested the weight in his palm. It was heavy, but not to a point that it was difficult to lift. The smaller hammers were considerably lighter, and the handles were long so as to not risk touching the metal that would be hot enough to melt skin.

“Alright, then we have these.” Wymack brought some more tools over, overcrowding the anvil space. They were long and thin, like a hammer-sized pickaxe, made of metal as well. “Things for cutting, making finer details. I’ve made all of these myself.”

Andrew had polished enough of the blades to know that Wymack’s more expensive pieces were beautiful. The steel had details carved into them, mostly winding lines that looked like branches or leaves. Wymack also seemed to have a certain style to the weapons he made, each of them thin and slightly curved.

“Who taught you?” Andrew asked before he could stop himself.

Wymack shrugged once, starting to put some tools back on the table. “Blacksmithing has always been in my family. I traveled when I was young, and by chance ran into an elf. She was a blacksmith and warrior for her people, and taught me a few tricks.”

He seemed to get a far-away look in his eyes for a moment, but it didn’t stick around for long. Andrew pointedly ignored it in favor of looking at the large chunk of dark steel nearby. “Show me,” he requested, looking back at Wymack.

“Right.” Wymack nodded to himself once, then turned to the furnace and scooped some coals on the already lit fire. Right next to it were two bellows that Wymack began to pump. “We need to get the fire hot enough.”

He paused to place the steel right into the fire. It was about as long as Wymack’s arm, so a portion of it hung away from the furnace. Andrew figured that was on purpose.

“Don’t get too close,” Wymack said, pumping the two bellows again. Sparks began to fly from the fire and the steel slowly lit up the hotter it got. “I always work from the end of the blade to the hilt. Form the point first.”

When Wymack deemed it hot enough, he took the blade to the anvil and raised his largest hammer, hitting the steel. With how hot it was, it easily bent to hits, and soon a pointed tip was made. Wymack returned the steel to the fire in the furnace multiple times, slowly working down the blade to the hilt. The finished blade didn’t look like much yet: the steel was still thick and dark, and it had Wymack’s signature curve, but no details and certainly not yet sharpened.

“Once the basic shape has been formed, I always go back and look for imperfections.” Wymack grabbed the cooled steel and raised it, looking down with squinted eyes. “The best swords are the ones with hours of work put into them. Take your time.”

The blade was put back into the fire, and Wymack spent more time forming the blade. He pointed out some specific spots, like bumps in the blade or thicker spots that needed to be thinned out. Eventually Wymack was satisfied, and the blade was put to the side so he could

grab smaller pieces of metal. He explained he'd need to make the guard next, which he heated up like the blade and then cut a piece in the middle, fitting the blade through. The pommel was hit into a circular shape, small enough to not be an annoyance when the sword was complete.

"You can make all different kinds of pommels and guards. We'll stay simple for now." Wymack nodded towards the expensive pieces, the ones with winding guards that could protect an entire hand. Andrew was fine sticking with the basics.

"What's left?" he asked.

"Need to cut the hilt of the blade and then stick the pieces together. After that we can add some details."

This time Wymack heated the hilt of the blade, cutting off a small portion of it and working to make a thinner piece that would eventually become the hilt. When that was done, he heated up the guard and pommel, attaching all of the pieces together until he had something that looked roughly sword-shaped.

"There, now the basics are finished." Wymack held the sword out, the metal dark now that it had cooled. "A few more days of work, and it'll be ready for the shelves. The blade needs to be tapered and sharpened, so we'll need to use the whetstone."

"It's ugly," Andrew pointed out.

"Of course it is. It doesn't have any personality, yet." Wymack put the crude sword down on the already cluttered table. "We'll give it a hilt, some details to the blade. Polish it and sharpen it, and it'll be fit for a king." Wymack grabbed another chunk of steel, putting it into the furnace. "Alright, show me what you learned."

A rainy day was perfect for working, since nobody came to the shop and the two could work in relative silence. Andrew's memory finally seemed to have a good use, so following Wymack's instructions was easy. He learned how hard to hit the steel to make it form the right shape, pointed out imperfections when looking at the blade over again, and repeated the process over and over. Wymack's commentary while he worked wasn't irritating but helpful, especially when he said something like, "Don't be afraid to hit it harder. It won't bend unless you give it some force - there, like that. Get into a rhythm. Good."

In the end, Andrew's sword looked just as ugly as Wymack's. The steel was rough and dark, but it had the basic shape, but not curved. A bit smaller than Wymack's, since he'd cut off more hilt than he'd meant to. Wymack told him it would just be a short sword instead.

"A nice hilt, some details..." Wymack picked it up, balancing it between his fingers. "A few more adjustments, maybe. But for a first blade? Incredible." He put the short sword back down. "Great job."

Andrew wasn't sure how to take the praise. He looked back at the short sword, then glanced at the other swords in the shop. "What do you make the hilts from?"

“Usually leather. Sometimes wood.”

He thought about the charms he kept over his door and window upstairs. “What about charms?”

“Charms?” Wymack frowned.

“I have some. They’re made out of leather.”

The blacksmith nodded, a pleased look on his face. “Well, magic’s been flowing through them, right? Take them apart and use the leather as the hilt, and it would become an amplifier for magic.”

“Hmm.” Andrew didn’t know why he was considering it, only that today had given him a different perspective of the people that let him into their home. He wasn’t sure if he could take down the charms, but he didn’t want to keep going from place to place with a magical lock on his door to make him feel safe.

“Don’t worry about the details for now,” Wymack spoke up.

Before he could continue, some heavy steps fell on the stairs. Both him and Andrew looked that way as Abby came down, one eyebrow raised. “I didn’t want to bother you when you’re working with hot steel, but you both skipped lunch.”

“Oh,” Wymack mumbled. “Time flies.”

“Hm. Dinner’s ready.”

“Great,” Wymack said, taking a few steps forward.

“Oh, no, no no...” Abby shook her head, reaching for one of the pockets of her apron and walking to meet her husband and Andrew. She held out a clean cloth in Andrew’s direction, a deep frown on her face as she looked at him and Wymack. “Both of you clean up before you come upstairs. You’re not tracking coal into my house.”

“I always clean up,” Wymack said.

Abby rolled her eyes. “I suppose they don’t call it ‘blacksmith’ for nothing,” she said as she turned on her heel, walking back to the stairs.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Wymack asked, grabbing a spare rag and wiping his face with it as he rushed after Abby. He’d barely cleaned anything up, which his wife would no doubt scold him for.

Andrew glanced at the cloth he’d taken from Abby, hesitantly raising it to his face and wiping away whatever was there. The cloth was immediately dirty, darkened from the coals and from shaping the metal. Andrew felt slightly bad about Abby’s cloth getting so dirty it would probably never be clean again, but then again...she’d have to know that when she handed it over.

He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

He'd dutifully cleaned up fully before going up the stairs. Abby was dishing out a meal while Wymack finished washing up at the sink. Andrew was silent during the meal, as usual, but he did respond with an affirmative hum when Abby asked him how the lesson went. He'd genuinely enjoyed it, and since he'd gotten Wymack's permission to continue practicing, he knew he would. He'd liked the daggers that Black-Beard had, and while his knife worked well, Andrew found he wanted to make something similar to those.

Andrew wasn't planning on staying too long, since he could never sit still in one place, but he had to admit that *this* place was even more comfortable than living with the raiders had been. That night, when he and Wymack sat just outside the closed shop to smoke, Andrew ended up confessing it. "I'll leave once spring arrives," he mumbled around his pipe.

"Hmm?" Wymack hummed, blowing smoke into the air. "Alright."

He didn't say anything else. Andrew wasn't sure if he wanted the man to. "Anywhere good to travel?"

"I used to go to E'Allen, but I wouldn't recommend it." Wymack huffed, lowering his pipe and his head. "Eager to go?"

Not yet, but it would come. Andrew shrugged once in response.

"Why don't you leave now?" Wymack asked.

"Just waiting for the right moment," Andrew replied.

The thing about growing comfortable was how striking it was when anything unexpected happened.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

I love Dad-mack, and I hope you enjoyed learning how to be a blacksmith lol. I wonder if there's a reason why Andrew's so good at it his first try, hmmm.... Thanks so much for reading, let me know what you thought in the comments! I read them all and try to reply to them all as well.

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

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Twin Scales

Chapter Notes

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

Andrew had stayed through summer, and found himself not wanting to leave when autumn arrived. He enjoyed work as a blacksmith, since making weapons required a lot of focus and allowed him to get out of his own head for a time. He'd gotten better at it too, not sure how to feel about Wymack displaying the blades *Andrew* had made rather than the other way around. The first blade he'd made, a short-sword that had the leather from his charms wound to make a hilt, was kept tucked away from the other swords on display.

For some reason, he liked that. He didn't want to sell it, mostly because it had been the first one he'd made and wasn't anything special. Wymack refused to sell it because it was an amplifier of magic, which wouldn't work well in the hands of a non magic-user.

Most days, he and Wymack traded who could work on a sword and who cleaned up the shop. Sometimes it was easy to work around each other, but other times one would be starting a weapon from scratch and would need as much room as they could afford. Today was Wymack's to use the furnace, so Andrew used his time finishing the hilt of a new sword he'd made and sharpening it with the whetstone. He'd never been able to adopt the curved blade Wymack usually made, so his were rather standard and straight, but they sold just as often as the others.

He'd just finished sharpening a sword when Wymack walked downstairs, a piece of paper in hand. "Market run," he said, holding out the paper. Andrew took it after putting the sword aside. "It's getting late. You should go before the shops close."

After accepting Wymack's money, Andrew walked to a nearby table cluttered high and found the cloak that Wymack had given him. It was dark brown in color and far too big, practically covering him from his shoulders to his feet. But it was warm, which was welcome when the weather started turning cold. He walked down the streets to get to the markets, quickly finding the merchant Wymack bought materials from and got what was requested. As any other day, the market was full of people, enough that Andrew felt slightly closed in. He meant to leave as quickly as he could, but while walking he ended up finding something that caught his eye.

It was a small stall that could've been easily overlooked, but the moment that Andrew saw what was displayed in large jars he was curious. As he got closer, and the man running the stall perked up, grinning grossly enough to match the way he looked. Andrew was sure this man hadn't gotten the prize he was selling on his own. "Interested?" he asked, voice nasally sounding. "I'm not surprised."

Andrew tried to ignore him, eyes catching the jar of black dragon scales. He wanted to ask how much they'd cost, but it would have to be a fortune. More than Andrew had ever made in his life. He could tell they were dragon scales because of the varying sizes, some as large as his thumb and others as small as the tips of his fingers.

“They’re genuine,” the man continued, grabbing a large red scale from a different jar and running a blade over it. It didn’t so much as leave a mark. “They’re impenetrable.”

“Then how’d you get them off?” Andrew asked.

“Ah, know a bit about dragons, do you?” the man asked, chuckling. He reached for something else, coming up with a blade made out of a tooth. A large one, as long as Andrew’s forearm. “Dragon scales are impenetrable to any blade, but not their own claws or teeth. They’re the only things that can cut through.”

He’d heard stories of such things being true, but Andrew had been fortunate enough to have never come face-to-face with a dragon in his life. He couldn’t tell why he lingered, since he didn’t have nearly enough to purchase such a thing, and he couldn’t figure out why he wanted them, either. He supposed at the shop he’d find some use for them, maybe make some kind of armor, but...

“You really do have expensive taste,” someone said at Andrew’s side. He glanced to his right, eyes immediately catching on the type of clothing the man now next to him wore. It was like this person was trying not to stand out at the market but was very much dressed for the noble end of the capital. He looked away from the scales to give Andrew a smile, dark hair bouncing as he moved. “What do you want dragon scales for?”

Andrew didn’t know why this person was talking to him, but it wasn’t anyone’s business why he wanted dragon scales, so he didn’t answer. In fact, he was about to leave when the person grabbed part of the cloak he was wearing and tugged him to a stop. Andrew immediately glared, doing his best to make the man falter and leave him alone.

But he didn’t. His grin fell, but only for a moment. “The black ones, right?” the man asked, pulling out some coins. Andrew was pretty sure they were *gold*, and that alone almost made him freeze. “I *did* bring money with, you know. He’ll take the black scales.” This man - most likely a noble - glanced at Andrew once more, holding out the coins to the gross seller. “And the blue.”

“What are you doing?” Andrew asked.

“It’s a present,” the man replied, handing over the jars of scales once the payment had been made. Andrew couldn’t even begin to imagine how much it had cost. “Happy early birthday.”

Who the hell was this? What were they trying to do? Andrew wouldn’t say no to free dragon scales, because he’d be stupid if he did, but there had to be a reason for this. Andrew nodded his head towards the crowd, glad that they got the message and followed him until they were out of the market. He then took them to an alley that was empty, placed the jars and Wymack’s materials down against a wall and reached for one of his knives strapped to his forearms.

“Do you want to go back?” the man asked.

Andrew turned around and quickly pinned him to a wall, holding his knife under the noble’s throat. His brown eyes widened, and one hand quickly grabbed Andrew’s elbow. The other

was easily pinned to the wall. "Who are you?" Andrew demanded.

"Aaron - " the man began, then gulped. "You can get hanged for impersonating a royal. Especially with magic."

"I'm not impersonating anyone," Andrew hissed back. "Who's Aaron?"

"You won't get me to talk," the man said, now completely serious. There was still a hint of nervousness in his eyes, but there was also a challenge there. "I was only getting him out for a day, just leave us alone."

"You were the one that approached me," Andrew pointed out. "Talk. Now."

"Nicky!" someone else called. Andrew looked sharply to the end of the alley, where he and the noble had been just moments before. Another man was standing there, wearing an oversized brown cloak with the hood drawn up, as though to hide his face. If that was his goal, he was doing a terrible job, because Andrew could still clearly see what he looked like.

"Aaron, go," the one Andrew was pinning said. Nicky, if what Aaron had called was correct.

Aaron ignored his companion and ran down the alley. Andrew let go of Nicky just when he got pushed, not hard enough to make him fall back but enough to make him back away a few steps. The hood of Aaron's cloak fell down when he stopped. "Leave us alone," Aaron demanded.

"Who are you?" Andrew asked, glaring back and forth between the two.

"I'm - " Aaron began.

Nicky stopped him by placing a hand on Aaron's shoulder. His eyes were wide, and he kept looking back and forth between Andrew and Aaron. "No magic..." he said to himself. "Shit. You two could be twins."

"What?" Aaron asked, frowning at Nicky. Andrew shared that sentiment, but didn't say anything.

"I mistook him for you," Nicky explained. "But *wow*. If his hair was shorter, you guys could definitely be twins."

Andrew and Aaron faced each other, as though that would help them understand. The last time Andrew had looked in a mirror was when Black-Beard had first handed him the enchanted one, so he didn't know if Nicky was telling the truth. But the way that Aaron's eyes widened just slightly made him assume Nicky was right. Feeling uneasy, Andrew gripped his knife more surely in his hand, taking a single step back.

"Don't go," Aaron quickly said, reaching out. Andrew raised the knife in response, and Aaron slowly pulled his hand back. "Wait. What's your name?"

"No," Andrew said firmly.

"It's okay, we're not going to hurt you," Nicky said, as though he was trying to calm a wild animal. Andrew wondered for a moment if that analogy wasn't that far off.

"This is..." Aaron trailed off. "I'm Prince Aaron Minyard."

"Aaron!" Nicky exclaimed.

"Just tell me your name, okay?"

Andrew hesitated, his knife still raised. He wasn't sure how to process someone claiming to be the prince, especially since the only royal he'd ever heard by name was the queen. He was sure others in the kingdom had to know, especially if this would one day be their king, but he wondered why or how nobody had ever noticed what Nicky was telling him. He wasn't sure if he believed them, but at the same time...he wanted to.

"Andrew," he finally answered.

"Andrew!" Nicky exclaimed, now slightly smiling.

"Where's your family?" Aaron asked, glancing down at the stone streets every few seconds.

"I'm an orphan," Andrew explained. He tucked his knife away in an attempt to avoid looking at the two, but he could still see the moment Nicky gripped Aaron's arm, something passing through them. But this...just wasn't possible.

"Is there a safe place we can talk?" Nicky asked.

"Why?" Andrew asked sharply.

"Because we need to."

"No, we don't."

"We do," Aaron argued.

Truthfully, Andrew wanted to talk. He wanted to figure out what was going on, to find a mirror, to...he wasn't sure what else. But if what they were saying was true, then that meant he was royalty. That for some reason, he hadn't grown up in the palace with a brother, with a *family*. And what did that mean? Too many self-deprecating thoughts suddenly surfaced, and Andrew could feel his hands shaking, sure he wasn't getting enough air in.

He couldn't decide if he wanted to push them away or hold on to them closely.

"Follow me," Andrew eventually said, voice cracking.

He held tightly to the small jars of dragon scales that Nicky had bought him, unsure if the man would want them back or not. Aaron pulled his hood back up as Andrew led the two back to Wymack's place, pointing to the small stable near the building. The two ducked inside of it while Andrew continued to the shop, dropping Wymack's materials down on the table next to the large furnace. Wymack paused in his work to glance over his shoulder.

“Thanks,” he grunted. Andrew nodded, still holding the jars of scales close to his chest. Wymack squinted and wiped sweat off his brow. “Are those *dragon scales*?”

“Yes,” Andrew replied, starting to walk towards the stairs.

Wymack made a choking noise. “Did you steal those? Damn it, Andrew, do you know - ?”

“I didn’t steal them,” Andrew quickly answered. He paused on the stairs, trying to think of a reason why he’d have them without explaining Nicky and Aaron. “A Slayer traded with us,” he said after a moment.

“Traded with us,” Wymack repeated, crossing his arms and frowning at the jars. “How the hell - ? No, a better question is *why the hell*. ”

“He admired your craftsmanship,” Andrew decided. “My knives for the scales.”

He wasn’t sure if Wymack believed him, and he’d have to do something about his knives if the lie was going to stick. But after a moment the crease between Wymack’s eyebrows softened. “Sounds like he admired *your* craftsmanship,” said the blacksmith, slowly turning back to the blade he was sharpening. “So, those scales are yours. Don’t waste them.”

Andrew didn’t have a clue what he was going to use them for, but he nodded and continued up the stairs to his room. He hid the jars under his bed, along with his knives, and then rushed to the stables, empty except for Nicky and Aaron. The moment he entered he made sure the doors were pulled shut, then quickly walked around, checking for any eavesdroppers.

“Your stables are empty,” Aaron said.

“Congratulations on your ability to see,” Andrew replied, coming to a stop before the two.

“You don’t have any horses?”

“This is for travelers coming to buy Wymack’s weapons,” Andrew explained. “Most of them have horses. What do you want?”

Nicky and Aaron exchanged a look. “Andrew, have you lived here your whole life?” Nicky asked.

“No.”

“And...”

“I know what you’re saying,” Andrew growled. He crossed his arms and gripped his biceps, as though that would help calm the anger he was starting to feel.

“I mean, we won’t know for sure until I...” Aaron paused, waiting until Andrew finally looked into his eyes to continue. “Until I ask my mother.”

“I don’t want to know,” Andrew blurted.

“You don’t?” Nicky asked. There was a sympathetic frown on his face, as though he felt bad that Andrew had suddenly been put in this situation, but at the same time not being able to understand why Andrew would say such a thing.

“If I’m royalty, I don’t want any part of it.” Andrew looked away from the two, glaring at the nearest bundle of hay. “I’ve seen what you people have done to this kingdom. To the people that live in it. I’ve been one of those people all my life.”

“I know,” Aaron began, lifting one hand towards Andrew’s nearest arm.

“No, you don’t,” Andrew snapped back, moving away from the touch. “Neither of you have *any* idea what it’s like living out there. Don’t pretend you know me.” He pushed past them, walking towards the doors of the stables. “Go. And don’t come back.”

Aaron was clearly fuming. He drew his hood back up and left, but Nicky hesitated in the doorway. “We’re still going to make sure,” he said gently.

“I don’t care,” Andrew lied.

“You deserve to know, Andrew.” Nicky took a step back, then paused again. “If it’s true, then we’re coming back. You don’t have to come with us, but if you want to, I’ll make sure you get there.”

Andrew gripped the door more tightly. “Go away,” he ordered.

They did. He ended up standing in the stables for a while longer, trying to process, to figure out what was going through his head. He wasn’t sure if meeting potential family members was a good thing or not. Maybe if they were regular people rather than royalty he wouldn’t be freaking out as badly, but they *were*. How was he going to explain this to anyone? Would they make him go to the palace if it was true?

Did he even want to go?

~*~

The answer came a few days later, by mail. Abby said it was addressed to Andrew, and he cursed Aaron and Nicky for assuming he could read. After thinking about it he asked Abby to read it to him, who did without hesitation, even though she could clearly see the royal seal and who it had come from.

““It’s true. My mother knows you’re here’,” she read. ““You have to decide whether to come or not, before she makes that decision for you. Nicky will arrive at the end of the week. Signed, Prince Aaron’.” Abby and Wymack shared a look, then glanced sternly at Andrew, who almost felt like he was being cornered by parents.

“I’m not in trouble with the monarchy,” he huffed.

“Then explain why we’re getting a letter from the prince of all people,” Wymack demanded.

Andrew shrugged, staring at the table and picking at the wood. He wished that the two would leave it at that, but they just continued to wait, no matter how long it took for Andrew to finally say it. "I'm..." Andrew paused, closing his eyes so that he wouldn't have to see their reactions. "I'm Prince Aaron's twin brother."

Abby and Wymack were silent for a moment, clearly processing. "Oh," Abby eventually breathed.

"You're a prince?" Wymack asked.

Andrew clenched a fist. "I'm not," he argued.

"Sure as hell sounds like they're getting you ready for it," Wymack pointed out.

They were. He didn't know what either of them were expecting, but Andrew was *not* going to leave. "I'm staying here."

"Andrew," Wymack snapped. "You're not going to waste away in this hellhole."

"David," Abby said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm serious." Wymack pushed the letter across the table. "An opportunity like this shows up? You don't waste it."

"I don't *want* it," Andrew growled back, pushing the paper away. The pristine paper crinkled as it was roughly moved.

"Really?" Wymack asked, planting both hands on the table and leaning forward. Andrew avoided looking at him. "You always said the only reason you stuck around was because you were waiting for the right moment to leave. If this isn't it, then I don't know what is."

"She gave me up," Andrew said, finally looking at the two adults in front of him. "Why? I went through all of that, and for...?" He paused, trying to gather his thoughts. "Why would they want me back after they casted me away?"

"I don't know," Abby said, sitting down. For a moment Andrew thought she was going to reach a hand out, but they both stayed in her lap. "I can't pretend to understand what goes on there. But maybe you could find out."

"I don't want to find out."

"Bullshit." And it *was* bullshit - Andrew wanted to know why more than anything, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to handle the truth. Wymack let out a long sigh, walking a few steps away to the nearest counter. After a moment, he turned back around. "You could have a claim to the throne."

"They won't let me anywhere near it," Andrew argued.

"They may not have a choice." Wymack shrugged. "I listen when you talk, kid. There's a great deal of change you could bring around if you had that power. Or any influence to it."

You should go.”

It was a hard argument to beat. Andrew hadn’t considered that, but...shit. Why would Wymack throw that at him? Just the idea that he *could* do something, even if it was something small, was enough.

At the end of the week, when Nicky arrived at the shop in a black carriage with at least four guards, Andrew had packed everything he owned in his bag and was holding tightly to the jars of dragon scales. Nicky grinned openly, and Andrew attempted to give something back, but he knew it fell flat. The guards kept staring at him as he was led into the carriage, blissfully empty except for him and Nicky.

“You have no idea how happy I am you’re coming,” Nicky started babbling. “It’s going to be so nice to have someone other than Aaron to talk to. There’s so much to show you, just wait until you see the castle grounds...”

Andrew leaned his head against the window and watched Wymack’s shop leave his sight as the carriage started moving down the road.

Chapter End Notes

Hi again.

Thanks so much for reading! I edited what I had already written to make things flow a little better. I also suddenly thought of the short-sword, it will make sense in due time...hehe. Thank you again for putting up with my sudden rewrite, we will now be off to new stuff! Let me know what you thought in the comments, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well.

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

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Inside The Palace

Chapter Notes

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

The soft bed was nice for two days. Now, it was almost like the mattress was trying to pull Andrew inside of it.

Most of the night Andrew spent awake, staring at the top of the huge four-poster bed he would lay in. It had too many pillows, but the mattress was big enough that he could push them to one side and not have to worry about rolling onto them. The room he now stayed in was as large as some of the houses in the kingdom, with a specific space dedicated to his bed and wardrobe versus the rest of the living area. There was a huge desk, fireplace, bookshelves and dining table. He even had his own private bathroom.

For someone who had nothing, suddenly being given so much for seemingly no reason was a shock.

Andrew had barely left his room for the four days he'd lived in the palace. The carriage Nicky had arrived in to pick him up had gone through a huge stone gate lined with soldiers all wearing the same silver armor to get to the front entrance. Inside the walls was a large courtyard with people everywhere, smaller buildings that housed servants and soldiers, huge stables and, of course, the palace itself. The carriage had come to a stop before a large staircase, and waiting for their arrival was Aaron and a man Andrew had never seen before.

"That's my father," Nicky explained in a whisper before the carriage doors opened. "Lord Luther."

Luther Hemmick was a tall and stocky man with graying hair cut short. He was clean shaven and dressed in expensive black robes. Aaron looked very small at his side, a frown on his face until Nicky and Andrew got out of the carriage. "You're here," Aaron said through a smile, as though he couldn't believe it. Andrew didn't blame it, since he almost couldn't believe he was here, either.

"Told you I'd get him here," Nicky spoke up, reaching out to pat Aaron's shoulder once.

Luther didn't say anything, but Andrew could feel the man's eyes on him. He glanced Luther's way once, trying to give the man his best 'leave me alone' look that he could. But Luther didn't cave at the stare - if anything, his own look intensified, and he started watching Andrew with narrowed eyes.

"Come on," Aaron said, bringing Andrew out of his staring contest. His brother - how strange was that? - turned on his heel and waved for Andrew to follow, starting to walk up the stairs. "I'll show you to your room. We're on the same floor."

Andrew followed Aaron and Nicky through the doors, taking his first steps into the palace. Through the doors was a grand entryway, full of servants rushing around. There were two

large staircases that winded up to a second floor, the walls were draped with tapestries bearing the royal crest, and the floors had beautiful rugs that led to different doorways and the grand staircase. Andrew felt like he was dirtying them as he walked across, looking at everything he could and noticing the chandelier hanging from the ceiling that was painted with some kind of artwork.

Nobody bumped into him, but Andrew didn't realize how much he was looking around until he noticed Aaron and Nicky had paused, watching him. He did his best to glare at the two, walking the rest of the way forward until they started leading the way again. Andrew's room was on the third floor, right down the hall from Aaron's, and it was lined by two soldiers in full armor. They opened the door when the group reached it, letting them inside.

The first time Andrew saw the room, he needed a minute to take everything in. Nicky and Aaron had been talking about something - "Sorry it's pretty bare, but we'll get your bookshelves filled once we know what you like - " - if you want different sheets, we can get them, no problem - " - that Andrew couldn't pay much attention to. He ran his fingers over the table and desk, eventually taking a seat on the bed and somehow managing to stay upright when he sank right into the mattress.

"Is it comfortable?" Aaron asked. He was tapping his fingers together as he asked.

"Yes," Andrew answered. He was sure he could live in this room for the rest of his days and not need anything else to be comfortable.

"Good." Aaron relaxed, then pointed at the wardrobe. "Some new clothes are in there. And the servants have drawn you a bath."

A bath. The most Andrew had cleaned up in the past had been with a bucket of water from a well. He got up and left his bag on the bed, opening the wardrobe to see what was inside. Every outfit was different from the last, some he could guess were made for parties or balls or whatever they did in the palace. But there were also clothes that looked familiar and more comfortable than the rest: simple pants and tunics.

"Will you be okay on your own?" Nicky asked.

"Yes," Andrew said while closing the wardrobe.

"Okay. We'll leave you alone to get used to this for a bit." Both he and Aaron started to turn. "We can eat dinner together. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

"Alright!" Nicky waved as he and Aaron left the room. The moment the doors closed, Andrew was in silence, and some of the tension in his shoulders dropped just slightly.

Everything here was strange. Andrew didn't have to make himself a meal because the cooks took care of that, he had more than one outfit, was left alone if asked, and had to learn from Nicky that pulling a knife on a servant wasn't acceptable. Andrew had only done it once, and it was because it was the first time his manservant had entered the room with breakfast. The

only reason Andrew had missed while throwing was because he was still half-asleep and the guy could dodge.

Now, he'd gotten used to the routine.

"Morning," Matt Boyd called while drawing back the curtains to the room, immediately letting the sunlight in.

Andrew squinted and sat up in his bed, raising one hand to keep the light out of his eyes. "I was already awake," he pointed out.

"I noticed," Matt said back.

Of all the people he could've had as a manservant, Matt seemed a good choice. The other servants Andrew had run into always bowed when he walked by, quickly shuffling away with a muffled, "Your highness." But after he'd thrown his knife at Matt his first day on the job, the two had fallen into some kind of weird acquaintanceship. Matt quickly learned that Andrew was different from the other royals around, and Andrew learned that there was nothing that could surprise Matt after that first day.

"Breakfast is on the table," he said, walking towards the bathroom doors. "I'll get a bath ready."

"Don't bother," Andrew huffed, pulling the covers back so he could get out of the bed.

Matt ignored him, but that was to be expected at this point. Andrew walked to the table large enough to seat six people and looked at the fancy tray set there. There was a bowl of fruit, some sweet bread, meat and three eggs. The first time he'd gotten this much, he had to wonder if the other royals ate everything on the tray by themselves. Andrew never could.

A few minutes after he sat down, glaring at the eggs as though that would make them go away, Matt returned to the room and sat at the table. At first he'd been hesitant to join Andrew for breakfast, but Andrew knew he couldn't eat it all and it felt wrong to waste anything. He didn't necessarily *want* to eat with anyone, but he couldn't make Matt turn away from his own job.

"I've got an actual schedule for you, today," Matt said cheerfully while stealing a piece of ham.

"Hmm," Andrew hummed, picking up a fork and stabbing one of the fried eggs.

"Lord Luther wants you to start your studies, but his son has been pushing back on that. You'll be starting next week." Matt glanced at Andrew over the top of the paper he was holding. "And then I won't have to read your schedule to you, anymore. Isn't that exciting?"

"This is my excited face," Andrew replied, making a mess of the runny yolk from the egg he was stabbing.

Matt glanced at the plate and then looked back at the paper. "Okay, your cousin gave me a specific message: 'Andrew, you haven't left your room for days. I'm giving you a tour so you

don't get lost whenever you decide to leave'."

It wasn't true that Andrew hadn't left his room, because he'd snuck around the hallways and learned the way to different areas. He now knew that the doors at the top of the grand staircase led to the throne room, but that there were many other doorways to get inside. He discovered a tall tower with a small balcony that made his heart drop when he glanced over the edge and a library, where he'd stolen a few books just for the hell of it.

They sat on his bookshelf. Matt had asked him where he'd gotten them just yesterday, saying, "Andrew, I know you can't read."

And that's true, but that wasn't a reason why Andrew couldn't have books on his shelves.

"Okay," Andrew replied to Matt reading Nicky's message.

"He says he's coming after lunch." Matt put the paper down, glancing pointedly at the eggs. "Are you going to eat those, or just make a mess?"

Andrew hadn't decided, yet. He stabbed a piece of ham next and decided to actually eat that, shifting the tray closer to Matt afterwards. "What's there to see?" he asked, reaching for the paper left on the table and starting to fold it up.

Matt let him. He ate whatever was left of one of the eggs as he thought. "Well, there's the ballroom, the kitchens, the gardens. And the stables and training grounds."

Andrew didn't miss the way Matt's voice lightened at the mention of the training grounds. He figured that's where the soldiers trained, but he hadn't seen the area just yet. "Training grounds?"

"Just in the courtyard. There's a place behind the soldier's barracks, near the stables." Matt smiled to himself. "I've gotten a few pointers from some soldiers."

"You can fight?"

"Well, yeah. How did you think I dodged your knife?"

"Instinct," Andrew said immediately. Seeing the training grounds didn't seem like a bad idea. Maybe he could get his own practice there.

"Well, probably." Matt got up, grabbing the tray. "Do you want anything else?"

Andrew shook his head, getting up and walking to his wardrobe to grab something to change into. Matt announced he'd be back later, so while his bedroom was empty Andrew took a quick bath and changed into some clothes. Then, he grabbed his jar of black dragon scales and sat at the table, taking out his new project.

He missed working as a blacksmith, but making this was helping keep his hands busy. Andrew had started making some arm guards, stealing a pair of basic ones from Wymack's shop before he left. He'd cut them down into the shape he wanted and then used the very thin dragon tooth included in the jar to sew the scales to the arm guards. He was nearly finished

with one, and had decided to attach the sheaths to the thin knives he'd made to them. Sewing the scales was tedious, but it helped to pass the time and keep Andrew's mind off of anything else going on.

Long after he'd started working again, there was a knock on his door and Matt entered with Nicky in tow. He'd brought another tray of food and Andrew frowned at, setting it on the table. "Hey," Nicky said in greeting, sitting down at Andrew's side. "What's that?"

"Arm guards," Andrew explained, glancing down at the scale he was sewing.

"Oh, and the scales." He could see Nicky bobbing his head out of the corners of his eyes. Andrew finally paused in his work to look up, trying to figure out what was going through Nicky's head. "I want to show you around the palace, today. Aaron's busy with his studies, so it would be just me and you."

"Okay." Andrew gently set his arm guard down on the table. "Where?"

"The whole thing?" Nicky shrugged. "I don't know." He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "Listen, my father *really* wants you to start your studies. I managed to get him to wait until you had gotten used to how things work, but he's going to be hard on you."

Andrew felt like Nicky was speaking from experience. "Okay," he said, shrugging once.

Nicky sighed, but didn't say anything else. "Why don't you eat, okay? And then I'll show you around."

The tray Matt had brought up had lots of small sandwiches on it. Andrew took one to eat while he got up, finding a place to store his dragon scales and arm guards until he'd come back to the room. As he and Nicky walked towards the doors, Andrew motioned for Matt to follow. "I want to see the training grounds," he decided as they walked down the hallway.

"First?" Nicky asked. When Andrew nodded, he said, "Okay! Oh, that reminds me: do you know how to ride a horse?"

"Yes." Lake had taught him while he was at the camp. They'd rarely had to use their horses, so he didn't get to ride often, but there was something exciting about it that Andrew had enjoyed every time.

"Well, then we can kill two birds with one stone. You need to get your horse." Nicky walked with more of a bounce to his step, a genuine smile spreading on his face.

"I get my own horse?"

"Of course you do," Nicky replied. "You even get to pick."

Hi again.

He's arrived and this is just the calm before the storm. In future chapters there will include Luther being awful as usual, meeting Tilda and learning how to be a royal at all. Matt is a manservant for now, but in the future he gets to achieve his dream. To be honest, I just want to write Renee's introduction I have it all planned out and I love it so much but I have to WAIT to post that until later. Urg, I love her.

Anyways, thanks so much for reading! Let me know what you thought in the comments, I read them all and try to reply to them all as well.

Stay safe, wear a mask and wash your hands, my darlings!

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