Reaching the Crossroads

by Chestburster

Summary

One week. One damn week full of investigation and still Ann McBrady had no trace of any Van der Linde gang members. But to be fair, what did she expect? Dutch van der Linde and his posse walking down the towns’ streets for no reason?

Notes

This little story came to my mind when I started playing RDR2 in October and I scribbled it down. Please, please note that English isn’t my native language. I translated this fanfiction from German, so there will be some mistakes for sure but I did my best. However, I hope you’ll like it.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter I: Searching

This had already been saloon number 3! Within just one week she had trudged three saloons! And just like elsewhere previously there was not one living soul who could help her along. Helping her along by simply providing some information. Ann McBrady really didn’t ask for much – no convoy, no money, no other things –, solely some goddamn pieces of information! It hadn’t been long for her to realize how ignorant people here in Valentine were until the guy in the post office harshly threw her out, as a sideline telling her that merely the try to hunt down any Van der Linde members would be a waste of time. And yet one should have assumed that especially officers of all people had their eyes in the back of their heads! What about all the gossiping and stories told to them by travellers?

The deal was too good to not pick up on, even if certain lawmen back in Blackwater a week ago had a different take on her undertaking. Not that Ann cared for their opinion though – she was used to get sneered at from some other towns in the past but also to prove the sheriffs wrong whenever she brought in a wanted person. Sometimes alive, sometimes dead. It didn’t really matter as long as she was able to show off her abilities even if she was a woman. Brains over guns and so far it has always worked out for the brunette.

“Miss, you know, these men you are goin’ for, they’re extremely dangerous,” Blackwater’s police commander – Mister Dunbar – had told her last week while she was staying at the quickly growing town. Looking for work, some wanted posters had caught her attention, showing members of the Van der Linde gang. Thieves, murderers. Outlaws.

“Oh, they are always, aren’t they?” she’d then answered Dunbar’s question with a question.

“You’re aware of what had happened here in Blackwater some months ago?”

“Just read it on the posters, yes.”

“Well then,” the policeman had broadly grinned, putting his feet on his desk. “Not my choice but good luck, Miss. You’ll need it. Since I’m not able to talk this out of you I hope you’re alive when we meet again.”

Ann remembered, at this very moment she’d been about to jump on his throat. Just because that guy wouldn’t have wanted to stop. So he had provoked her further while she’d started to silently take down some of the wanted posters from the wall: One was showing Dutch van der Linde himself, another one a guy called Micah Bell, the third and the fourth posters pictured two men named Javier Escuella and Arthur Morgan.

*That’s it*, she had thought. On the face of it those were the four most remarkable gang members and to make sure she’d never forget about their faces she’d wrinkled them up to eventually store them in her satchel.

“Last time they’d been seen it was somewhere north. Maybe you should start lookin’ there, Miss.” Dunbar’s last words before she had left without a comment. She had sworn to bring that asshole at least one of these outlaws – just as a matter of principle.

*Somewhere northwards, that is. Great, just great.* And here she was. Heading from Strawberry to Valentine, Ann was now taking a break from all the travelling. She had ordered herself a beer and
stared blankly at the lonesome bottle in her gloved hands. What was it again all these folks here in Valentine were drinking? She searched the beer bottle for a label, actually uninterested. So she took another look around the Saloon, watched people come and go.

*Somewhere northwards*, the bounty huntress kept repeating to herself, snorting. *Somewhere northwards her ass!* These damn outlaws literally could be everywhere! In Ambarino, in Lemoyne, here in New Hanover... They could be hiding in some caves, a simple shack, hell, maybe they had already even left the country! They could have left while she was wasting her time here in this... muddy livestock town.

One week. One damn week full of investigation and still she’d no trace of any Van der Linde gang members. But to be fair, what did she expect? Dutch van der Linde and his posse walking down the towns’ streets for no reason? After such a coup like Blackwater, with a criminal record being as long as the ride from Mount Hagen to Hennigan’s Stead? The probability was low. Very low. Then again even the biggest outlaws had to make their living from anything and Ann remembered catching a few targets while being in smaller towns.

She uttered a heavy sigh when suddenly someone somewhere in this saloon started yelling a name over and over again. Really? This shit again? It has only been midday today – she was restocking her supplies at the general store – when outside a stranger went up and down the streets, stopping nearly every traveller asking for his friend. *Gavin* was his friend’s name, that much she remembered. Hours full of “GAVIN!!!” calls had left marks inside her ears. Mercifully eventually Gavin’s friend had left Valentine; maybe he had found his buddy, maybe not. Maybe he was about to annoy the hell out of people in other towns. Who knew? Ann didn’t.

One thing she did know for sure, though: As opposed to Gavin’s friend this guy here in the saloon clearly hadn’t found his friend yet. And so she now needed to endure constant calling for someone named *Lenny*.

The bounty huntress pulled out a small silver watch from her pocket and got a glimpse of the watch hand. Nearly midnight! Ann would have lied, if she wasn’t shocked about how late it already had gotten. Since when did she sit here? Taking a look at her beer again, she noticed that it was about getting empty. Must have been a sign.

Okay, ready to go. She slammed her hands on the table, figuring out what to do with the rest of the night. According to her plan the next stop on her journey was supposed to be Annesburg but considering the current time... She wasn’t sure about riding through Roanoke Ridge on her own during the night. It was said that there were some real nasty gangs being up to mischief. Among others was the so called *Murfree Brood*, supposedly a group of insane cannibals, kidnapping people just to torture and eat them. No, that wasn’t kind the experience she needed right now. Instead she’d just walk over to the Saints Hotel, seeing if she could get a room for tonight. Tomorrow morning she then would move on.

Yawning, Ann ordered one last beer from the barkeeper for the short range over to the hotel before stepping outside. God, she was tired... and suddenly cold! The weather had changed since midday. Now it was raining cats and dogs while the temperature had dropped. Simply put, the weather was depressing – matching the whole day so far. By now the rain had made the already muddy streets even sludgier.

“That’s not for us, huh, Calido?”

Calido, her Pinto Mustang, panted in response. It had been a few months now since she had found the stallion in Cholla Springs not far from Armadillo. He was badly injured, so she took him with her and pepped him up. The two of them quickly became very close and Calido her loyal
companion. He indeed was a beautiful and graceful animal – one Ann was very proud of.

Lighthearted, she took the horse’s reins from the post, taking a long drink from her beer.

When suddenly someone strikingly sounded right behind her back: “LENNY?!”

Ann cringed and before she was even able to whirl around to locate the noise’s source she was jostled. Of course she lost her balance, of course she stumbled downstairs and of course she eventually ended up in the mud. What a great daily closing!

“Oh.” The man who had bumped into her looked puzzled from under his hat. “Ya ain’t Lenny. Sorry.”

First cursing, the brunette woman then snapped: “Apparently not!” Something about this man – Lenny’s friend – was kind of familiar, she thought while having a closer look at him. Where did she know him from? That beard, that face… And suddenly it came to her mind; she immediately froze.

Arthur Morgan from that wanted poster. Arthur-fucking-outlaw-Morgan! It seemed that this day was about to take a really great turn. What was more, she didn’t only find one Van der Linde guy, no! She found two of them! This certain Lenny… Ann was dead sure she’d read about him, too. His real name was Leonard Summers and he was a wanted man, just like Morgan.

Dead or alive, she kept telling herself over and over again, just in case she’d get troubles in this matter. If necessary, you can still shoot them and drag their bodies to Blackwater. Of course a dead body would reduce the bounty a bit but truth be told, half a loaf was better than none.

In the meanwhile Arthur Morgan had already tottered back into the damn saloon. Now it was not the time to let him out of sight! Ann followed him, pants still filthy from mud. She almost felt certain that today – given the circumstances of two drunken men getting drunker and drunker – she would be offered an opportunity to catch them, at best once they were completely off-guard. All the bounty huntress practically had to do was taking a backseat and wait. Just wait.

And because she’d lost her dear friend beer bottle to the mud outside when Morgan had bumped into her and also because waiting was so much better while having a cool beer at hand she immediately ordered a new one before taking place not far from those two drunkards. Every so often she really had trouble suppressing her laughter: Morgan and Lenny first molested some random dude who was wise enough to leave them alone. Then Lenny disappeared again, making Morgan look for him once more in an acoustically blatant tone. Lenny appeared, they continued drinking. Meanwhile that random dude from a short while ago showed up again – this time Morgan hauled him out, not returning for ages. Lenny was also nowhere to be seen and – as Ann was already expecting – his friend started hunting for him because he was simply drunk as fuck.

While Arthur Morgan weaved up the stairs Ann took a deep sigh. What time was it?

“LENNY???”

Only two hours passed since she had picked up with the mud outside. She sighed again.

“Heeey LENNY!!!”

Ann lifted her gaze, suddenly white as salt. In her mind’s eye all the bounty went already missing because Morgan was leaning over the railing, yelling something at his re-emerged friend downstairs. Way too far, according to Ann’s taste. He wouldn’t preserve his balance for long, if he continued gesturing like that with his head downwards.
This goddamn fool. Don’t you dare to die! She cursed under her breath, stood up and rushed up the stairs. At the very last moment the brunette woman was able to catch hold of him, grapping the back of his blue shirt as well as his suspenders. She literally just saved an outlaw from unintended suicide. “Careful, Mister. You’ll break your neck otherwise.”

Morgan was just staring at her for a moment until he eventually started laughing right into her face, smell of booze included. “Ahh, dat woman that ain’t Lenny again! Thank ya, Miss. Thank ya.” He patted her head and went away – back to his friend Lenny. Of course.

Taken aback, the bounty huntress sighed a third time within only a few minutes und went back to her seat. How long should she bear all of this up? Not later than the two of them are lying around somewhere dead drunk. Or riding their horses back to where they came from. If they really were to ride back to their hideout this night, she could at least follow them at a remove. Everything else… was up to her spontaneity.

Hours passed by agonizingly slow. With each minute Ann found herself wondering how in God’s name a simple human being could have that much of a tolerance for alcohol, still steady on the legs. By this time her head was resting on the desk right in front of her because her palm couldn’t bear it anymore. She was so fucking tired. If it wasn’t for some fresh air, she would have fallen asleep. Right here, right now. Just because.

Outside the saloon she lazily banked on the upmost step, finally able to take an air draft without the scent of either alcohol or smoke. Her right leg bended, the woman leaned backwards just to close her eyes for the blink of an eye. She would just rest for a small moment and soon would be right back into the saloon to tail her prey. She would…

The initial small moment turned into a few hours.
Tracing

Chapter Notes

Oh wow! Some people actually have read the first chapter - that’s so cool! Thanks so much! (✿◠‿◠)

If you’re interested in Ann’s appearance, you can follow this link to see a doodle I inked of her: https://www.instagram.com/p/BrDV0FLhicl/

Chapter II: Tracing

“Uh?!” When Ann woke with a start, it was already day. Warming rays of sunshine mixed up with all the coaches’ noises ensured that her delirium had come to an end. She looked baffled, felt whacked. Why on earth was that? She didn’t even have a few too many! Morgan, it then suddenly flashed through her mind. Morgan and his friend! Where were they?! “Goddammit!” How long did she sleep here?! What time was it?

Screw it all! Without even taking a single look at her watch she rushed into the saloon, watched all the remaining drunken bodies closely. No sign of them! There was no fucking sign of Arthur Morgan and Leonard Summers. This just couldn’t be happening. It just couldn’t. The bartender… He probably was her best bet.

All out of breath Ann banged her hands down the counter, inspecting the bartender. Yes, he was the same as last night. He must have known where the outlaws went! “Those two men from tonight, Lenny and his friend, do you know when they left, Mister? And where?”

The man stopped drying glasses for a moment, giving her a grumpy gaze. While he then continued with his work he snorted. “Them? Were chased by the sheriff and his deputies, Miss. They nearly drowned a fella in the backyard.”

“By the sheriff?!!”

The bartender nodded. “Maybe they’re doin’ time now, maybe not. I don’t have the slightest clue if they’ve gotten away. Would just be nice, if they won’t bring any more trouble upon this saloon.”

Ann pricked up her ears. “So you mean… these fellas are stepping by every once in a while?”

“Yep, Miss. Some days ago they’ve already started a brawl. At least the bigger one, you know?”

“Yes, yes. And… by any means, do you know his name?” She leaned over, talking quietly now.

“Gimme a second, Miss.” The bartender thought about it for a moment, still drying glasses. “Well, I think…” He also lowered his voice. “I think it was Callahan. Arthur Callahan or something like this.”

Well, that was exactly what Ann had been looking for. Finally she had an alias. Continuing her search not for Arthur Morgan but Arthur Callahan would probably be a lot easier. Of course guys like him wouldn’t use their real name in public. She didn’t do that, either – by the mere fact that
Ann McBrady had a certain reputation down in New Austin where she was raised and worked for years. If it wasn’t for these special high bounties, she probably had never come up to the north but stick to her familiar surroundings instead while doing her job as a bounty huntress.

However, now she gave the bartender an honest smile: “Thank you very much, Mister. You really helped.”

The next stop on her list was the law office. While walking over to the new destination Ann became more and more tensed. How’d she do it best? By simply entering the office, greeting the sheriff and telling him some lies about fictional cattle thieves while looking around for the two drunkards without ostentation? If they were really serving time in there, how’d she get them out? Were Callahan and Lenny able to buy their freedom by themselves or were they running the risk of getting hanged at worst? And most importantly: Was the sheriff clear on who probably were in his prison cell?

Again she wanted to kick herself for falling asleep so close to the goal. Maybe – if the two men weren’t doing time – she was thrown off the track now and given the fact that fortune always messed with her, chances were good that they had managed to escape. All that would remain was Morgan’s alias which would be useless as well because neither he nor anyone else from this gang would ever show up here in Valentine again. The area was too hot to cause any further trouble.


Absorbed in her thoughts, she squeaked when suddenly the office door flung open and Arthur Morgan as well as Leonard Summers walked out right into freedom. Ann could hardly believe her luck.

Apparently the mass of alcohol – whatever exactly it has been they had drunk – left its mark on them after all. The corners of her mouth twitched while she was watching them dragging their feet over to the doctor, clearly being hung over. Well, outlaws were also humans.

Trying to maintain a low profile, Ann turned to the newspaper boy next to her and bought the current issue. While doing so she strained her ears to catch a few scraps of their conversation.

“I gotta get out of here,” Lenny said, mounting his horse.

Morgan, however, just leant against the post in front of the doctor’s office. Slowly sinking down, he groaned: “I’m just gonna… have a little sit down and… feel sorry for myself.”

Serves you right for messing up my pants. There was no pity for him and now that he sat there, resting, she turned around again to have a closer look. Hard to believe that this man carried around such an enormous criminal record. Of course he looked a bit reckless but not that obviously criminal. The bounty huntress couldn’t even make out any noticeable scars.

If that’s recently a sign for delinquency, I guess I’m an outlaw myself, she inwardly grinned. After all Ann’s face was graced by a scar which was spanning from her nose bone over to a part of her right cheek – admittedly faint but on closer inspection plainly visible. Sometimes she asked herself what strangers might think about her when they first saw her. Did she look like an outlaw, too?

Morgan knocked off some dirt from his black hat and while he did so their gazes met for a moment. Suddenly feeling a bit uncomfortable, Ann rolled up the newspaper in her hands and went over to her still fastened horse in front of the saloon. She stored it away into the saddle bag and fished out a carrot instead. Calido cheerfully accepted it and neighed in response.
“Shh, Calido. No worries, we will be gone soon,” his owner whispered while patting him. “Once Mister Callahan decides to put his criminal ass onto his horse, that is.”

From the corner of her eyes she suddenly saw him passing by towards a horse – a Tennessee Walker from what she could tell. While he was preparing for leaving their eyes met once again and his pale green eyes were enough to cause her discomfort anew. Turning her face away quickly, she wondered if he had become suspicious. No way. You’re just a normal traveller.

“Miss.”

Ann swallowed when she eventually heard him speak her name with his deep voice. Okay, poker face now. Act normal. Everything’s fine. You can always just shoot him down. She faced him again and damn, he was big. A lot bigger than her.

“I’m afraid I bumped into you last night. Anyways…” Morgan pointed at her pants, the mud on them now crusted. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

It did take her a while to figure out the best possible response to his words, still not sure what was going on. Maybe she was well-advised to better keep her hands off that man. But then again… She wanted that damn money. Trying to calm down, she kept telling herself that he simply couldn’t have any clue about who or what she was. He was just trying to be nice. Hopefully.

“Accepted,” the bounty huntress then replied shortly, turning to Calido again. “Hope you’re not feeling too bad after that little… party of yours.” Making a little small talk couldn’t hurt either.

“I’m fine, I guess.” Eventually he mounted his horse, eyes still focused on her. “Well then, take care of yourself. I was told this ain’t the right place for a woman travelling alone, ya know?”

Did he… did he just subtly threaten her?! Damn, her heart was suddenly in her boots. “Thanks, you too, Mister.” Ann tried to behave unimpressed, still acting like a normal traveller who absolutely didn’t stalk that guy.

One last glance from him without any further answer and then he was gone by spurring his horse, leaving the woman with mixed feelings behind. Either way – threat or not –, she had to wait for a while before she could stick to his heels. The good news was that she was a very good tracker, at least she thought so. As a farmer’s daughter she was raised on the usage of weapons and her father often took her with him when he was heading out for hunting animals. All these experiences helped her a lot when she’d finally gotten into the bounty hunting business. Morgan might have been a better and more experienced gunman but she would track him. And she would snipe him.

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Something wasn’t right. All along now Arthur had that qualms and it wasn’t because of his hangover. Okay, all the beer and whiskey from tonight definitely turned his stomach too, but this feeling was something else. He slowed down his horse from trot just to glance backwards. Not a soul to be seen. Especially not a certain female soul that obviously wasn’t Lenny.

There was something about her he liked for no means. Despite being drunk as fuck he still remembered that he’d brought her down to the ground outside the saloon. And after that… She’d simply been there all the night, had saved him from having a fall – that woman had even slept in front of the saloon! For fuck’s sake, why?!

Arthur probably knew the answer and still he was anxious for it to prove true. He allowed himself a little test and left the path which – still wet from all the rain – exposed all his horse’s hoof prints.
This time he’d take another route to their hideout, to Horseshoe Overlook. Clapping spurs to his horse, he crossed the large meadow and followed the path paralleling the first one. If she was smart, she would recover the scent and if not… *She ain’t worth the time then. Shoddiest trick ever.*

Arthur passed Caliban’s Seat and turned right, finally riding down towards Dakota River. He made sure to leave proper tracks for his supposed tracker. Only when he was sure to be in visual range from the camp’s plateau he suddenly stopped. Time for magical trick number 2. By simply channeling the horse through the middle of the river he rounded the entire camp area, now erasing all further tracks. Instead of entering their hideout from the north he entered it from south this time.

“Arthur!” Charles immediately greeted him when he dismounted his horse. Obviously he was the one taking guard at the moment. “Hard night, eh? Lenny’s already hit the sack.”

Arthur groaned in response. People talking about last night only made him remember his headache and his need to take a nap himself. “Charles, do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Check out that river and tell me if there’s anything… suspicious, will ya?”

Charles immediately understood. “You think we get a problem?”

“Maybe. Just tell me, okay?”

“Will do, Arthur.”

His buddy was about to turn around and continue keeping guard when Arthur quickly retained him. Because he hadn’t seen Dutch on his return he now asked Charles: “Dutch’s not here?”

“Nope. Said he had something to settle.”

Arthur nodded in response and went to his tent where he sank into his bed, totally exhausted from nausea as well as headaches. Though he had never admitted it but even the light of the day was taken a lot out of him. Someone so needed to remind him next time he was at any saloon with anyone not to drink a single drop of alcohol. It always escalated. Always. Fortunately they were able to bail themselves out. Goddamn!

Well, at least that night got Lenny’s mind off that damn Micah. Speaking of Micah, he still needed to get him out of jail in Strawberry. A thankless task. So much had happened since Blackwater… Maybe settling down that near to all these quickly changing towns was unconducive. All hope was on Dutch. Him being him, he would find a way out before the pinkertons caught up on them.

Arthur had barely rested for some minutes when Charles showed up again. “Arthur! There’s something you might wanna see.”

“I do?” the older man grunted, taking his arm from his face. He indeed did wanna see because it would prove him right about that woman. Therefore he bounced out of bed and followed his fellow gang brother right to the plateau cliff where he took his binoculars from his belt and a look right through them.

When for a long time he didn’t say a single word but just watched, Charles quietly asked: “You know that woman? She’s been there for some time. Looks like she’s tracing something. Or someone. You, Arthur?”

Arthur took the binoculars down. “I suppose so. She’s a goddamn bounty hunter. That’s why I
took another route.” He didn’t look too pleased about that circumstance that his gut instincts didn’t
deceive him. Being chased by a bounty hunter stated a problem – at least if it was a somewhat
capable bounty hunter. Arthur watched the woman that wasn’t Lenny again. Was she capable?
Well… As planned she’d lost his track right there on the riverbed and searched for a new one on
the other side.

“What do we do with her? Shoot her?”

“That’s probably best but…” Arthur took a short pause. “She ain’t the smartest one.” A part of him
seemed disappointed that she didn’t do better, that she didn’t simply continue following the river
because it was so fucking obvious. Instead she was heading west with her beautiful Mustang horse,
directly out of his sight.

“So?”

“She ain’t worth the time, Charles. Leave her be.”

“What if she returns?”

“Then I’ll take care of her.”
Encountering

Chapter Notes

Here we go, chapter three. I'm still working on the translation of the fourth one, so it might take some time from now on. (・̀ᴗ・́)

If, by any chance, there's someone who wants to proofread any of the future chapters, feel free to contact me. It would probably also help me to improve my English.

Anyways, thank you for stopping by.

Chapter III: Encountering

That’s it, you’ve lost him, Ann. Morgan had thrown her off by using one of the cheapest methods ever. She had spent the whole day searching the area around Dakota River for that outlaw but wasn’t successful in picking up the trace once again. While the sun had already set, covering her search in nearly complete darkness, her thoughts began bothering her more and more. With the day now getting to end, was it wise to pitch up a camp in the wilderness? Wouldn’t she be well advised to move on? At least until she’d found some kind of an abandoned shack? Last thing she’d need now was unnecessary attention.

Valentine was most certainly another option. Ann could have just gone there, taking a room, resting for the night and continue her search tomorrow. She was so damn sure that she was close. These Van der Linde gang members had to be somewhere around here – though she also had to consider that especially Morgan was toying with her. In the end it seemed that she was absolutely right about him subtly threatening her.

“And the day today started so well, huh? Tomorrow, Calido, tomorrow,” Ann softly murmured and patted her huffing Mustang. While putting him to a trot through the woods she suddenly noted a change. Calido somehow became sort of unsettled, panted again and again, then nickered. Tossing his head to both sides, it was tough to bring him under control again.

But Ann managed, though. Her horse soothed again, so she patted it once more. “It’s fine, Calido. It’s fine.” Actually she didn’t recognize this kind of behavior from him, or rather knew it from very rare situations. Like ambushes or predators. Being not familiar with the region up here, she finally wondered what kind of predators might stake out their territories in this surrounding area. Wolves? Most likely, but if there had been any wolf around, she’d probably heard the noises by now.

Hell, how she hated operating in the dark! Even though sometimes it was a must for her profession as a bounty huntress to go after her targets in the dark she simply hated it. The darkness always made her feel uncomfortable. Must have been some kind of childhood thing. All the more she exhaled when the clouds eventually passed the moon and her surroundings became illuminated a bit.

While she was relaxing Calido, however, perceptibly made a dent in pace. The horse suddenly tensed again, whinnying through bright nostrils. Ann peered but couldn’t locate anything that might cause him panic. So she tried to calm him. “Shhh, Calido! Nothing’s he-”
Then it happened ever so sudden: The Mustang reared up, tossing his rider off. Ann forcefully dashed against a tree, groaning. Through narrow eyes she could watch her horse cantering in circles before disappearing into the darkness of the covert.

“What the hell, Calido?!” And as if this cropper wasn’t enough, she heard a hiss by her side to top it all. At first the bounty huntress didn’t dare to even move a tiny bit; she knew it was a snake. She hated snakes – much the same as she hated the dark. Spiders? Creepy-crawlies in general? Not a problem. Snakes? That was going beyond a joke! What was more, she wasn’t well up in the fauna of New Hanover so she could barely even tell, if it was some kind of venomous snake.

*Just. Don’t. Move. Just. Do. Nothing. At. All.* Ann breathed deeply, breaking out in a cold sweat. The snake still kept hissing and then it slowly touched her with its cold scales, slithering just across her left hand. Nearly having a coronary, she panicked and – while getting to her feet abruptly – slung the reptile away somewhere into the darkness.

“Fuck… Fuck,” she then gasped. Time to definitely get back to Valentine. Another snake and she’d lose her damn mind. She just needed… Calido! Where had that goddamn horse been gone to? She whistled for him but no reaction. As a rule the Mustang always followed her whistles – but not this time.

*Shit,* she thought and crouched, reaching for her holstered revolver. Calido better was okay. If anyone dared to harm him…

Ann started carefully stalking forwards through the covert, ready to shoot everything that popped into her view. Her search only came to an end when she eventually saw the stallion being out to grass once she’d come out of the thicket. He seemed unruffled so she uttered a sigh of relief, putting away the revolver.

“Would you *please* don’t do that again, horse?” She sounded reproachful and went over to Calido who simply gave a damn. “Why wouldn’t you listen, huh?”

“Could ask ya the same, Miss.”

Ann froze. It was that man again – Morgan! And he pulled a gun right to the back of her head, cocking it. She could even feel the cold muzzle through her thick brown hair. At this point she was dead certain about losing her life here and now. Namely just because of her own foolishness. What was the matter with her not even noticing that it was *him* that stuck to her heels and not the other way around?

“What do you want, Mister?” she asked, still turning her back on him. Best thing in this sensitive situation was probably to act innocent, try to defuse it a bit. After all she was a normal traveller and not in the least she’d ever traced him. Never.

“I think I told ya that it ain’t safe here.” It wasn’t quite necessary anger that resonated within his voice but a certain annoyance couldn’t be denied.

“Excuse me?” Oh well, her answer came harsher than she would’ve cared for.

“Oh c’mon! I ain’t that much of a fool.” A jerk with his gun. “Alright, hands up, Miss!”

Ann did as she was told. Now it was important to play along until she would get a chance to attack him in a moment of abstraction. “No idea what you’re talking about. I came out here for hunting.”

“Ya sure did.”
Ann gulped. Perfect, she had just furnished him a fit occasion. This surely did not go as planned. Especially not that he started to disarm her by removing her belt along with the holster. The rifle around her shoulder followed. “Look,” she quickly tried to back down. “I was just on my way back to Valentine. It’s gotten real late.”

Morgan tossed her equipment aside. “Sounds like a long story. I’m pretty much interested in hearin’ it.” In a flash he grabbed her wrists and forced them onto her back, tying them together tightly. Next he brought her to her knees before completely hogtying her. “You gonna tell me on the way.”

While being scooped by him, Ann fidgeted like a maggot. “It’s an incredible awful story full of misadventures,” she asserted. “It would just bore the hell out of you.” Besides, tell him on the way where?! To the whole Van der Linde gang, to their hideout? That didn’t seem too promising to say at least. After all she was hogtied – hogtied and unarmed.

Morgan tossed her onto his horse’s back and watched her for a moment. “Then I suggest ya better make sure that I ain’t get bored, Miss.”

She noticed that dark hat of his again, throwing a terrific shadow on his face even in the moonlight. Then – before she was even able to have a closer look – he took off his bandana and used it for blindfolding her. Apparently he was about to take her to some super-secret place on a super-secret route which was pretty bad. But what was even worse: She was blind at this very moment and being blind – even if only temporarily – meant complete darkness in her head.

Ann vehemently struggled. “Let me down, dammit! And don’t you dare to hurt Calido!” Because she couldn’t see anything that was going on she also wasn’t sure, if Calido was alright. She couldn’t help but panicked more and more.

“So Calido it is?” Morgan made a pause. “That’s a good name for a good boah.” He audibly patted the Mustang’s neck. “Where’d ya find him, Miss?”

“New Austin.”

“Obviously. You comin’ from New Austin?”

Ann carefully thought about whether to give him an honest answer or not. What was the worst thing that could happen? New Austin was fairly big. Nevertheless… “No,” she then lied. “I found him while passing through.”

Instead of answering her he just mounted that horse of his; she could feel it and she could hear a crinkle, like he had taken up some reins. Must have been Calido’s. At least he wouldn’t leave her horse behind which would simplify matters. Her wrists still bound together, she started fumbling around with her back pocket. From what she could tell Morgan hadn’t taken away her pocketknife – and to her great relief it was still there.

Morgan’s Tennessee Walker started moving and next to him was Calido, holding up the pace. Ann continued fumbling, hoping that the outlaw was busy enough with focusing on the way to wherever. Because she wasn’t able to see anything she knew that she had to act with a fine-toothed comb. Distracting him from the obvious would be a good start, she guessed.

“Your horse has a name, too?” Asking that question, she carefully fished the pocketknife out and turned it up.

“… Not yet.”
“It’s a new horsey then?” Ann started to quietly cutting through the robes that bound her wrists.

“Quite.”

“You bought it? Or did you tame it?”

“Stole it.”

Of course he did. The bounty huntress wasn’t surprised at all. “You gonna take Calido, too?” Just a little bit more…

“Well, you ain’t need him anymore.”

Ann was done. Finally! The robes on her wrists were cut – the ones around her feet followed. “I doubt that, Mister.” She silently grabbed the handkerchief converted to a blindfold and sneaked a peek at the situation. Morgan was sitting in front of her, riding his horse single-handed. His other hand held Calido’s reins, just as she had already assumed.

“You doubt that?” He was now laughing. “I think you ain’t in any position to doubt anything, Miss.”

Snorting, Ann unknotted the dark handkerchief. “I very well do, Mister Callahan.”

“Aaah, now we’re gettin’ somewhere. Please continue, Miss.”

“With pleasure.” Her voice was clear when she suddenly rammed her pocketknife into his side and immediately afterwards tossed his own handkerchief around his own fucking neck just to violently tighten it. “You think you’re smart?!” Bracing herself, she tried to strangulate the surprised man. “I’m gonna give you smart!”
Here we go, Arthur and Ann struggling for their lives. I should probably also mention that it's getting a bit bloody at this point. I'm sorry for injuring our precious boah.

Starting from the next chapter, we will get deeper insight into Ann's motivation as well as reasons for literally hating any kind of outlaws.

**Chapter IV: Confronting**

Arthur groaned in pain when suddenly something sharp and spiky plunged into his left side, cutting his flesh underneath the blue shirt. Just before he knew, something else wrapped around his neck, taking his breath away. Alarmed, he panted and let go of both horses’ reins while struggling against whatever was chocking him there. It all happened so sudden; he didn’t even realize who attacked him for a moment.

“You think you’re smart?! I’m gonna give you smart!” a familiar female voice yelled from behind.

It was that damn woman! Somehow she had managed to free herself! And – Arthur was realizing it just now – she used *his own* handkerchief on the attempt to murder him. What an irony! Apparently he hadn’t paid enough attention to all her weapons… Goddamn rookie mistake! That was surely not supposed to happen to a man like him.

Ignoring the pervading pain, Arthur – most likely driven by all the adrenaline – reached backwards. He caught hold of his attacker’s braided ponytail, actually thankful for anything he could get his hands on at all.

They both continued struggling on the Tennessee Walker; the stranger strangling and strangling him while he desperately tried to loosen the handkerchief with one hand while the other just hauled her. Eventually she lost her balance and because that woman didn’t give up she pulled him with her when she fell down the horse. They ended up on the hard ground, Arthur on top of her, nearly crushing her with his weight.

To his relief this was enough for that damn bounty hunter to finally yield. He coughed, desperately gasping for breath while tugging the bandana away. It took some seconds to recollect himself but then he noticed it: quick steps, a whistle and the cantering of a horse. Dammit, she was going to get away!

Drawing his revolver, Arthur immediately turned around and yelled: “Stay, woman!” Of course she didn’t, so he aimed at her silhouette on that horse of hers and pulled the trigger.

But she galloped off; he had missed her. Hissing, Arthur felt for the source of all the pain which was now overwhelming him with might and main. A small knife was sticking in his left side underneath his rips, dipping his blue shirt in dark red. “Goddamn!” Dragging it out was probably not a good idea, he figured. Not as long as he didn’t have anything to treat the stab wound.

That damn bounty hunter wouldn’t get away with that. Gritting his teeth, Arthur pulled himself
together and reached for his own horse to mount it. He managed somehow and spurred his horse, trying to repress the pain again.

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Ann looked back when she could clearly hear hoof noises that weren’t Calido’s – Morgan was still following her, wasn’t he? Damn it, that man was injured! For the time being she would’ve really appreciated him not following her because he was definitely going to kill her – at least since her little murder attempt. Besides, being unarmed, she preferred running away for now.

And there he suddenly appeared – sticking to her heels at an alarming rate. The bounty huntress glanced backwards again and again, not believing her eyes. “Back off!” she shouted, ducking a tree in front of her and running her horse even faster. Keeping up that speed would end in disaster, that was for sure.

“Stop that damn horse!” Morgan got closer.

Of course she didn’t dream of doing so – instead she did the exact opposite by speeding up.

“Last warning!” His voice again; this time it sounded much closer and clearer. “You wanna make me shoot that precious horse of yours? Be my guest then!”

Ann didn’t even have to turn around; she fucking knew that he was leveling a weapon at her, she could kinda feel the muzzle as near as he was. But still she didn’t follow the man’s instructions. Today was not the day to be killed. Neither she nor Calido would die.

Then a bullet was fired – this time well targeted and brutally calculated. To her surprise it wasn’t directed at her or her horse at first but rather at the ground to the right of Calido’s front hoof. As measured by the stallion’s response Morgan’s intention suddenly dawned on her. Fuck! The Mustang shied, slowing down significantly.

“I warned ya,” Morgan’s deep voice echoed directly to her left now and with that he tossed himself onto her horse, grabbing her and sending her flying.

The landing was hard; Ann grunted. Rolling over on to her back, she heard him jumping down the horse, coming right towards her. How was this even possible? He must already have lost tons of blood. “Fuckin’ asshole,” she then hissed.

Towering over her, he reached for his lasso once again. The bounty huntress realized that her knife was still sticking in his body – he was definitely loosing blood but it didn’t seem likely that he was taking interest in that at all. What a killer. Now Ann was safe in the knowledge that it would have been better to keep her hands off that man right from the start. And now all that mattered to her was staying alive. Somehow.

“Ya stretchin’ my patience,” the outlaw firmly said. “I’m serious, ya better ain’t make this a biggie otherwise I shoot ya.”

Despite that tone in his voice he evidently was badly affected by the knife attack, considering his heavy breaths. That was still her chance.

Upturning lightning-fast before he could even lean over her to hogtie her again, she grasped at the knife and swayed it, pressing it even deeper into his skin. Morgan groaned with pain, still keeping up overbearing her. Warm blood was dripping down the handle, bathing her own hands in dark red when she continued twisting the blade. “Die, goddammit!” Ann growled breathlessly.
After a short struggle Morgan’s hand dashed forward, grabbing her throat, and on impulse the bounty huntress released her grip on the handle. It was that very moment she’d lost the fight and was hogtied just like before. He hastily searched all of her pockets for further knives and – as soon as he made sure there weren’t any left – floored her by letting go of her throat. Breathing hard, he finally managed to get up, taking a look at the bloody mess she’d caused.

“Goddamn, woman! Look at this shit,” the outlaw panted, closing his eyes for a moment to catch his breath again.

Ann silently cursed; it was well and truly over. He had her. At least she had been able to inflict even more pain on him. Maybe he would die from an infection. Maybe the blood loss would kill him even before he could return to his fellas. Anyhow, the blood-soaked stain had significantly grown on his shirt. Sweat was dripping off his forehead – she could tell because he had obviously lost his hat during the fight.

“So?” Morgan eventually asked out of nowhere, voice steady again.

“So what?” Ann spat in response, twisting and turning.

In silence but obviously und truly pissed, he went und took a rifle from his horse’s saddle. With what was most likely a hunting rifle in his hand he returned to her, steps heavy on the ground. “Well, I think ya still owe me quite a few answers, Miss.”

To her surprise he still managed to keep his emotions under control – not quite exactly what she had expected from a man like him after what had happened in recent minutes. He was even civilized enough to still call her Miss. Yet Ann kept her mouth shut. She could so say goodbye to her innocent traveler show.

“All right.” Sighing, Morgan took the rifle in both hands, muzzle being fixed on her. “You really sure you ain’t wanna tell me somethin’? Name, reasons for stalkin’ me… life story maybe?”

Maybe – if she really wanted to live through this – it was now a good time for speaking up. Giving in to an outlaw, to everything she hated so much… But no, she couldn’t do this. She’d rather bite off her tongue than tell him anything about her in particular. “Go to hell,” she said instead.

All of a sudden Morgan forcefully shoved the muzzle into her mouth before she could even close it again. “Gonna count on three, woman. One.”

Ashen-faced, Ann watched him wide-eyed. Fuck, her damn skull was just about to get blown off.

“Two.” The safety catch was taken off.

*He’s fucking doing it, Ann! Do something! Anything!* Completely panicked, she decided to tell him her name at last: “Mmmffady!” As best as she could with a muzzle that filled her mouth, that is.

“What was that?” he taunted her. “Three by the way.”

“Ann. Mffady,” the bounty huntress tried again, this time slower and clearer. She hated herself so much for caving in.

Satisfied and confident that now she would tell him everything, Morgan put his gun out of her mouth again. “And now the whole story please.”

“And what could ya be seekin’ here all alone, Miss McBrady?” It was a rhetorical question.

“I came here for earning money!”

Arching his eyebrows, Morgan nodded. Apparently that wasn’t news for him. “C’mon, go on.”

“I’m a bounty huntress.”

“Ya don’t say.”

“From New Austin!”

“Lemme guess.” He squatted down next to her, screwing up his face in pain for a short moment. “Ya heard of that Blackwater thing and thought catchin’ us would be like shootin’ a fish in a barrel.”

Now it was Ann who desperately nodded, her cool exterior long gone. “Pure accident that I met you two, though.”

“Maybe.” Morgan rubbed his bearded chin. “So any suggestion what to do with ya?”

“Listen, Mister Morgan. How about you gonna let me go and we just forget about this whole thing? We won’t see each other again. I even haven’t found your hideout.” There she was, pleading an outlaw to spare her life. How much had she degraded?

He watched her closely for a full minute or so, obviously thinking about what to do with her. Apparently he was reconsidering her suggestion. Then he just cocked his head. “Nah, can’t do this, Miss. I’m already a wanted man by a bunch of pinktertons. I ain’t got the time to look out for bounty hunters as well.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Nah.” Morgan pulled out a remarkable hunting knife. “We’ll make this real quick.”

Ann squint her eyes shut, being certain that this goddamn outlaw would cut her throat any second now. But to her surprise he suddenly cut the ropes, letting her free again. Puzzled, she looked him in the eyes.

“Now get lost, Miss McBrady,” he said, standing up. He was now holding his injured side. “I ain’t a good man but killing women ain’t my style, too.”

Still confused, Ann got to her feed again. You should be thankful you’d made it alive, she told herself. Not question his decisions. Just. Be. Fucking. Thankful.

“Ya better hurry before I change my mind.”

“My weapons, can I-”

“You can’t. I said get lost!” Morgan now impatiently yelled, aiming his revolver at her.

The bounty huntress didn’t need to be told one more time; she approached her horse at a smart pace and mounted it. Without even taking one last glance at the man she rode off, trusting his words not to kill her. Only when she was close to Valentine again her inner tension was easing bit by bit. Ann started to realize what she’d just gotten into and suddenly was close to tears. She hated these damn outlaws so much ever since her father’s death. And yet one of them had just spared her life. Despite she had stabbed him. Despite she had tried to choke him.
With her hands still covered in his now dried blood, she really had to question herself, if she was better at all.
Here we go, X-Mas update for you. ♥ I’m mixing up some of the main story elements from now on.

Chapter V: Reencountering

“Mister Callahan, how good you’re here!” Taking a nip from his brandy bottle, Sheriff Leigh Gray slapped Arthur – deputy of the small settlement Rhodes for about 48 hours now – on the shoulder. “We’ve a problem with Archibald.”

Considering that damn MacGregor’s wicked mouth, Dutch van der Linde’s protégé couldn’t really say that he was surprised about him getting into trouble again. If it had been up to him, Arthur would’ve just left the other deputy to rot wherever he now was. But of course that wasn’t an option right now. Dutch had made himself very clear that they had to play along with the Grays as long as they’d get a chance to play them off against the loathsome and rivaled Braithwaite family – that way they would get the most out of both collaborations. In theory, that is. So far Dutch’s plan hadn’t proved very useful but Arthur wouldn’t even have thought about doubting it. He would just do as told – namely buttering Leigh Gray up.

Sighing, he eventually nodded: “Alright, what’s this damn fool gotten up to?”

Obviously satisfied about the imposed cooperativeness, Sheriff Gray took a hit again. “The Lemoynes,” he slurred his speech.

“The Lemoynes?” It wasn’t really a question; in fact Arthur very well knew that Leigh referred to the Lemoyne Raiders – a gang residing the Lemoyne area. They’d already gotten into contact shortly after pulling up stakes at Horseshoe Overlook just to move on to Clemens Point.

“We had a girl kidnapped by these damn Lemoyne Raiders from the saloon. Sent Archibald find them and take her back home to her family.”

“… And he didn’t return?” Obviously.

“Nope. Now, Mister Callahan, if you were so nice to-“

The conversation between the two men was cut short by a sudden loud neighing from the outside followed by a heavy banging.

“Ohh! Must be my delivery!” Sheriff Gray sounded most pleased. Emptying his bottle, he rushed for the office door to eagerly open it. “Ah, wonderful, Miss! But… where’s the woman?”

Arthur just stood there, watching the drunken man talking to whoever had brought him one of these poor wanted targets of the state of Lemoyne. Recently the presence of any bounty hunters caused an uneasy feeling deep within him – he could count his blessings to be still around today after the unpleasant incident a few weeks ago.
“This bitch’s killed Tammy! My honey pie,” a male voice yelled in despair. A somehow familiar voice, Arthur thought.

Then a harsh female voice barked back: “She attacked me first, you piece of shit!”

He couldn’t help but immediately thought he’d recognize that voice, too. But wherefrom? It wasn’t until a minute later that it suddenly dawned on him when a small framed woman entered the office, dragging a rope along behind her. Yes, Arthur Morgan knew this fine-boned woman with that braided hair because it had been himself that had nearly crushed her while fighting for his goddamn life on a goddamn horse. Miss Ann McBrady – and he was always very good at remembering faces and corresponding names. If only he had shot her back that night…

“Wait, Miss!” Leigh Gray – well aware of the woman’s physical effort – beckoned Arthur over while he opened another bottle. “My new deputy will help ya. Lend that woman a hand, will you, Mister Callahan?”

“Sure,” Arthur obeyed, giving her a quick smirk once he realized that she had taken note of his presence, too. She had suddenly let go of the rope while she was watching him as though she’d seen a ghost; hell, she wasn’t even able to move anymore, it seemed. Apparently he had left a truly impression.

Deputy Callahan passed her, glancing at her prey which had smashed down the stairs when she had released her rope in shock and expecting something really, really massive. And damn! Today appeared to be the day of reunions! It was no less than that filthy thick farmer from the Aberdeen Pig Farm who was coiling round down the dusty ground. Arthur kind of made his acquaintance when he was riding through and was offered to join him and his – supposedly – wife, girlfriend or whatever for dinner. Back then this invitation had set his antennae quivering and as it now seemed to turn out rejecting it had been the perfect decision.

Being the gentleman he sometimes was, he grabbed the stout man by his tied legs and dragged him up the stairs right into the law office. This was for sure a stature even he couldn’t handle on his shoulders and what was most important: Arthur Morgan didn’t have an itch for getting Lumbago just like that old fuck Uncle.

Indoors was already payday with Leigh Gray taking out a bundle of money and handing it to Ann McBrady. “Miss, mind tellin’ me how you managed to drag this fat bastard here all by yourself?” he asked her and Arthur closely listened while he was imprisoning the caught farmer.

That bounty hunter just stopped the sheriff with a wave of her hand. “Better don’t ask,” she then sighed. “His girlfriend’s still in that farm house. Had to kill her, unfortunately. Maybe you better send someone to get the body.”

Nodding, Sheriff Gray turned his head towards Arthur. “Mister Callahan will deal with that once he’s done finding our other deputy.”

Oh great! Arthur really couldn’t find anything far better to do than clean up after a woman who had nearly killed him.

“Anything else you have for me?” Miss McBrady asked hopefully, pocketing the money she’d just received.

“Nah, that’s it for now, Miss. No more criminals wanted around here.”

“I see. Will try my luck at Saint Denis then.” Resignation in her voice, the bounty hunter first
caught a fleeting glimpse at Arthur, then nodded and said goodbye to Sheriff Gray.

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*Let’s get the hell outta here, Ann!* Holy shit! How was she supposed to know *that*?! And why the hell were these goddamn *outlaws* now playing *lawmen*?! Certainly not because they had considered their philosophy of life.

Hurrying, Ann made her way right to her horse Calido who was resting in front of the telegraph office. The sooner she was out of Rhodes the better. Especially since there wasn’t any more work left for her here. Being an industrial larger city, Saint Denis was probably her best bet now. All the money she had made during the past weeks still wasn’t enough, considering that she was due next week. With the bounties on the Van der Linde members omitted, her overall planning had fallen to pieces.

*You’re so up in the shit,* the bounty huntress bitterly thought while mounting her horse. What if she told Sheriff Gray about *Callahan’s* true identity? Probably the other gang members would come after her because – after all what had happened in that night – they knew for sure who she was and what she’d done to Morgan. After all she still clung to life.

Ann supported herself onto her saddle-horn, hanging her head in shame as well as exhaustion.

“Ya still here, Miss McBrady?”

She suddenly yanked her head up, staring at Deputy *Callahan* sitting on his nameless, stolen Tennessee Walker, wearing that shiny sheriff’s badge on his shirt. “I think I haven’t said that I’d go back to New Austin, have I?”

Unimpressed, he retorted: “Actually you said that we ain’t seein’ each other again. I just wonder why ya still stalkin’ me then.”

“Much as I’d like to, Mister *Callahan*, I’m not stalkin’ you. I’m just looking for work. If I knew you climbed up the greasy pole, I’d have stayed away from this town.” Ann chose her words carefully, yet they came out rather sarcastically. She tensed a bit but when Morgan didn’t give the impression that he took them wrong she immediately relaxed again.

“So you’re in need of money?”

A sudden change in subject – good! The bounty huntress condoned it, although she had rather not wanted to get into too many details in front of this man. He must’ve caught her conversation with Gray. “Who isn’t in times like this?”

“Well. I gotta find some fool of deputy.” Morgan pointed his thumb at the southern road leading out of Rhodes towards Bolger Glade. “Maybe I could use help. Dunno yet.”

“And why would you ask *me* of all people for help, Mister *Callahan*?” Ann was eying him suspiciously. Surely he was going to ambush her because he was still thinking that she was after him even if it wasn’t the case. Not anymore.

“It’s paid.”

That was definitely an argument but still she didn’t quite understand his motives. Pure kindness? Willingness to help? “So you’re not afraid that I might kill you?”

“Ya ain’t gonna and I ain’t askin’ twice, Miss McBrady. It’s either-or.” Morgan was already
turning his horse, glancing back at her.

Nodding, Ann finally put Calido to a trot until she was next to the outlaw. Only then they spurred their horses, leaving Rhodes southwards. “Fine. How ‘bout fifty-fifty then?” she immediately started negotiating.

“Yes, you really needin’ it, huh?” Morgan asked in return. “You owin’ money to someone?”

“You can say that.”

“Yes, you wanna talk about it?”

“No, you still don’t call him by his real name even now that they had left the settlement. It just felt so wrong and awkward at the same time to now work together with someone who originally was supposed to be her enemy, whose bounty was supposed to pay parts of her dept. She had tried to brutally kill him and all he did now was offering her a job and trying to talk to her. Where would all this end up?

“See, Miss McBrady, I’m a debt-collector myself sometimes,” Morgan stated, looking at her. “It ain’t the best job but it has to be done.”

“It has, hasn’t it?” Ann gave a small desperate laugh in response. “So, being a dept-collector aside from being an outlaw as well as a deputy, what would you recommend?”

“Depends on who’s on your tail. Either pay ‘em or just kill ‘em.”

He was so unapproachable. Coming out of his lips, the solutions to her problem sounded so easy. If only they were! If only they were... “What about running? Would you find your debtor, Mister Callahan?”

“Yes, of course I would. And you, Miss, ain’t pretty good at coverin’ your own tracks.”

Yes, she did know and because of this she kept quiet for most of the time they were riding down to Bolger Glade. He’s a good knowledge of human nature, Ann. Maybe he’s really not too bad. Maybe no calculation. Maybe, maybe – whatever! Sad her past experiences with outlaws hadn’t played out too well, so her instincts told her to be extremely careful. Hard to believe that any member of the Van der Linde gang was different from the Del Lobos.

Distracting herself from all that pondering, Ann decided to ask him about the stab wound. After all it had been her who had inflicted it. “So how’s your wound doin’, Mister Callahan?”

“Oh, fine. At least I didn’t bleed out.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

Morgan now smirked at her while riding up a small hill. “Nah, you ain’t. You’re a terrible liar.” He then abruptly stopped his Tennessee Walker and reached for his binoculars attached to his belt. “That’s it. The old destroyed church.”

Ann followed his lead, taking a look through her own binoculars. Through the lenses she could see about three men sitting around a camp fire in front of an old weathered church. “So that’s where we’re looking for your stupid co-deputy? Damn, these are Lemoine Raiders, right?” she murmured.

“Yes. Ya think you can distract them? Would serve me a lot of ammunition.”
“Mister Callahan,” the bounty huntress assured. “I’m a fuckin’ woman. I can play on the moment of surprise. *Always.*”

Morgan nodded at her, face serious. “Alright. Lemme put that question in another way: Are ya willin’ to distract ‘em for me so I can sneak in and spring MacGregor and that girl? Just a few minutes.” The outlaw scouted the hideout again. “There ain’t many of them inside the ruins. Maybe ya can get ‘em outta there.”

“Like shooting a fish in a barrel, just to quote you,” she blinked her eyes. “I give you five minutes. Let’s meet at the fork north again when you’re done.”
Yes, I’m now starting to bring them closer so you may expect some very mild fluff from the next chapter. (✿◠‿◠)

Chapter VI: Assisting

Why was it again he had offered her to help him in this matter? Arthur remembered a couple of similar situations in the past where he’d done a considerable amount more to people who had tried to do even less to him than this woman. He hadn’t killed her back then in that night and he probably wouldn’t even now. The fact that he now knew that she was most likely in a financial mess wasn’t helping matters, either. Proceeding from her dialogue with Gray, there wasn’t a question about that.

Of course bounty hunters weren’t going hunting just for fun but he couldn’t think of even a single one he had encountered during all these years that looked as wasted as a certain Miss McBrady was doing right now. As if she hadn’t slept for days.

Was it because he felt kind of sorry for her? Arthur Morgan felt sorry for someone? Well, he had offered her to come with him even before he could really reconsider it. It wasn’t that she hadn’t something on the ball – obviously – and he figured that this fact might had stirred something inside of him. Her being all that cold and calculating back that night had really left its mark on him. Just like now…

“Mister Callahan, I’m a fuckin’ woman. I can play on the moment of surprise. Always,” she said in response to his question to distract the Lemoynes, face solemn.

Oh course she could, Arthur didn’t have the slightest doubt about it. That was exactly the reason why they were often taking the women of their camp out to the towns whenever they were going on a caper – they were the perfect actors when in fact they stabbed you in the back. And Miss McBrady was of the same kidney.

She wouldn’t try anything on him again, though. Being not too bad in knowing people, Arthur was cocksure that she had learned her lesson. He had gotten the better of her once severely injured and he would always do so again – especially while being perfectly well.

“I give you five minutes. Let’s meet at the fork north again when you’re done.”

“That’ll do,” he confirmed, taking out the hunting knife Miss McBrady already had become acquainted with.

“Well then,” the bounty hunter sighed with pleasure, pushing her Mustang. “Damsel in distress incoming.”

Determined not to waste any time, Arthur jumped off his own horse and hurried his way down the hill straight towards the old weathered church ruins. He kept low, seeking the cover of any bushes and trees he could get, anxious for not attracting the attention of the Lemoynes. MacGregor was in
there; he had seen him lying on the ground through his binoculars. No clue of the kidnapped girl of Rhodes, though.

“Stop it,” a male voice from afar suddenly sounded. “Miss, ya ain’t supposed to be here! Keep movin’!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mister! I’m afraid I got lost!” And that was Miss McBrady’s voice. “You’re lookin’ like nice men, maybe you can help a poor lady out?”

“Poor lady? You sure with all these weapons on your horse?”

“I’m a huntress. But not from here. I’m really not familiar with this area. I’m just lookin’ for a special animal.”

Arthur couldn’t help but grin at this point of the conversation. She was a huntress, indeed. And she did good so far. He slipped through the ruins, taking cover immediately after. That bigmouth Archibald MacGregor seemed wounded indeed, maybe he had even passed out. There wasn’t the slightest movement on his part, that is. Looking closer, Arthur then finally detected the girl, too – long-gone. She had a bullet hole right through her eyes, her body not lying far from MacGregor. Poor thing!

“What special animal?” the male voice from earlier continued.

“Dunno, some kind of albino moose. I was told it’s somewhere Roanoke Ridge but I took the wrong turn, I’m afraid. I’m gettin’ closer to Saint Denis this way, huh?”

“And how, lady! You ain’t findin’ any moose around here, hehehe.”

“What’s that damn noise out there?!”

Arthur observed one of the three guards inside going out to probably check on the visitor. With two being left, he quietly slipped out of his cover, sneaking up on the first one who was turning his back on him and stabbed him right into the throat. The dying man’s burbling drew the other guard’s attention but Arthur was faster. Pulling his hunting knife out promptly, he rushed upon him and rammed the stabbing weapon right into his heart.

“Oh, Mister, please don’t mind me!” Miss McBrady meanwhile insisted outside the ruins. “See, I’m comin’ from new Austin and… oh no! Someone stole my map.”

“Oh yeah? You chose the wrong place, girl!”

“Please don’t hurt me, I’m beggin’ you! You look like decent people.”

The given five minutes were ticking. Arthur flew to MacGregor’s side and checked on him. He was still alive. Swearing, he heaved the man and made his way out of the church ruins again all the way back to his horse. No sooner than he had stowed the deputy away gunshots suddenly reached his ears.

The five minutes are over, he dryly thought.

Horses were whickering, more shots were snapped, men and a woman were yelling and then… silence. Either everybody was dead or after Ann now. At least he couldn’t see her anymore. Arthur wasn’t too concerned about her, though. Miss McBrady had already proved that she was a tough woman that could look out for herself. She’d meet him at the arranged place and he wouldn’t rip her off.
On his way back he wondered who it was she was so deep in debt to. After all she hadn’t directly reacted to his suggestions. Damn O’Driscolls? Not if she was from New Austin. Arthur mentally went through the other alternatives. Skinner Brothers? Mostly hunters and killers but no one who would ever poke their noses in financial things. Del Lobos? That was more likely, considering all their contacts, structures and spreading throughout the Mexican border up to the whole New Austin area. It was even told that they’d reside Ambarino. Doing business with the Del Lobo Gang was carrying a risk for sure. But maybe Ann McBrady would tell him more.

Once she was back, that it. Arthur waited at the fork they’d passed on their way to the church, Deputy MacGregor still hanging unconscious on the back of his Tennessee Walker. Boredly humming a melody, he eventually lit a cigarette.

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After she had thrown off her last pursuer Ann and Calido rode back to the meeting spot. Still hoping she’d stalled enough time for Morgan to get to what seemed his co-deputy, she hurried up. Dealing with the few Lemoyne Raiders had taken up more time than she thought it would so she assumed she was a bit late now.

To her relief – surprisingly – he was still waiting for her in that fork, looking up and flicking away a cigarette when she headed his way. “So you got him,” Ann then stated, stopping her horse next to him and pointing at Archibald MacGregor.

“Thanks to your great performance,” the outlaw smirked back and patted the deputy’s head. “He’ll be okay, I guess. Let’s head back.”

Ann remained silent for most of the way back to the sheriff office in Rhodes, wondering how much of the payment he would assign to her in the end. After all they had been off the topic shortly after she demanded fifty percent. Either way, she very well knew that she would be content with anything he’d share because she simply had no choice. At this point every dollar was of help.

She didn’t even say a word when they reached their goal. Without wasting any time, Morgan dismounted from his Tennessee Walker, took down the passed out deputy and carried him right into Gray’s office. While they started to discuss inside Ann poked around.

It had been two weeks since she had received unwelcome visitors while camping in the wild, one of them well-known to her because she already had the privilege of meeting him back on her farm in New Austin: Diandro Sánchez. Del Lobos now were definitely holding a gun to her head and somehow she couldn’t escape the feeling that she was being watched.

When Morgan eventually came out again he was holding up a money clip. Ann already mentally prepared for negotiating whilst he completely handed it to her. Taken aback, she just looked at him with gaping mouth.

“Take it, Miss.” The man held her gaze, still offering her the clip. “I’m serious.”

After some hesitation Ann lastly took it from him and quickly counted the money. It was fifteen dollars, a good amount. “I-” She was speechless about an outlaw basically divesting himself of his complete reward. This in no way had been what she’d expected. “Why, Mister Morgan?”

“I ain’t need it. Well maybe I do but ya deeper in the shit than I,” he wrinkled his nose and took the reins of his horse, walking away. “Take care of yourself, Miss. And good luck on… whatever.”

That was it. She hopped down from Calido, chasing him just to grab his right wrist. “Mister
Morgan!

He immediately halted and turned around, looking at her hand still grabbing his wrist. Panting, she did the same and let go of him.

“Well, sorry ‘bout that but-” Embarrassed, Ann rubbed her neck. “That’s probably more than anyone’s ever done for me. So thank you, truly thank you.”

Morgan just cocked his head – maybe because he was kind of embarrassed for being a good man, too – but then roguishly grinned at her. It lasted only for a second, however, before his face hardened again. “You still ain’t wanna talk ‘bout it?”

Shaking her head, Ann closed her eyes but to her great relief it became apparent that Arthur Morgan already seemed to know everything. Wherever from.

“It’s the damn Del Lobos, ain’t it?”

The bounty huntress kept silencing. She still stuck to the assumption that it was better to not tell anyone as to not get anyone in danger because of connivance. Even if Morgan was an outlaw himself. But you can trust him. He ain’t as bad as he’s stating.

“You wanna make me count down again?” Morgan perked his eyebrows up. “Three… Two.”

“Yeah, it’s them! I’m owing them money, okay?” Crossing her arms, Ann finally gave in. It kinda brought relief to her already heavy burdened soul. “I’m due next week and I’ve no idea how to come up with that damn money!”

“We’re talkin’ ’bout how much…?”

“Too much.”

“You ever thought about robbin’ a coat?”

“No.”

“A bank?”

“Mister Morgan, I prefer earning my money the legal way, thanks.”

“Legal ain’t savin’ your ass, Miss.”

Being aware that – in this case – he was absolutely right, Ann resignedly sighed. “I’ll find a way. I always do.” And she would. She had managed to pay this goddamn son of a bitch twice and she also would thrice. But with deadlines drawing close, she always found herself hating her father a bit more for casting his bargains on her after he had passed.

“Maybe you wanna discuss options while joinin’ me for a drink at the saloon?”

Contrary to her expectations Morgan still offered to listen to her, to probably work things out. If only sharing her whole story with that man that he was wouldn’t involve dropping her shields once and for all! Torn apart, she weighed the pros and cons, finally concluding that she’d probably die one way or another. She had nothing to lose and so she agreed.
This is probably one of my favorite parts within this story. If you're wondering how Arthur experienced that last part, well, you'll find out in chapter 8. (^_^)

Chapter VII: Confiding

“I just hope this isn’t gonna end like last time. In Valentine.”

Waiting for Ann to go in, Arthur was holding the saloon’s door open. “You mean that night I met that woman that ain’t Lenny?” Still it was some kind of alias he had used for her every now and then whenever he was quizzed about this damn stab wound. It was probably better that way, he thought. Maybe otherwise someone from the gang would have gone after her, if they knew her real name.

“How about the woman that ain’t Lenny buying you a drink?” She was tickled; he could hear the amusement in her voice when she asked him while she went over to the barkeeper. “Beer, whisky, anything else?”

Arthur chose the beer; after all it was still late afternoon. He’d save the good stuff until later and besides he also still needed to be clear-headed to ponder all the possible solutions to Miss McBrady’s debt problem. Once she would tell the whole story to him, that is. For now she was acting so heavily tense that it almost made himself nervous, too. Continuously looking forwards and backwards, she seemed so relieved at once when she finally had two bottles of beer in her hands.

“So… we wanna take a seat?” She pointed at the empty tables near the saloon entrance. “It’s going to be a long story, Mister Morgan.”

Simply nodding, he gave her the advantage and then followed her to one of the tables where he sat down opposite to her. “So what’s it with the Del Lobos, Miss McBrady?” He was ready for anything.

“Huh.” The bounty hunter swallowed hard, fiddling around with her bottle. “Okay. Actually… it was my father who was doing business with them. You must know I grew up as a farmer’s daughter, Mister Morgan. He had a small ranch near Gaptooth Ridge. My mother died when I was little and my father did… Well, he did everything to pull us through. He was a good and honorable man, doing his everything for me.”

Arthur listened to her, feelings mingled. On the one hand her telling about a mother who had passed when she was only a child really stirred him up due to his own childhood, on the other hand he found himself admiring this man who had raised such an independent and brave woman that the woman who ain’t Lenny was. He also couldn’t escape the feeling that this story was going to become more tragic and tragic.

“Someday he died,” she quietly continued. “I had to take over his ranch.”
“Del Lobos, too?” Arthur asked just as quietly.

But Miss McBrady wagged her head. “No, it was… just a small group of… outlaws. I don’t know. They wanted money and he wouldn’t give it to them so they killed him. Coldblooded.”

“You watched him die?”

“Yeah, I did. It was… not quite the experience I ever wanted to have.”

Arthur lapsed into silence once again. There were so many familiar components within her story that matched his own life. No matter how but somehow he would find a way to help her dealing with the Del Lobo gang. Or parts of it.

“Anyway, there came a day a man named Diandro Sánchez and his men showed up at the ranch. He wanted money, a lot of money. Told me my father owed it to them. I had no choice but to pay them a small amount. They went off, gave me a new ultimatum. I worked my ass off but.” She ruffled through her hair. “Given time that goddamn ranch didn’t yield a shit. My cattle were dying from disease and I had no money to keep things running.”

“Life’s pretty much fucked ya up, Miss. Sorry to hear that.” And Arthur meant that. Probably everyone had their crosses to bear. At least he was now understanding the origin of her hatred towards outlaws and he couldn’t really blame her for that.

“But then, Mister Morgan, I headed out and started working as a bounty huntress. More cash in less time and I could pay that asshole of Sánchez a second time.”

“Sounds to me that ya into them for several thousand dollars.” Because paying someone over a number of years didn’t support any other conclusion.

“Not anymore but I also won’t be able to pay the rest next week, I’m afraid. Don’t think I can put off Sánchez again.”

Eventually leaning back, Arthur digested everything she had just told him about her life. That was being fucked up by definition and there was only one obvious solution he saw for her problem: eliminating the Del Lobos. Dutch would most likely wring his neck for provoking a conflict with them while they still were in permanent vendetta with the damn O’Driscols but then again… who would ever notice who’d killed them if there wasn’t anybody left who could tell a shit?

“Listen, Miss,” Arthur breathed heavily, still observing her. “I cannot help ya with money but I can offer to kill ‘em. Depending on how many they’re, of course. I’m not too bad at snipin’.”

His company nodded in uncertainty. “I bet you’re not but I cannot ask for that. I-”

“You ain’t,” he interrupted her. “Because it’s me offerin’ help.” Yeah, namely putting his own ass on the line just for some strange woman he had come to know while she was trying to kill him and therewith had deeply impressed him. This really shouldn’t have happened and yet here he was, sitting on a table with that woman, trying to work things out for her.

*It ain’t your business, let her handle all this shit herself,* Arthur tried to convince himself, very well aware that it was of no avail. He *wanted* to help; he somehow felt responsible for her simply because – to his mind – he wasn’t any better than the Del Lobos or at least that guy who called himself Sánchez. It might as well could’ve been him who collected the debts from her now, if her father had caught Mister Strauss instead. *Looks like I ain’t that bad in the end.*

“Fine then, Mister Morgan. I’ll get back to you if I didn’t come up with a better idea until next
week. Really appreciate your offer but for now…” Miss McBrady slightly smiled, thumping her bottle down on the table. “I’d rather like not to talk about all this shit anymore. Maybe you’ve some better stories than I? About robbing coaches and banks and stuff.” She wiggled her eyebrows, definitely becoming more relaxed now.

“Nah, never! Why would I do that?” Arthur drank his beer, dead serious, yet he was fighting himself hard from cracking up, though.

“I thought you were speakin’ from experience earlier.” That bounty hunter was so entering into his sarcasm! Grinning broadly, she then suddenly glanced up and Arthur already thought that the newly relaxed atmosphere would have gone again. It turned out that she was just looking for the barkeeper. “Gonna get us a new drink, gimme a second. Unless you’re out of time, Mister Morgan.”

“Takin’ some time from not robbing coaches and banks, ya know? Keep it coming, Miss.” He watched her walking off, almost automatically thinking about how different she was from Mary. Heck, every goddamn woman of Dutch’s gang was different from Mary! If it weren’t for that goddamn letter she had sent him, he now wouldn’t hold thoughts like this in his mind.

“Arthur!”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” the outlaw murmured when he suddenly spotted Lenny at the saloon entrance, waving at him. Of all things! Camp gossip was confirmed once that kid would spy the woman that wasn’t him. Besides, whenever someone was sent to look for him there was naturally a high chance that some genius had come up with some shitty plan that most certainly wouldn’t go wrong.

Lenny took a seat in front of him – just where Miss McBrady was sitting a few seconds ago – and literally beamed at him.

“So what’s it?” Arthur asked abruptly, hoping that it wouldn’t be a big deal.

“Bill sent me.”

“So it was.

“He says he’s at a bigger thing. Maybe ya should come and hear it yourse-”

“Here we go. Only the good stuff.” Interrupting the both of them, Ann suddenly put a whole whisky bottle on the table. Only then she seemed to notice the new member and looked at Arthur, falling immediately quiet.

Lenny apparently did so, too. Confused, he was looking back and forth between them until he eventually realized that he was obviously bothering.

Raising his eyebrows full of expectation, Arthur shrugged his shoulders in response. “Go ‘n tell Bill he can fuck off. Today I ain’t goin’ nowhere. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Okay?” Still being confused, Lenny continued looking back and forth. “Well, err… Good to see you getting’ over your Mary then, I guess?” He stood up, making room for the woman. “And… sorry, ya know? For… disturbin’.”

“Goodbye, Lenny,” Arthur firmly said, finally bringing his buddy to leave them alone. After that he shook his head. Because justifying himself to everyone was so much fun.
In the meanwhile Miss Brady had sat down and already put two glasses on the table, too. Pouring the whisky, she asked as a sideline: “Who’s Mary? Your wife? Girlfriend?”

Damn, fortunately that woman wasn’t curious as hell. He gulped down the first glass. “Sorta.” When she still looked at him in anticipation, Arthur sighed. “Some kind of foolish love story and I fucked it up a long time ago, to say at least.”

Thankfully understanding, she smiled. “Okay, won’t ask further, Mister Morgan.”

***

The late afternoon went by quickly and the sun had already set when Ann was still listening to all the shitty stuff Morgan told her – stories about robberies that had gone completely wrong, seemingly unguarded coaches that turned out to be guarded very well; stories about damn O’Driscolls. In fact everything she would have expected from the life of an outlaw and somehow it even didn’t upset her anymore. Maybe it was due to the alcohol, maybe it was because she thought she’d understand his way of life to a large extent.

There were questions on her part, though. Many questions she wasn’t comfortable to ask because she very quickly had realized that he wasn’t quite the kind of man who talked about his personal life a lot. As a result Ann thought it was probably better to keep it with that.

At times she found him watching her as carefully as he was doing right now. “What’s it, Mister Morgan?” she eventually pumped.

“That scar,” he simply answered, half-drunk. “Where’s it from? Still wonderin’.”

The scar on her face, of course. It would always stick out a mile, even if she persuaded herself that it wasn’t that striking. “What ya think?” she asked, raising her whisky glass.

“Well, I think it was Del Lobos.”

“You’re a smart man, Mister Morgan.” Ann paused for breath. “Marked me when I wasn’t able to pay that one time. It’s not too bad, is it?”

Before Morgan could even reply another man came to a stop next to their table. Due to his stumbling she could tell that he was drunk like a motherfucker. Pointing at her, the man slurred: “Such a pretty girl! And ya name’s…?”

Irritated, Ann turned her head and looked at the guy. She was just about to let out some nasty comment when suddenly he jumped back, face all terrified.

“Damn, look at ya face! No offence, Miss!”

He then bluntly moved on to the next table, leaving Ann with some kind of shock. “Well,” she smiled bitterly, raising her glass again. “It is that bad.”

“Want me to beat the shit outta that fool?”

“No, Mister Morgan, if I wanna beat the shit outta him, I’ll do it myself. Thanks, though.”

Grinning, Ann refilled her glass once more and finished it off. “You still have that pocket knife by the way?”

Morgan reached for his satchel and pulled out a small stabbing weapon. “Heirloom?” he asked, still holding it tightly in his hand.
“Yes, it was my father’s.” Now it was Ann who watched him closely. After all she was glad that it still existed.

Suddenly Arthur Morgan was holding the knife out to her. “Here.”

She took it, pursing her lips due to mixed emotions within her. It was time to quit the damn alcohol for tonight. Way too much input for today as a whole. She’d just go to bed. All she needed was a room.

Ann banged her hands on the table – and missed it, bumping her head nearly on the edge. “Goddamn! Okay, Mister Morgan. If ya don’t mind. I need to rest. Day’s been long.” A bit unsteady on her feet, she stood up, giving him a charming smile. “Thanks for the knife, all the stories and the… drinks.” She hiccupped.

“I was drinkin’ at ya cost, Miss,” Morgan smirked, also standing up, ready to possibly catch her if she tumbled.

“However.” Ann clapped him on the back. “You a good man. Jus’ need to get… a room. Everything’s good.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the outlaw assured while he carried her towards somewhere. Hell, the bounty huntress didn’t even realize how drunk she actually was until she had decided to go to bed. She heard him buy a room for her and then felt him carry her somewhere again. A door was opened.

“I’m so… fuckin’ sorry, Mister Morgan,” she whispered, landing on a bed.

“Ya better sleepin’ off,” his voice sounded and suddenly it appeared so far. Her boots were taken off.

“There’s a note in ma satchel. With the meetin’ spot… for the delivery.” Dizzily, Ann looked at him und held out her satchel to him. Crooked, she smiled at him, closing her eyes again. “I never drink that much, okay?”

“Nah, I’m sure ya ain’t.” A long pause and then: “Don’t think I’m supposed to read this… letter.”

“The other note,” Ann groaned. “Not that fuckin’ letter to my dad.”

“Whatsoever ya say, Miss. We’ll talk ‘bout that tomorrow.”

Apparently he was about to leave, so she instinctively grabbed him by his suspenders when passing by. And although she didn’t want to pull him close she somehow did; he ended up on top of her, fortunately using his forearms for support. “Sorry,” Ann then spoke under her breath, glancing at him. Only now that he was that close to her she actually noticed how beautiful he was – that bad man that he was, or at least pretended to be. She reached for his face and kissed him, bending her legs under him. His hat fell off his head.

Feeling this urge didn’t seem right; he was an outlaw after all, an outlaw just like the ones who had killed her father and who were now threatening her. Ann didn’t understand herself anymore. This man had cared for her problems, had spared her life when in fact her time had come. He had done so much for her…

His hands grabbing her ass tightly and pressing her against his boner, she heard him murmuring next to her ear: “You’ll regret this…”

Yeah. Maybe she would. Tomorrow, but not now. Right now it was the right thing. So she
searched for his lips again, in desperate need for another kiss. All this pure lust was making her feel so free. Like she hadn’t in such a long time.

“Arthur…”

But Arthur suddenly broke away, releasing his grip on her to get on his feet again. “This…” He shook his head. “This ain’t right, Miss McBrady.” And he still kept his distance from her by calling her by her last name. “Just… sleep it off. Without me.”

Ann watched him leave the room without another word. Asking herself what had just gone wrong, she turned onto her side and closed her eyes in disbelief. What a complete messy day! The sudden coldness and solitude were haunting her again, embracing her. Just like every night.
**Chapter VIII: Rejecting**

*Goddamn, woman!* Right now Arthur cursed himself for getting into this situation. All of a sudden Miss McBrady was so drunk that it was in doubt, if she’d ever manage to get to the barkeeper and get a room for the night. And because he apparently was *a good man* as he had just learned from her he took it over for her, carrying her into the – thankfully – only free room that was left.

She apologized for like a thousand times even once he had dropped her onto the bed and taken off her boots – but simply wouldn’t want to sleep it off. Instead she was handing her satchel to him, babbling something about a note with the meeting spot for the money handover on it. Oh, not to forget her insistence on *never drinking that much*.

In fact the very second Arthur decided to have a look at that note she talked about was initiating a series of unlucky incidents. In whatever way one wanted to define unlucky, that is.

He grabbed her satchel, scrabbling about any piece of paper. Thinking he finally got it, he unfolded it and took a peek, wondering where the Del Lobos would ask a lone woman to come and pay them off. To his surprise the paper at his hands wasn’t disclosing any places or time but a letter that apparently was written by Miss McBrady. A letter to her passed father, that much Arthur could tell by skimming through the lines.

Starting to immediately feel pretty bad for invading her privacy like that – even if it was by accident –, he fell quiet for a good minute. Basically the letter said she’d miss and hate her dad at the same time; that she was hoping to get out of that situation in one piece. Hell, she even wrote about how being all alone was burdening her and having found that wonderful but heavily injured Mustang horse she called Calido that turned out to be the only one she can rely on.

There was much more written down but Arthur decided that it was none of his business. *He* wasn’t the one supposed to know everything about her inner life. “Don’t think I’m supposed to read this… letter,” it eventually passed his lips.

“The other note,” she groaned behind him, obviously trying to get up. “Not that fuckin’ letter to my dad.”

No shit! *Of course* that other note – he knew that himself by now, too. “Whatever ya say, Miss. We’ll talk ‘bout that tomorrow,” he suggested and put the letter back into her satchel, ready to leave the room. He’d return tomorrow once she was sober again, have a look at her note then. For now he just wanted to get out of here because he felt something heavy being in the wind. He badly needed room to breathe again.

Passing the now straight sitting Ann at a smart pace, he was suddenly caught by his suspenders and somehow that small framed woman managed to sweep him off his feet. Lucky for her, this
time he didn’t fell right onto her but instinctively supported himself on his forearms, his face close to hers.

“Sorry,” the bounty hunter sheepishly muttered while just watching him through her green eyes.

Arthur could feel her breath against his lips; her damn eyes were attracting him that much that he wasn’t even able to get off her although he had to! He simply had to, if he didn’t want this moment to go too far. And it would; it had been a long time, he only noticed now that he was lying on top of that beautiful woman who now touched his face and pulled him even closer just to kiss him. His hat fell off.

Passionately returning her kiss, his hands were touching her bended legs, wandering all the way up, finally grabbing her tight ass through her pants. Panting, he felt himself harden when he pressed her against his aching crotch. This wasn’t going to end well…

He couldn’t do this, shouldn’t do this. But he needed it. So he kissed her again, enjoying her grinding against him while she gasped loudly.

“Arthur…”

He was just about to unbutton his pants with one hand when she desperately called him by his name, bringing him back to the here and now. Immediately he let go of her and got up, shaking his head. “This… ain’t right, Miss McBrady,” he huffed. He couldn’t get her laid after all he had experienced in his life. Not after Mary and especially not after Eliza and Isaac. Actually Arthur was preferring not to get too attached to anyone ever again – not even in sexual ways. Indeed he had his needs but he was also professional enough to back off. Until tonight it had worked for many months.

He needed to calm down, needed so badly to think about something turning off. Uncle! And heck, that old fuck wearing his red long johns saved him like probably no one else could.

Ann, still lying there on the bed, was hazily looking at him, most likely asking herself what she’d done wrong. Of course it wasn’t her fault and Arthur felt bad as shit for neglecting a woman like her for such absurd reasons but still… “Just… sleep it off. Without me,” he told her, avoiding any further eye contact.

Then he left, in a hurry but with an unpleasant feeling. Even if he wanted to lay her, there’d still be that uncertainty about getting her pregnant at worst.

Sighing, Arthur mounted his horse. It was just… He didn’t want to re-experience all this shit again. Losing people he deeply cared for to be exact. And still he had offered her his help which he would stand for after all. Tomorrow was a new day; maybe Miss McBrady was too drunk to remember anything. He would have really appreciated that to happen.

Still there was Lenny, Arthur remembered on his way back to Clemens Point. Mentally ready for a lot of bantering, he entered the camp side with his horse, racking it up to one of the posts. He was concerned about not getting caught by any of his fellow gang members but to his great displease Micah was already waiting for him in front of his tent, looking up when he was approaching.

“Ah, cowpoke! It’s good to see ya. But… back this early?”

Arthur took a deep breath. Lenny had talked and he would so kill him for talking about shit that wasn’t nothing at all. Especially now, that this rat of Micah was teasing him.

“Yep,” he just answered, walking towards his bed.
“Well, ya know… Lenny’s just told some things.”

“Yeah?”

“’Bout you and a scarred whore.”

“Really.” Oh c’mon, Arthur really wasn’t having enough strength for debating about Ann and what he did with her or what he didn’t.

“Kinda seems like ya ain’t got it up, cowpoke. Maybe I should pay her a visit, don’t cha think? Just to correct things.”

Just let him talk, it’s just Micah, Arthur told himself, not paying attention to that little rat. After all he didn’t know who that scarred whore was, neither where she was residing at. To sum it up he couldn’t do a shit. “If ya say so,” he retorted instead, laying down and noting that he must’ve forgotten his hat at Ann’s room. Well, he’d see her again tomorrow one way or another.

***

Her head aching awfully, Ann woke early in the morning. She turned to the other side, mourning in self-pity. “Good lord…” What did she do? What…?

Suddenly she cursed, eyes open wide due to the memory of last night. She had kissed that outlaw! She even had… nearly gotten laid by him. “No, no, no!” Sitting up, she scanned the room but nobody was there – nobody except of Morgan’s dark hat which was lying next to her.

No, please no. Don’t tell me, you wanted him to fuck you, Ann. God… Ann put her head in her hands, still not believing what had happened. That wasn’t her; she wasn’t a disreputable woman… Not too often, that is.

Damn it, how the hell was she supposed to face him ever again? He had offered her help and that inevitably meant that she’d see him again. If not today, maybe tomorrow. “No, no, NO!” she yelled at herself, collapsing into the bed again. Why on earth? Why him, that dirty bastard that was such a bad man?

Embarrassed about herself she turned her head, glancing at his hat. It was smelling of him. “You can’t be serious,” Ann nearly whined when she also remembered rubbing her crotch against his boner, being so eager to get fucked. She didn’t… Anyone please tell me that I didn’t. Just please…

She rolled over – when the next shock occurred. With her satchel lying on the table next to her she also remembered that she had told him to have a look at the fucking Del Lobo notes which he didn’t because he obviously had found the letter she had written to her father.

Okay. Ann sat up again, ready to meet him again with her head held high. After all nothing had happened. She had kissed him, so what? He had a boner, who cared? It wasn’t that she was digging him.

Beset with dizziness, she eventually got on her feet, reaching for her satchel. After all the best spot for meeting Mister Morgan was probably the sheriff’s office. Being the deputy that he was, he would arrive there sooner or later. Taking Calido, she went over to the building where she sat down and put on Morgan’s hat to shield from the morning sun – ready for his return.

***

Ann had just closed her eyes for some time when suddenly a heavy panting followed by the sound
of someone dismounting a horse reached her ears. Heavy steps were coming towards her and then… her hat was taken off, letting the torturous sunbeams right through her face.

She blinked and recognized Morgan. Heart pounding, she quickly got up. “ Didn’t see you coming, Mister Morgan.”

“I bet ya ain’t,” he said, putting on his property onto his own head again.

So he still knew, what – of course – wasn’t too surprising because he didn’t drink as much as she did. Ann figured that it was maybe best to apologize to him. “ About tonight,” she began but the outlaw put her off.

“ That note you told me ‘bout. Show it.” Morgan was holding out his one hand while taking out something else with his other hand that looked like a small note-book.

Resigning, Ann handed over the paper and watched him transcribing the information right into his book. She wondered what exactly it was that he was putting down there in general. Was it some kind of diary, too? She didn’t dare to ask, though. He appeared so cold, as if nothing had happened. That wasn’t the Arthur Morgan she had dealt with yesterday. As if some kind of switch had flipped inside of him.

He then gave the piece of paper back to her, nodding. “ Railroad bridge south of Valentine it is then. I suggest we meet at the Saloon there on Monday. I’ll bring my sniper rifle and then we save your ass.”

“Thank you,” Ann uttered. “ I guess… I’ll see you there.” Because what else was she supposed to say to him? That she was sorry to make a move on him? That she was sorry that he didn’t fuck her in the end? No, he would help her – which she was truly grateful for – and after that they’d go separate ways.

Instead of answering her, Morgan simply walked into the office, ditching the bounty huntress.
Chapter IX: Feeling

Ann was waiting in front of the saloon in Valenine since early in the morning now. It was Monday, Payday. Denying that she was extremely nervous would’ve been a lie – after all the Del Lobos weren’t any tiny little obscure gang. Probably Sánchez would – as he always had done in the past – bring two, maybe three men with him. The bounty huntress, however, was well aware of the fact that his death wouldn’t solve the problem forever but only temporary. Buying some time was better than nothing, though.

Gladly she had been able to make some money from bounty jobs in Saint Denis within the last few days but of course it wasn’t enough to pay Sánchez once and for all. It doesn’t have to; still he’ll have your back. At least she hoped that Arthur would. Pissed off as he had been last week, she could consider herself lucky, if he would show up at all.

And anyways, the events of that night were crossing her mind for days now. It all was just so… awkward that she kept asking herself what had been wrong with her to nearly get laid by a fucking outlaw. Of course she had a few too many but that wasn’t an excuse; she simply didn’t recognize herself anymore ‘cause that wasn’t characteristic for her. Maybe you were just too sensitive to the whole conversation with him, to the fact that he wanted to help you.

Shaking her head, Ann consulted her pocket watch. 10 a.m. Although they hadn’t arranged a specific moment of time she was already wondering where on earth he was. “Still time before evening, Mister Morgan,” she murmured, sighing.

Mister Morgan, however, allowed himself plenty of time, still not appearing after a few hours later – not that Ann was surprised at all. Well, okay, she actually was because she was assuming that he was a relatively honest man by now. Apparently he wasn’t, though.

But Ann was sure she would make it on her own, too. Killing Sánchez and his men wasn’t too hopeless. She would take him hostage while killing the other bastards. In theory it sounded so easy but still there was this unease within her now that she most likely couldn’t count on Morgan; she simply had no one covering her ass.

Getting more unsettled the more time was proceeding, the bounty huntress began strolling up and down the town’s main shops and suddenly – when she was passing one of the side paths – was grasped. A gloved hand covering her mouth, she was dragged into the shadows.

Supposing that her sudden attacker was most likely Diandro Sánchez, Ann immediately started to oppose. She wanted to scream, catch anyone’s attention but couldn’t utter a single clear word. Before she even knew what was happening she was pushed against one of the house walls, the stranger’s hand still on her mouth. She kept struggling until…
“Sh, sh, sh!” A deep coarse and familiar voice that belonged to Morgan.

Somewhat relieved, Ann sighed and looked him in his pale eyes. At least he wasn’t a Del Lobo, only a Van der Linde. Returning the look, he finally removed his hand from her.

“You’re late,” she then simply tried to cover her shock. “Already thought you’d chicken out.” Hell, he was so close to her body; she could smell his breath, could smell him. She just needed to look up at him and it already set her teeth on edge again.

Maybe noticing the change in her, he took a step back. “Not robbin’ any banks ‘n coaches is takin’ its toll.”

Unimpressed, Ann raised her eyebrows. “Should’ve known it was you robbing the Valentine bank.” Considering his teasing, it seemed at least that he had calmed down again during the last few days since their last encounter. So chances were good that he was more sociable than back in Rhodes.

“Who, me?” Morgan asked, exaggerated. “I thought I told ya that I ain’t do no such things.”

“‘Course you don’t.”

“However.” Rubbing his chin, he eventually leaned against the wall opposite to Ann. “I’m gonna need your help later. You, Miss McBrady, need to keep these guys busy as long as possible. I kill the first one, you kill Sánchez. In that turmoil I’m gonna shoot the rest of ‘em. You think you can do this?”

Bewildered, the bounty huntress crossed her arms. “Really, Mister Morgan? I’m nearly killing you, I’m distracting some fucking Lemoynes and you’re asking me, if I can keep a bunch of assholes busy?” That discussion again – how she hated it! How she was hating proving herself to other people!

But Morgan stayed calm. “I ain’t askin’ if you can keep ‘em busy, I’m askin’ if you dare to kill Sánchez.”

Changing that little detail in his question didn’t make things better for her. If anything she even got more pissed – and once she was in a pretty pissed state she often wasn’t able to contain her words anymore. “Just gimme cover and don’t run away again, okay?”

He said nothing, only clenched his teeth and she knew she had hit him. She wasn’t even sorry about that. He deserved feeling bad right now for making herself feeling like a doormat that night when he gave her that damn feeling that it was her who did something wrong. Hell, thinking about fucking feelings all the time bothered her even more. She couldn’t even stop to do that at this very moment! It frustrated her, so she was taking it out on him – very well knowing that it might have been unfair.

Morgan, however, was waiting for her little blowup to end. After a while he just asked: “You done now?”

Heavily breathing, Ann nodded her head. Obviously she was done – a nervous wreck for days! Because of him! Because of everything. “… I’m sorry,” she eventually softly remarked.

“Why you apologizin’? For that I nearly fucked the shit outta you?”

Something told her that his self-perception was kind of strange. He always claimed to be a bad, bad man when in fact he was the contrary – polite and helpful. Sometimes a bit odd but still likeable.
Almost a man of honor. Ann assumed that he was occasionally switching between moods because of that distorted self-perception. Whatever had happened within his life, it most likely made him drawing back from people he wasn’t quite familiar with. Right now, while he was the one accusing himself for what had happened, she really wished she had known more about him – but she didn’t. She did know shit about him, except that he was an outlaw and once had a wife or a girlfriend named Mary. That creeping compassion for him – Ann wanted it to end. Vice versa it was probably the same because… there was something, otherwise he wouldn’t have spared her.

“Maybe for hitting on you last week?” she asked, being stressed out. “Why’s it you’re so fucking self-destructive? Because of this Mary girl?” And again, she immediately regretted that she hadn’t thought about choosing her words carefully before.

Morgan was laughing in response, though. “What the hell ya talkin’ about, woman?”

“My name’s Ann and I’d prefer you calling me that. I’m not your woman!”

“Fine then, Ann,” he leaned forward. “Now listen carefully. I’m gonna help ya ‘cause I gave ya my word. But fuckin’ stay outta my business, understand that? I said it once: You’ll regret it. Just go back and live your fuckin’ life.” Pushing himself away from the wall, the outlaw took a peek at her once again before he left the shadowy side path.

Go back and live her fuckin’ life? What was that even supposed to mean, if there was nothing she had left at all? So big of you, Mister Morgan! Ann watched him leave in both, anger and wistfulness. All she wanted right now was to get over and done with this day.

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Arthur was taking up position on a formation near Citadel Rock. Taking his sniper rifle off his shoulder, he tested his sight and range. As already assumed it turned out as a very good spot for keeping an eye on the train bridge. Now he just had to wait until evening, for the damn Del Lobos and damn Ann to arrive.

Why on earth did she have to be that pushy? Hadn’t he made himself clear enough that he didn’t want to talk about anything that was going on in his life? Not about Mary, not about anything else. Yet last week seemed to still bother her – but she couldn’t know better. He didn’t even blame her.

His horse next to him was pawing the ground, suddenly reminding him of the essentials. They still had to get money – a lot of money –, if they wanted to continue a life in freedom. Robbing the bank in Valentine kind of escalated, so they now had to look for another hiding spot sooner or later since Arthur felt that Sheriff Gray was becoming more and more suspicious.

Living a life like this – always on the run – wasn’t something a woman like Ann should experience. Hell, it was always the same! He had Mary, her father hadn’t thought he was a good match for her, they had gone separate ways, she had married another man. He had met Eliza, they had gotten Isaac; they both had been killed for nothing. Then he had met that bounty hunter and so many parallels had shown up. She probably was used to better men than him because he’d obviously ruin her, if she got too close to him. Then there was all that sad life story of hers, with her mother being dead and her father passing… Arthur had no doubts that it was some kind of catalyst for him becoming a bit – too – attached to her. He was realizing all this now and it had to end.

The sun was setting while he lied in waiting.

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It was about 7 p.m. when Ann headed out southwards. The way down to the railroad bridge wouldn’t take her long, she thought. It actually didn’t and she dismounted her horse only a couple of minutes after leaving Valentine, patting her companion. “I die and Arthur will take care of you, I’m sure,” she whispered, eyes closed and forehead leaning against Calido’s. “Wish me luck, okay?”

Calido nudged her, as if he was trying to cheer her up, to encourage her. Ann patted him again and then checked her belt for her knife as well as the revolver. She’d need them. Hopefully Morgan was out there as well. Just in case.

Spotting three riders heading right towards her from the distance, she suddenly tensed up. When they came closer she realized that no one of them was Sánchez. What the hell?! Why wasn’t he with them? That wasn’t clearly the way she had wanted to settle this deal. Morgan would kill every single one of them, meaning Sánchez was still out there. Somewhere. *Fuck!*

“Ah, Miss McBrady, I suppose?” the trio’s leader said once the small group had come to a halt not far from her. “Mister Sánchez is sending his apologies for not bein’ here today. He’s hopin’ ya takin’ no offence.”

Ready to draw any weapon at any time, Ann examined the three Del Lobos. None of them was familiar to her. “Not at all,” she retorted.

“Well.” The unknown leading man jumped off his horse; the other two men followed his suit, weapons ready. “I was told ya still owin’ us ‘bout 500 dollars. For ya sake I’m hopin’ ya brought the money.”

“Not quite.”

The Del Lobo grimaced.

“If we could put off the last 150 dollars,” Ann tried to debate. Maybe no one had to die here and now, if they took the deal and simply gave her some more time. The worst really didn’t have to come to the worst.

“My, my, Miss McBrady. Ya still wanna keep us waitin’? Interest’s not getting’ less, ya know?”

“Well, fuck you then,” Ann coldly said. With nothing to lose, she reached for her knife, caught the guy who was in charge and held the weapon right to his throat, facing his two companions. “Stay back!” the bounty huntress yelled. “Stay back or I’ll kill him!” Her heart was pounding heavily; she needed to stay focused, if she wanted to hold the upper hand.

“Relax, lady!” one of the Del Lobos tried to reassure her while the other was aiming his rifle at her head.

Ann didn’t listen but drew her revolver instead, all of a sudden shooting the guy in his head. “I. Said. Stay. Back.”

“Fuckin’ bitch!” It was that man she was holding hostage; he punched backwards, right into her stomach, making her tumble. Inevitably she had to let go of him, facing him after he turned around, coming for her.

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Arthur watched the proceedings through the scope of his rifle, ready to pull the trigger at any second. *Ann*, as she wanted him to call her, was still discussing with three Del Lobo members when
she suddenly took one of them hostage. “Good girl,” he muttered, now aiming at the two other men and admiring that smart move of hers. She really knew what she was doing.

Ann was drawing her revolver and aimed at one of the remaining men, shooting him without hesitation. Sadly she lost her focus and so the guy who seemed to be the leader was able to free himself from her, punching her in the stomach.

“That’s it,” Arthur murmured again, aiming for the now attacking Del Lobos. Holding his breath, he first sniped the leader and then the other man, both their heads almost exploding. Only then he breathed again and waited for possible reinforcements to show up. When nothing happened, he finally got up and jumped onto his horse to pay Ann a visit and to check on her as well.
Chapter X: Touching

Ann collapsed onto the ground, sighing with relief at the very moment. Three Del Lobos were successfully wiped out – admittedly with Morgan’s help but still they were dead. It didn’t take long, however, until the initial gladness gave way to her well-known intensity again. After all Diandro Sánchez hadn’t been with them, meaning that he still was somewhere out there. If he wasn’t too stupid – which Ann knew he definitely wasn’t –, he would easily put two and two together just to know who it was that killed his men. Not some random Van der Linde guy but her, who was having an appointment with them here, south of Valentine. If they didn’t return, well… She was fucked again. Sánchez would come for her and this time there wouldn’t be any escape.

Nothing has changed, goddamn!

Hoof noises again – just like last week in Rhodes – and she instantly knew that it was Morgan. Rifle still in his hands, he was looming over her.

“You okay?” he asked, reaching out to help her stand up. “That punch looked nasty.”

“It works.” Nodding, she then took his hand and got up to her feet again. Her guts were nothing compared to what Sánchez would do to her.

Morgan rolled over the three bodies with his boots, looking at her. “So who’s your Sánchez?” he asked, lighting up a cigarette.

“None of ‘em.”

Hearing that, the outlaw nearly dropped his cigarette. “Ya kiddin’ me.”

“I do not. He wasn’t with them. Thanks for your help, though.” Ann turned away and reached for her horse’s reins, not facing him at all. “This is where it ends, I guess. I don’t want you to get involved in this any further, Mister Morgan. You’ve done enough.” She tried to mount but a quick pang through her guts prevented her. Great, that was the last thing she needed right now; she was really losing her touch.

“You’ve got a room in Valentine?” his husky voice sounded right over her shoulder, making her flesh creep.

“Yeah, although I didn’t know if I’d come back at one piece to make use of it.”

“Well, you better do ‘cause there’s blood all over your face. That rifle’s pretty nasty,” Morgan
smirked, pointing at the two dead men with their heads completely messed.

Ann immediately felt her face for any caked parts. Damn, it seemed as if he was right! She didn’t notice in the heat of moment. “Maybe you should’ve brought another one. Always filth up my stuff once you show up, don’t you?”

“It was three times.”

“Yeah, it was.” The bounty huntress decided to make another try at mounting her horse – she couldn’t escape the feeling that she needed to flee from Morgan, as dealing with him right now became kind of intimate again. Gritting her teeth, she finally managed to climb onto Calido and ran him. Morgan had told her to go back and live her fuckin’ life, right? She would do this. Why even bother to say goodbye?

As if he’d just read her mind he suddenly appeared next to her, riding his stolen and nameless horse singlehanded. “Ya ain’t sayin’ goodbye, Miss McBrady?”

She glanced at him, simply shrugging and pretending to be cooler than she actually was. “Why should I? Thought I’d regret it?” Although asking sarcastically, Ann also felt that she wouldn’t refrain from trying to get to know him, that probably she would miss something if he wasn’t around anymore. It all was a big fucking dilemma.

“It’s Apollo.”

“Lovely. You’re definitely a man of animals,” she said. “I can tell from the way you treated Calido back then. He’s usually not coming to trust strangers at all but with you it was different. … That’s why I told him you’d take care of him, if they had killed me.”

“Probably ‘cause he had bad experiences with humans. You found him injured, I read that in that letter. Ya seem to be some kind of an attachment figure, Miss.” Morgan then fell quiet while they were drawing closer to Valentine.

He accompanied Ann all the way right up to the Saints Hotel. In consequence of his last sentence she wasn’t able to say anything too. She was sure she discerned a double meaning – using Calido as some kind of metaphor for himself. Pondering over her own interpretation of his cryptic statement, she asked herself who it was that had hurt him so badly. This ominous Mary?

Still there some seconds left until they’d go separate ways forever. Ann wanted to keep questioning him so badly, having the feeling she would regret otherwise. But as it was so often the case she didn’t dare – until they arrived at the hotel.

Morgan jumped off his horse and she followed suit, ready to say goodbye. Instead he took off his hat. Frowning, Ann eyed him, still not getting what he had in mind – until he put it onto her head and pulled it down a bit to cover her face in shadows.

“Just in case anyone’s askin’ silly questions ‘bout that blood on your face. People ‘round here are pretty nosy, just like certain bounty hunters,” he stated while putting an arm around her and entering the hotel.
Apparently he was going to pretend to bring his wasted girlfriend to her room. Ann denied herself a goofy grin because of this creative plan to get her up there without anyone noticing the splatters and getting any ideas. *One of his specialties, it seems.*

“Evening, Mister,” Morgan then greeted the receptionist, conscience-proof.

“Oh no, you again?”

“Relax, I ain’t breakin’ shit this time. Just takin’ my friend to her room,” the outlaw tried to defuse, pointing at Ann. “Drunk as a skunk, Mister.”

Great. The hotel owner did seem to know Mister Callahan – as probably everyone else in this town did. Ann quickly pretended to gag, moaning and then slurring: “Shit, mus’ puke… Can’t…” She then stumbled up the stairs, uttering some more gag noises.

“See?” Shrugging his shoulders, Morgan followed her upstairs quickly.

“Oh please, Mister, make sure she ain’t puking all over my property!”

“Sure.”

That hilarious discussion! Already at her room, Ann was waiting for her helping hand to follow and couldn’t stop herself from snorting with laughter once he did. “That was… That was just great! His fucking face!”

Morgan was toothy grinning. “You’re very talented, Miss. Perfect actress, I must admit.”

But Ann was nearly pissing herself laughing. Disguising her voice, she imitated the hotel owner. “*Oh please, Mister. You again?*” She needed to sit on her bed for a second to calm herself down – but immediately smirked again the moment she looked at him, taking off his hat. “Oh my, is there actually anybody who doesn’t know you from causing any trouble?”

“Hardly doubt that.”

“Bet you don’t, being the *bad* man you are,” she said, still with a smirk. Then she stood, searching all drawers for some kind of rag. Fortunately she made a find and took a look at her face in the mirror, inspecting the strangers’ blood. Without any comment she finally spat on that rag and cleaned her face.

“Oh, you don’t know me, you don’t know what I’ve done,” he simply retorted, not impressing her at all because it was always the same old story. Ann was just wondering whom he wanted to convince. Probably only himself because she definitely knew better by now.

From the corner of her eye she watched him picking up his hat again and suddenly felt bold enough to bespeak the bare essentials. “So it was your Mary who told you so? That you *ain’t a good man*?” Giving a crap about how much she was burning him up right now, she turned towards him and waited for an honest response, at last.

… Which he didn’t give her. Instead his facial features hardened while he was obviously clenching his jaw – but Ann wasn’t ready to give up yet. She continued putting pressure onto him: “What’s wrong with you then?! You’re telling me to go back but still you’re helping me! You’re even taking me here and now you’re just leaving once again? You’re so fucking *iffy*!” And God, she felt relieved, now that she had gotten this off her chest. This man – her erstwhile pray – had become more to her; she couldn’t deny that anymore to herself, couldn’t bear all this on-off and especially couldn’t bear to not understand him *at all.*
Mister Morgan – Arthur – just nodded in response. After all he still didn’t hit the roof. “You’re right,” he eventually admitted. “Must’ve been a goddamn fool.” Not paying any more attention to her, he tore open the door and left the room.

Well, okay. That’s it, Ann. He’s gone. Again. She definitely had found his weak spot, already regretting what she had just said to him. Who would have ever thought that a man like him was actually that vulnerable on the inside? He’s apparently hating himself for something. Maybe all of this was going far beyond Mary.

The mood had changed ever so quickly; a moment ago they were laughing about that idiot of hotel owner as well as their stagecraft and then suddenly – certainly also because she often couldn’t control her damn emotions and well, in this case situations often escalated quickly – he was so fucking pissed that he had left her again.

Ann sighed in frustration, burying her head in her hands. She had reached the point where she wasn’t giving a fuck about who he was or what he had done anymore. She didn’t even give a fuck about-

All of a sudden the door flung open, making her glancing up. It was him again – and he immediately kicked the door closed after he had entered the room. Ann noticed that he was holding something in his hand when he came straight towards her, grabbing her face just to kiss her dearly. Completely taken by surprise, she stumbled and – hitting the bed – fell onto it. There he was again, on top of her, kissing her once more. First stroking over the fabric of her blouse, his big rough hands eventually grasped it tightly, ready to probably rip it to pieces.

“Wait,” she gasped, quickly straightening herself a bit so that she could take off her jacket as well as undo the buttons of the blouse, exposing her bare small breasts to him. Hopefully he liked what she was showing to him.

And seemingly he did, given the way he continued to touch her; cupping her breasts, kissing the crook of her neck.

In response Ann stretched her neck, moaning with pure pleasure when his thumbs were rubbing her sensitive nipples – and hell, she was so goddamn sensitive there! She instantly got wet, feeling the urgent need to have him fuck her at last, to satisfy her, to make her forget about everything else for the moment.

It gave her goosebumps all over when his voice was echoing huskily right next to her ear, repeating something he had said to her once before: “You gonna regret that.”

“Never,” the bounty huntress repeated, sighing, while reaching for his suspenders and slipping them down. Her hands then searched for his belt, skillfully opened it before moving on to his pants where he stopped her.

Sitting up, he snatched at her wrists and held them together right above her head. Still watching her, he was breathing heavily, pressing his hardening member against her. “Ya trustin’ me?”

She blushed a bit at the feel of him getting hard just because of her and nodded – of course she did by now. And before she knew what was happening, he had already removed his handkerchief and was now using it to tie her wrists up to the bed, making her even wetter.

Once he fumbled around with her pants – unbuttoning and eventually pulling them down – her breathing became quicker and louder. God, Ann knew that she was desperately wet for him but
now that he could see how much her drawers were already sticking to her folds underneath she felt kinda ashamed. She couldn’t lose control over herself like this, she couldn’t-

The bed creaked while he was bending over her, keeping his eyes glued to hers as one of his fingers was beginning to slowly rub the wettish fabric against her crevice; up and down, again and again – until he decided that it was time to show some love to her clit.

“Already so goddamn wet, Miss,” Arthur whispered into her ear, rubbing it in gentle circles. Sometimes slower, sometimes faster.

With him still watching her so hungrily, she wasn’t able to stand it anymore and closed her eyes, moaning sensually and sticking her hips towards his skillful fingers. “Yes,” she panted. “Oh God, yes!”

“Such a good girl,” he whispered again, his voice slow but steady shaking from his own arousal while he still was playing with her clit, gently twisting it.

Already edged to the utmost, Ann bent over backwards, groaning with pleasure. “… Cumin’,” she brokenly gasped and ground her hips against him – not able to bear this sweet torture any second longer. So close...

And then he suddenly let her be, took his fingers away. Instead he got rid of her drawers now, having her completely naked in front of him. Ann spread her legs, trusting that he would continue teasing her, at best fuck her already. She would die here, if he didn’t.

Arthur just leaned over her again, pressing his lips onto hers while his fingers felt for her clit once more. He stroked it as if it were some kind of exciting toy for him, driving her completely insane. Then, without any prior warning, he slid two fingers between her folds, his thumb still teasing her sweet spot.

Deeply moaning, the bounty huntress parted from his lips, twitching around his stretching and pushing fingers. She cocked her head, clenching her teeth – all she wanted was getting off! No matter how.

“Been a while, huh?” he murmured, kissing and licking her throat while fucking her with his fingers. “So goddamn tight…”

Ann just nodded, her legs still quivering when he stopped stimulating her again. He sat up and opened his own pants as well as his shirt – she only now noticed the scar she had brought on him with her pocket knife; it was actually smaller than she had thought. But all scars aside he still was a fucking handsome man. … Truly huge and… thick. She shamelessly stared at his stiff and naked dick.

Smirking, he reached for something – that little something he was holding in his hand when he had returned to her. She realized that it apparently was a condom. “Wherefrom…?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Indeed it didn’t and considering that she was horny as fuck thanks to him, she also felt like doing other things rather than thinking about where that damn condom had come from right now. She was so ready for him when he grabbed her legs after he had made use of it, rubbing his tip back and forth through her folds before finally sliding into her with one deep thrust.

Gasping for breath due to the sudden stretch, Ann clenched her muscles around him. Shit, he was enormous and she needed a few seconds to get used to his size.
“Just relax,” he panted from above her, keeping still and therefore giving her the time needed. To help her he gently touched her swollen clit once more, massaging it with his thumb and forefinger. The sensation sent a shiver down her spine, making Ann moan ecstatically.

Eventually she relaxed her muscles, so Arthur started moving inside her at a slow pace, not stopping his fingers from their work, though. As her moaning became louder and more demanding he sped up his thrusts and literally *fucked* her into the mattress.

Her eyes closed, Ann could hear the bed creak louder and louder, could feel him fill her up completely again and yet again; she desperately moaned at the brutal feeling of nearly exploding from lust. “Yes, oh yes!”

Arthur then suddenly flipped her over, her tied wrists now crossed. When he ordered her to get on her knees she was getting even wetter – if that was still possible at all. Thrusting harder into her from behind than before, he grabbed her neck and pulled her down. His face was next to hers; his own gasps became heavier and louder.

Ann enjoyed his deep, nearly brutal thrusts, his fingers between her thighs. She passionately moaned his name and then he clutched at her braided ponytail, pulling her head back, groaning directly into her ear by himself. It wouldn’t take him much longer.

Not being able to hold on anymore, she was finally the first who gave in to her release, trembling and tightening around him while gasping his name over and over again with him still deeply thrusting into her. He was grunting by now, grasping her hips for one last push before he finally jerked and slowed down.

Ann felt his breath on her neck – still hot and heavy from the effort –, felt him kissing her sweaty skin while pulling himself out. Eased, she sighed; she had needed that so badly, even if that meant that she probably wouldn’t be able to sit for a few days now.

Meanwhile Arthur only moved to unknot her wrists. When he obviously wanted to get off the bed the bounty huntress quickly grabbed his hand after she had turned around. “What now?” she finally asked, facing him. “You leaving?”

“I don’t know,” he returned, putting his black handkerchief on her neck just the same way he was always wearing it. “I probably ain’t doin’ you good.”

Ann grimaced, not quite understanding. “What?”

“We’ve got very different views of life and I ain’t changing for no one. I’d be your downfall.”

“No, you wouldn’t!” she contradicted, not believing in what she was hearing. “Because we’re more similar to each other than you think! I know what it’s like to live a life on the run! I kinda do that, too! And I kill people as well!”

“That’s not a bit the same, Ann.”

Being in a complete tizzy, the bounty huntress didn’t speak a single word anymore. She was just speechless about all that ignorance and self-destruction on his part – although he obviously wasn’t enjoying acting like this towards her. But since he also wasn’t willing to tell her what the real problem was she couldn’t do shit but accept his move for now.

Yet feeling like a complete mess, she yelled at him: “I think you were right. I *do* regret it. And now piss off!”
While he was getting dressed again she bent her knees, burying her head into them. Telling herself that – despite everything – he liked her and had interest in her wasn’t helping at this very moment. She had clearly felt his devotion some minutes ago, being happier than probably any time before in her life.

Now he would return to his gang and come to terms with what had just happened – maybe she would see him again. She really wished for that.
Despairing

I must say I'm feeling a bit sorry for Ann in this chapter. ( °₀ °) And trust me, on occasion she will get a chance to have a look into Arthur's journal. But first things first.

Chapter XI: Despairing

Ann started up from her sleep due to a sudden thud on the windowpane. Still tired and not knowing what has happened, she looked around the hotel room. Apparently just a bird, she thought while rubbing her eyes.

So it wasn’t a dream; Arthur didn’t stay with her. Screw that, she had already made enough of a fool of herself last night when she was trying to explain why he wasn’t right when he told her that they had different views of life. God, she was so naïve! Heavily sighing, she now realized that she nearly had reached the crossroads where she would have been forced to come to a decision – sticking to the new world and the law or giving a damn about everything, following this goddamn outlaw. Since her sanity wasn’t up to scratch last night she knew that she should have been grateful to him for knocking sense into her.

Screw him. I’ve other things to deal with. Things named Diandro Sánchez, that is. Ann needed to come up with a plan, in case she would cross paths with him any time soon. However, first she needed to get dressed again because she simply had been too lazy for this last night.

She got up, the soreness between her thighs immediately reminding her of how intensively he had fucked her. Hissing, she then bent over to pick up her clothes and realized that she was still wearing his black handkerchief around her neck – probably the only thing she had left of him. “Goddamn fool!”

Half an hour later she was finally on her way downstairs when she noticed that the hotel owner checked on her warily. Really? Still that puking affair? Sighing irritated, she stated: “No worries, Mister. I didn’t puke over anything, okay?”

“It’s rather ‘bout the bed. On your behalf, Miss, I suggest that it’s better still in one piece.”

Embarrassed and lightly blushed, Ann quickly turned her head away from the man. “Sorry for the… noise,” she stuttered and quickly left the Saints Hotel to head out of Valentine as soon as possible. But where to? And after all, where was her horse?! Calido wasn’t where she had racked him up yesterday.

Baffled, she turned and began wandering around, looking for her Pinto Mustang everywhere in the small town. Even after questioning some locals as well as the sheriff she hadn’t got a clue about the whereabouts of Calido – as always nobody had seen a shit.

Coming to think about it, only Arthur was qualified for the perfect horse theft. Plus he knew Calido very well because that damn horse had faith in him. He could have easily taken him along. By God, Ann swore she would kill the outlaw for stealing her boy. Her hand grabbed his
handkerchief and squeezed the fabric forcefully, nearly tearing it down with rage.

The bounty huntress now needed a new horse to get to that man that stole her actual horse! Moreover that new horse would cost money – money she shouldn’t spend. She would so take a ride to Rhodes and pay Sheriff Gray a visit to ask about his fellow deputy Mister Callahan. If Calido was involved, Ann definitely couldn’t take a joke.

***

After tossing and turning in bed the whole night, Arthur was now more than glad to finally have his morning cup of coffee at the campfire. He was all tired from reflecting himself after he had left the Saints Hotel and returned to the camp. Brooding over what was the wrong and what was the right thing to do was always the part he feared most because of his often changing attitude. It was all about that damn dichotomy of heart and mind.

Following to what his heart was telling him, it probably had been the right thing to stay with her for the night, to confide his troubles to her. His gumption, however, was advising the contrary, reminding him of Mary and how he had never been enough for her just because of being the man he was. Yet ignoring his heart wasn’t the solution to this problem, Arthur knew that.

Damn, all this bullshit was distracting him from the gang’s current situation! There was still the O’Driscoll conflict as well as the Gray-Braithwait matter. Some days ago they had just stolen some of the Braithwait’s precious horses; now Hosea was talking something about a meeting with Miss Braithwait and burning tabacco fields of the Grays.

Good old Hosea. Arthur remembered a talk he had with him not so long ago when they were hunting that giant bear. Back then he stated that there was a time he and Bessie were indeed thinking about getting out of this criminal life. And although – according to Hosea – this resolution didn’t last long Arthur kind of admired his mentor for talking about it so bluntly. He himself would have never done that; it also wasn’t ever at issue.

Or was it? His thoughts wandering off again, he recalled last night once more. What would have been the alternative to his refusal? Getting her on board? She had hinted at something like that, yes, but he wasn’t in the position of having the final say. Still that was Dutch.

The other option, Arthur figured, was simply backing out – code aside. Still his loyalty to the gang – especially Dutch – was strong, so he exactly knew that he would never take this into consideration. He did not do it for Mary and he wouldn’t do it for Ann.

Sighing in irritation, he rubbed his scrubby chin. Not that he wasn’t secretly glad about her having sincere interest in him and his whole life, about her seemingly taking him the way he was, about her screaming with pure pleasure when he was fucking her… *Jesus,* what a night!

“Cowpoke!”

With Micah suddenly slapping on his shoulder, Arthur startled. He nearly spat out his coffee but choked on it instead. Coughing like crazy, he watched the other man joining him at the campfire.

“Careful, careful,” Micah viciously smiled. “Seein’ ya were out again tonight?”

Oh yeah, that story again. Of course this rat would try to provoke him once more. Ever since the day Lenny couldn’t keep his damn mouth shut Micah was trying to tease him about his new *lady friend* whenever possible. Sometimes Arthur felt the urgent need to blow his brains out but for Dutch’s sake he swallowed his anger.
“What’s it, cowpoke?” Micah watched him, pretending to be concerned. “Stamina’s better, I guess? Else this pretty little scarred whore of yours wouldn’t put out. Arthur, oh Arthur, ya hard-ass!”

Arthur just looked at the rat’s fist, playfully hitting his upper arm, like they were bust buddies for years. Right now was one of these special moments in which he simply would have loved killing him. Closing his eyes, he then puffed. Neither was Ann a whore nor was she scarred. That lack of respect annoyed him.

“You know what, Micah? Mind your own damn business. I was out there gatherin’ information ’cause someone needs to raise the fucking money. Bat wings ain’t enough to live off.” Arthur stood up, now patting his comrade on the shoulder. “And now… I’m gonna play deputy at Rhodes.”

Satisfyingly silencing Micah, he headed for his horse, eager for what kind of work Sheriff Gray had to offer today.

“Arthur?”

It was Abigail sheering up and he immediately stopped to hear what she had to say. After all she was one of the few people around here he really and truly appreciated.

“Don’t take him serious, he’s just an asshole,” Marston’s companion said, slightly smiling.

In response Arthur did the same. “Tell me ‘bout it, Abigail. Should’ve left him rotten at Strawberry.” Mounting, he then wished her a good day and headed out for Rhodes to meet Leigh Gray.

***

She had bought a Morgan for 15 bucks – a Morgan just like Morgan. And she had named it Morgan. Still fuming, Ann finally reached Rhodes in the afternoon, straightly approaching Gray’s office.

The long ride turned out to be pure torment; every movement of that damn horse causing her to make contact with the damn saddle was sore. In fact she was the luckiest person on earth when she could eventually jump off the lame Morgan; she didn’t even bother to rack it up anywhere because seriously, nobody would have stolen this kind of animal.

So far, so good. Now on to the real Morgan.

In the sheriff office Gray told her that his deputy had already knocked off and that therewith he didn’t know where to find him. So Ann had no other option but to search for him on her own. There was a high probability that by now Arthur was already with his folks again and of course she knew shit about the hideout. If they were smart, they were often switching locations.

Already cursing the whole world and especially the whole day, Ann suddenly paused stumping around the settlement. There he was! Sitting and leaning against a tree near the church while scribbling in that note-book she saw last week.

Ann caught her breath and rounded him unobtrusively, finally approaching him from behind, her revolver ready. When she was right behind him she aimed at the back of his head, cocking the weapon clearly audible. “Alright, where’s Calido? And don’t you dare to move.”

Not moving at all, his answer wasn’t long in coming. “Calido? Your horse?”

“Of course my damn horse! You stole it and now you’ll give it back!”
“Listen, Ann. I ain’t stealin’ horses.”

“Like you ain’t robbing banks, you mean?” Tired of his doubletalk, she fired a bullet right next to his head, missing him on purpose. A friendly reminder that she better wasn’t to be fucked with.

At least the sudden shot was enough to make him cringe. He let go of his note-book and turned around, watching her in some kind of awe. “Careful, okay?!”

“You, Mister, owe me 15 bucks!” Ann wasn’t finished yet. Still aiming at him, she pointed at her newly purchased horse. “Get me Calido back already and you can have that fucking Morgan called Morgan!”

Arthur blinked and then snorted, obviously not taking her serious anymore. “You really tellin’ me you named it after me?”

He promptly reached for the hand holding the revolver and twisted her wrist so that she had to drop the weapon immediately. After that he collected it from the ground. She was cursing and holding her aching hand when he drew himself up to his full height.

“Now once again,” he said. “Your horse’s gone and it’s my fault?”

“Calido trusts you!” Ann yelled, still upset about the uncertainty of not knowing how and where the stallion was. “You had all the time tonight and you know exactly what my horse looks like!”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because it’s a goddamn Mustang! You don’t get them up here too often!”

“Quite true but seriously, Ann.” Arthur held out her revolver to her again, cocking his head. “Wasn’t me who stole him. He’s a pretty precious horse so it could’ve been anyone.”

“But when you left tonight-”

“Well, when I left he was still there. I ain’t doin’ shit to your horsey.”

Realizing how wrong she was, Ann turned away and then leaned against the trunk. If it wasn’t Arthur, who on earth could have taken him? Where was she supposed to start looking if nobody had seen anything? Was it Del Lobos? Because she killed some of them? Were they going to kill her only and best friend in return? “Oh God, no,” she murmured, slumping down and trying to figure out a plan.

“That new horse,” Arthur spoke in a husky voice right into her ear. “It even ain’t worth 15 bucks by the way.”

Angered, she looked at him. “Shut it, will ya?! And before you ask: No, I don’t need your goddamn help!”

“Good, saves me a lotta time.” The outlaw picked up his note-book again. “I ain’t responsible for the Heartlands anyway.”

Rolling her eyes, Ann decided to not waste any more time. She ran over to her Morgan, anxious to not let her motions look too frantic because the real Morgan noticing about her aftereffects was all she had needed. Riding back to Valentine would take some time again – time she could use for coming up with a good plan on how to find Calido’s kidnapper. If it was really Del Lobos, she was most likely well-advised to start her investigation down south, where their main territory was
located. They probably had brought the Mustang to New Austin again and maybe already sold him to retrieve part of her debt. But considering that Calido was of great value they might just as well have sold him in New Hanover. Shit, this felt like finding a needle in a haystack. She didn’t even know all the horse dealers around here! With Arthur’s help or at least his knowledge it might have been easier to make a start.

The bounty huntress slowed down her horse shortly after leaving Rhodes, pondering if she should just return and ask him because this certainly wasn’t the time for wounded pride. Quietly groaning, she then turned Morgan the Morgan and suddenly froze. In front of her was Calido, being accompanied by a well-known man on his American Paint Horse.

“Hola, Miss McBrady. Long time no seen,” he said, dangerously smiling. “Lost a bunch of men yesterday and thought we better do a little talk. To get things ready, ya know?”

Yes, this was the man who was supposed to die yesterday evening: Diandro Sánchez.
Fearing

Chapter Notes

Phew, finally managed to translate the latest chapter. (¬‿¬) I really love Hosea and Arthur in this one but let me know what you think. ♥

Chapter XII: Fearing

Ann pursed her lips, uncertain about her next steps. She could either just shoot Sánchez here and now – being in the dark if he had brought any men with him – or play all along for now. Thinking long and hard, she finally reached the conclusion that option number 2 was probably best. After all he had Calido and the last thing she wanted was him to be hurt or at worst be killed.

“Okay, fine. Let’s talk,” she eventually said, dismounting her substitute horse. For sure she would have given herself a pat on the back for her brilliance of figuring out that the damn Del Lobos were the real kidnappers, if the situation wasn’t as grave as it was. As it seemed they had kept a wary eye on her lately, otherwise they would have never known about her stays respectively her horse in particular. So it wasn’t your imagination; they really did observe you and they’ve probably seen you with… Shit! White as a sheet, she was now starting to fear the worst.

After jumping down from his own horse Sánchez headed her way, revolver at the ready. “Well, Miss McBrady,” he then began. “Thing is… I had some of my men gettin’ some money from you yesterday but just imagine, they didn’t return. You wouldn’t happen to know why?” His eyebrows raised in anticipation.

Ann knew she was fucked. Was he aware of what happened to his fellow bastards? Of course he was! But did he also know when they died and by whom? Maybe she could trick him a bit, set him on the wrong track to keep Arthur out of all this. After all it was her concern.

“I paid them as promised, Mister Sánchez. Maybe someone robbed and killed them afterwards? See, it was a lot of money, you know that by yourself.” It was the best story she could come up with on impulse.

“Robbed and killed by someone, well well! Not by chance a certain Mister Callahan?”

Bad call, Ann, bad call. The bounty huntress really wanted to kick herself for being so stupid as to intensify the whole situation even more. Did Sánchez also know Arthur’s real name or just his alias? What was she supposed to answer? Apparently nothing, so she remained silent.

“Between you and me, because we go back a looong way, Miss: I kinda understand you. You’re up shit’s creek and you’re – with good reason – pissing your pants. Would do the same if I were you by the way. But!” Lifting his forefinger, the Del Lobo moved closer to her, the hand holding his gun now raised in her direction. “I really don’t appreciate you dragging along one of these Blackwater guys. Your Mister Callahan or rather Morgan isn’t quite what I expect when it’s you who fuckin’ owes me money.”

By showing her hands Ann hoped to defuse the situation. Diandro Sánchez was a very freakish man, which she had already experienced firsthand. He could completely lose it at any moment.
Believing that killing these three men would solve her problems even partially had been wrong – so wrong! Damn Arthur and his damn manner of dealing with people like this! Why was she fooled into thinking he was right when he told her to simply shoot them?

“Mister Sánchez, I can explain!” Ann tried to quiet the Del Lobo.

“I assume you do.” He suddenly pointed his revolver at her Mustang, herself not being his main target anymore. “Unless you wanna make me knock his lights out. Such a lovely horsy. Would be sad at heart, don’t you think?”

Internally fighting for keeping a cool head, Ann gnashed her teeth. Just kill him now, fucking kill him. You can do it and Calido will be fine. But regardless of how much she encouraged herself, she just couldn’t risk losing the stallion, her one and only friend and companion. The animal she had saved from dying.

“Morgan,” she finally began. “Morgan helped me shooting your men.”

“Although it’s been me you wanted dead.”

“Yes and I’m...” There was no point in lying anymore, so the bounty huntress swallowed her pride. “I’m sorry, Mister. You must know, I’ve got most of the money but I need some more time for the rest. You’ll get it, I promise!”

“Think I got a better idea.” Sánchez lowered his revolver. “How ‘bout you bring me your precious Mister Morgan? Bounty’s high on that asshole and you two are close to each other, I heard. So it’s nothin’ to you, is it?”

Shit, no! How the hell did he know that? She wasn’t actually too close to Arthur but the mental image that someone had stalked her and even perhaps watched her during screwing troubled her, to put it mildly.

“Sorry, but that must be a misinformation.”

Sánchez nodded understandingly. “Well, that’s actually none of my business; after all we’re only dealin’ on business level which your amigo had interfered in, unfortunately.” He suddenly passed her Calido’s reins, smiling. “Here, as a sign of goodwill. Take your horsy and bring me Morgan, Callahan or whatever his name’s.”

Eying the Del Lobo suspiciously, Ann drew closer to him. Her trembling hand took the reins, part of her still afraid that he would shoot or wound Calido. But it wasn’t the stallion who got hurt – it was her.

Out of nowhere she got struck by his gun right above her temple – enough to floor her immediately. Seeing stars for quite a moment, Ann rolled on her side, not sure what had just happened. “The... fuck,” she moaned and tried to look up.

“I’m gonna see only one – and I repeat one – of my men dying at your hands again, I swear I’m gonna feed you to the gators!” Sánchez raged, kicking her right into the guts and making her roll over on her other side. After repeating twice he then put one foot on her throat, making her gasp for breath. “Got that?!?”

Desperately clutching his pants leg, Ann just rattled: “Yes!”

“Fine. Have a nice day then, Miss McBrady. I’m gettin’ back to you.” The Del Lobo let her free again, smiling just like nothing had happened. “And don’t forget: I’ll find ya if you’re bustin’ my
balls.” Then he left her and Calido.

Far too much for Ann; she was running empty, felt trapped. One more mistake and she was dead for sure – maybe not the worst outcome by this point. Watching the sky, she realized that it was slowly clouding up. Still her head felt as if someone constantly beat it with a hammer so she closed her eyes, not even perceiving the raindrops on her face.

She couldn’t… What had she done, dragging Arthur right into all this never-ending shit? What was she to do? Talk to him, warn him…

Groaning, Ann picked herself up and reached for Calido, leaned her head against his mane. “It’s good to have you back,” she whispered, not aware of the bloodstain she left on his skin. Using the last of her strength, she only just managed to climb on his back. “Just do me one favor. Take me to him… Please.” Her voice fading, she directed the horse back towards Rhodes, forehead pressed against its neck to ease the headache a bit. Struggling against the gathering unconsciousness was hard; she felt hazy and thought she might be bleeding but at the same time wasn’t certain about that. Something warm was running down her cheek, down her neck. She just… didn’t know.

When she opened her eyes the next time she seemed to have reached Rhodes. Morgan was following her – the real Morgan, though. Ann didn’t understand a thing.

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She must have been out of it, no clue for how long. Also, she was definitely not sitting on Calido’s back anymore but was now lying in a bed instead. Next to her was a lighted lamp placed onto a wooden crate and from the distance she could hear several voices; laughter as well as music. Where the hell was she?

Del Lobos! Not a moment later she sat up straight and – alarmed – watched her surroundings. While breathing heavily she only now noticed that she was apparently in some kind of tent which was attached to a coach. Since it was already pitch-dark outside Ann concluded that she must have laid here for about a few hours at least.

Good gracious, her head was still aching viciously. Sánchez really did a great job. First her cheek, now her whole skull – what was next?

“Fuck you, Diandro,” she then huffed, bouncing out of bed and immediately regretting it again because her circulation apparently wasn’t doing all too well yet. Therefore the bounty huntress considered for a moment before she started to feel her way in the dark once she was beyond the light.

Based on all the tents around her she could easily tell that she must have been at some sort of camp. But whose? His camp? Where was he? Not too far away she made out a campfire as well as a few people sitting around it. Ann also noticed that the area was surrounded by water; the moon was reflecting in it.

Making her way over to the unknown people around the fire warily, she eventually stopped slightly away from them, uncertain about how she was to encounter them best. By taking advantage of the shadows she inspected the strangers without interruption and she instantly recognized some of them.

Yes, there was no doubt. It was his fellas. Dutch van der Linde himself, that Lenny guy from Valentine and at least one more man from the wanted posters she had taken back in Blackwater. Having all of them here meant that Arthur must have been around as well.
Realizing that she was right into the lion’s den, she silently stepped backwards again, anxious not to cause any unnecessary attention. Arthur must have found her in Rhodes and taken her to the camp, it seemed.

Wandering around, Ann kept looking for him on the other side of the camp where she quickly noticed another campfire with this time only two people sitting there. She tried her luck and kind of felt happy when it turned out it was him indeed – him as well as an elderly man. They both were sitting on a trunk, talking and sharing a bottle of what was presumably whisky.

“You know, Hosea, always good to have you ‘round,” Arthur said, clapping the other man on the shoulder.

“Well, Arthur, as I told ya, there’s always-” Hosea suddenly broke off and looked past him. Apparently he had spotted Ann who was standing nearby, watching them.

Following the older man’s gaze, Arthur also turned around, eyes fixed on her at once. He scratched his neck, simply commenting: “Didn’t know you’re already back from the dead, Miss.”

Oh really? Back to formal again? It somehow bugged Ann but then again, what else did she expect? It was so damn obvious that he didn’t tip anyone off that she was the woman who had been after him, who had stabbed him and whom he had… well. “You couldn’t. Because you’re obviously drinking again.” Hence her answer was cocky.

But Arthur just snorted, completely unimpressed. “Hey, I ain’t the reverend, okay?” Then he looked back at the grey-haired man. “Am I, Hosea?”

“Nah, just a bit rough sometimes but still a good match.”

“Ah, so you wanna marry him off, old man?” Despite her headache Ann sneered. She couldn’t help thinking that the two of them were acting like father and son. Moreover Hosea was well up in their whole story – that had resulted from his words in no uncertain terms.

“I would but unfortunately he’s a man of no luck.”

“Hosea!” Arthur now harshly intervened, obviously embarrassed. “I ain’t marrying no one. Just helped her!”


Poking around, she then went over to the fire and sat down next to Arthur. “Not much to tell, I guess. Just had a small argument with someone.”

“By someone you mean Mister Sánchez?”

The bounty huntress answered with a nod, yet again surprised at Arthur’s investigative skills. He indeed was a very smart man and deserved the truth. “That asshole bashed me up. Ar-” She suddenly paused and switched to formal mode. “Mister Morgen, he wants me to turn you in! They spied on me and they know you because you were with me.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised at all.” Puffing, Arthur held the bottle out to her. “Well, I guess we might pay them bastards a visit and show ‘em what’s happenin’ to anyone who’s layin’ hands upon our women.”

Taking a long drink, Ann then looked at him. “So it’s our women now? I’m not one of your-”
“Oh shut up now, Ann! I saved you today, okay? And I ain’t gonna let this asshole do that shit again,” Arthur angrily stated and he suddenly seemed different – dangerous, terrifying. It was due to his respect for women in general, she figured.

“Miss, coincidentally you’ve come to the right place,” Hosea smiled. “Arthur and I are professionals when it comes to fooling. As are you, I heard.”

“I’m only average, Mister…?”

“Matthews. Hosea Matthews.”

“Yeah, well, Mister Matthews.” Curious for what the elderly man was up to, she looked at him. “As I said, I’m not that good yet.”

“Don’t listen to her, Hosea. She is,” Arthur tossed in quietly, arms folded.

“See, Miss? Arthur already told me that you’re a natural talent which is a good start to trick your debt-collector. Gimme some time; I’ll come up with a plan.” Still smiling, Hosea stood up from his trunk. He took the rifle which was leaning against the wood and shouldered it. “Now excuse me but I need to keep guard again. Dutch won’t be pleased.”

“Yep.” Arthur just raised one hand when he left. Sneezing, he then quickly turned to Ann. “Your Calido’s safe. He’s over there.”

“And Morgan?”

“Sold him.”

“Can’t blame you.”

“I knew you wouldn’t.”

Ann smirked, all stresses and strains of the day suddenly forgotten. “Thank you, I guess? For saving me today.”

Arthur just nodded. “So how’s ya head?”

“Shitty.”

“Well, Miss Grimshaw and Miss Jackson did their best to stop the bleeding. You should probably rest.”

“It’s your tent then?” Ann asked him, considering his advice. With her head and guts aching, she really felt like crap so getting some more rest was probably a good idea. Hopefully she was feeling better by tomorrow.

Arthur helped her up. “Sure but I’m leavin’ it to you for tonight. Just… don’t mess things up, okay?”

“Okay,” she promised when she returned to the tent, surprised that he was trusting her with his private sphere. Were there actually any things she could mess up at all? But seeing his note-book lying onto one of the crates then put her right and made her finally consider her promise. After all he had read the letter to her father, too.
disclosing

I’m really sorry for the delay but it’s finally here: chapter 13. It really did take me some time to write and translate it since I often wasn’t quite satisfied with my interpretation of Arthur in this one. Portraying him finally opening up to someone he cares for was pretty hard and I really hope that I did him justice.

Chapter XIII: Disclosing

Sitting on his bed again, Ann was holding his note-book in her hands – which was most likely some kind of journal. Still there were voices reaching her ears from the main campfire. Surely must have been a party or something like that. See, being an outlaw is more pleasant than you think it is. Always party, always drinking.

It was not, of course. After all they were still on the run, apprehending the worst. Not that they didn’t deserve it for what they had done.

Then again men like Hosea Matthews astonished her in a positive way. That man didn’t know her at all but still he tried so hard to come up with a solution to her problems. To be honest, she never had expected this kind of behavior from any outlaws – especially not the ones who had committed that slaughter of Blackwater.

Part of her felt even bad that Arthur was still acting that cool and distant towards her. She just couldn’t believe that she had totally fallen for a man like him, an outlaw. A criminal. Maybe he was right by telling her that he’d be her downfall.

But now that she had gotten her hands on his little book she may had the opportunity to finally get the answers to all of her questions. Yet she was hesitating – after all this was his privacy she was about to intrude and she wasn’t even his girlfriend.

Torn apart, Ann stared at the note-book for a moment. Sighing, she eventually put it aside again, feeling bad for only thinking about poking around. Therefore her gaze suddenly settled on some set up picture frames she also hadn’t noticed before. Well, since they weren’t a secret there wasn’t any reason having a guilty conscience for taking a closer look at them, right?

So she inspected them one by one. The first photograph was showing a woman named Beatrice Morgan – Ann could tell due to the signature on the back. Must be his mother. Right beside it was another photo of another woman. Mary Gillis, it was written on the flipside.

The bounty huntress eyed it for a long time. Well, well, so this was the ominous Mary? She was beautiful, very beautiful. No wonder Arthur was still attached to her.

Suddenly something stirred deep inside of her – a kind of terrible feeling which she assumed was jealousy. Ridiculous! Never in her whole life had she been jealous of anyone! Why just now? Voiceless cursing, she quickly put the photograph away again but doing so couldn’t hinder her mind from thinking about this relationship Arthur once had. Against her will she began comparing herself to this seemingly perfect Mary. Why was he into her that much? Because she apparently
had nothing to do with all this gun and violence shit? Because she was wearing a nice dress? After all he did seem to have a protective side.

The feeling of not being what he needed was eating Ann up. She hated herself so much for thinking this way. She just…

You can’t do that. C’mon, Ann, she tried to make herself see reason but it did no good. Instead she snatched at the note-book again and this time opened it. Indeed it was a journal – actually more of an art book than a journal because the first thing catching her eyes was some really pretty drawings. Drawings of all kind of animals, landscapes, buildings and people. Goddamn, Arthur Morgan was a fucking artist! Amazed at his drawing skills, Ann wasn’t surprised that his handwriting was neat as well as legible, too. It seemed that despite of his questionable way of life Arthur was the kind of guy who often needed a break from everything and – beyond that – time for himself.

So that was what he was doing yesterday when she confronted him while he was sitting against that tree in Rhodes. He obviously had sketched the town or at least people around it. Now being more curious, Ann turned over to the last inscribed page, wondering if he ever had drawn her or written about her as well.

A sudden clearing of the throat from nearby made her startle. It was him, not standing too far from her. Without a word he reached out his hand and she gave him his journal back.

“I’m sorry,” the bounty huntress quietly said. “I didn’t mean to-”

“You ain’t sorry,” Arthur finally cut her short, stowing away his book into his satchel. “Your credibility’s not up to scratch. Maybe I should tell Hosea I wasn’t right.”

He wasn’t fully pissed, only a bit. Still it was enough for her to notice, so Ann decided to switch topics. “I had no idea that you’re that good at drawing.” Because these damn beautiful sketches really were absorbing her.

“That good?” Perking his eyebrows up, he cocked his head as he was doing so often.

“Average.”

Sometimes Ann found herself hating this man, this cynical side of him. Although she often felt that she wasn’t capable to deal with it she – in a strange way – still admired whenever he was holding a mirror up to her. Properly speaking they were on different sides but she considered him her equal. It had been a slow process during the past weeks and still it wasn’t enough for him to do the same, it seemed.

Wagging her head, she finally sighed and lied down, turning her back on him. The day had already been tough enough so she really didn’t want to pick a fight with him. Arthur was absolutely right to be annoyed by her now; what she did was wrong. Ann knew that very well by herself and yet there was still this unfamiliar feeling within her.

Closing her eyes and buried in thoughts, she suddenly confessed: “I saw this picture of your Mary. She’s… beautiful.”

“She’s indeed.”

Goddamn, Ann knew that he was teasing her on purpose. Why had she even tried to comment on
that woman at all? Her behavior was so ridiculous; just like a fucking teen.

“But it’s long gone,” Arthur’s voice then sounded, husky as always. “You wanna know why? ‘Cause I wasn’t enough for her old man as I wasn’t enough for her.”

Well, Ann thought. Seemingly her theory about Mary wasn’t none too wrong. At the same time she was asking herself, if he might thought that she was the same and therefore distanced himself from her. It all fitted together so well.

“You’re still attached to her?”

His answer was quite a long in coming but eventually he admitted: “Yes, ‘course. Sorta. Mary’s been a part of life for a long time.”

Understanding, Ann simply commented: “Okay.” In fact she did not and his words weren’t quite what she had hoped to hear from him. She would rest now and leave at dawn, considering what the future would bring then. Dunbar had been so right; all of this was out of her league. She had completely lost control over the situation, over herself. This emotional turmoil was nearly sucking more than her debt problems.

When she closed her eyes in complete disbelief she suddenly felt something hitting her body. Turning around again, she noticed that it was his journal again.

“Here. Since ya wanted to know everything ‘bout me, read it! I ain’t nothin’ to hide,” Arthur said, a cigarette between his lips. He lit it and breathed the smoke out through his nostrils.

Ann felt uncomfortable, knowing that he was waiting for her to go through his entries in his presence. Again she had difficulties to interpret his behavior but being as taciturn as he was, she supposed that by doing so he wanted to show something up to her – probably that she wasn’t all the same to him.

Arthur kept waiting and glanced at her in anticipation, smoking his cigarette not far from her.

So Ann opened the journal once again and flipped through it until she reached the fatal day of their meeting. What she spotted first was a sketch of Calido in Valentine under which Arthur had written down how much a beautiful and rare horse he was. **Definitely a man of animals**, she thought. That couldn’t be denied.

Arthur also wrote about their nightly encounter; how she – a bounty huntress – had tried to strangle him and how he eventually had gained the upper hand. The way things were going he only spared her because he had kind of admired her audacity and guts.

Their second encounter several weeks after the first one was also thematized by him. He first vented about her but then – as she read in later lines – revised that, commenting on her story which he partly compared to his own. And then… there was her awkward try to make a move on him which he had broken off because he didn’t **want to go through it all again.** It – he then explained – stood for Isaac and Eliza who were taken from him.

Looking truly surprised, Ann now realized that Arthur must have had a son and maybe had even been married. They being probably murdered explained him being so relationally disturbed. There was much the bounty huntress wanted to ask right now; she even wasn’t interested in finding out about his attitude towards herself anymore.

“Arthur,” she halted. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”
“You couldn’t. Almost no one does,” he coldly stated, flicking his cigarette end away.

Still shocked, Ann stared at him. “What… happened?” she whispered, nearly sure that he wouldn’t talk about it. He did, though.

“Things that naturally happen when you’re whorin’ ’round. Got a waitress pregnant after the break up with Mary. She had a son and well, I did my best to help ‘em out. Stopped by there every few months and someday just found two crosses outside their home. Later found out that they were killed because of ten goddamn dollars.”

She nodded in silence. No wonder that he had been so reserved when they had gotten closer to each other. It didn’t even take her by surprise that sex was a sensitive and severe subject for him. His behavior made so much sense now that she knew the whole background – she felt the need to give him a hug but faltered. He wouldn’t have wanted it anyway.

“You should probably get some rest now,” Arthur told her and went off, lighting another cigarette. Apparently he felt stressed from his exposure; he even seemed to have completely forgotten about his journal.

Being alone again, Ann looked down at the small book still in her hands. She really, really wanted to know how he stuck with their night together but considering all the things he had just told her she believed that it was better to make a cut for tonight. So she put the journal aside – right onto one of the crates – and lay back again, closing her eyes. Finally coming to rest, her headache slow but steady debated.

The party around the main campfire was still ongoing and its distant voices were rocking her to sleep.

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“Arthur. Arthur!”

Opening one eye half asleep, Arthur realized that he must have dropped off right next to the campfire tonight. Dutch was standing in front of him, hands on his hips. “Oh, it’s you, Dutch,” he then murmured, tilting his head back until his neck faintly cracked. Goddamn, he was getting old.

“We need to talk about that small souvenir of yours.”

“Just calm down, Dutch. She’ll be gone by today,” he assured while getting up. Maybe Ann had already even left the camp.

“Listen, Arthur, my boy.”

Great, one of Dutch’s reproaches again. Why hadn’t he already done so yesterday when he had carried the heavily injured woman to their hideout? Because the mood had been too cheerful to waste much thoughts on a possible intruder? Well, now everyone was sober again and most possibly hungover, so bitching around was an obvious outlet.

“Listen, you cannot simply bring any strangers here. What if-” Dutch’s voice became quieter. “What if she’s workin’ for the pinkertons? My goddamn face is known all over this country. You know that.”

“All our faces are, Dutch,” Arthur just responded. He really didn’t like it whenever his mentor was only speaking about himself when in fact he always underscored how important this family – as he often referred to the gang – was to him. And apparently his words made an impact on him.
“I know, Arthur, I know.”

Putting his hand on the older man’s shoulder, Arthur finally went on: “Dutch, how many years is it now I’m workin’ for you? And I never failed you, did I?”

“No.”

“She was injured, Dutch. C’mon, we’re not that much of assholes to ignore a woman in help! I’ll make sure to get her away from here.”


“Sure, Dutch.” Loyalty aside, Arthur was kind of teed off right now. He felt that something was changing, not sure if it was Dutch or the overall situation – maybe it was even he himself. It seemed that priorities were lying elsewhere than a few months ago, when for instance they had rescued Miss Adler up in the mountains and given her a new home. It hadn’t been a problem back then but apparently it was now. Not that Arthur would have insisted on accepting Ann in the group at all, but… Maybe he was imagining things, maybe it was just because everyone was having weak nerves.

He eventually returned to his tent with the intention of checking on Ann who was still sleeping and suddenly noticed that she had helped herself to his stuff once again. She was covering herself with his winter coat; his whole chest was rummaged. This woman! Apparently she had gotten cold and he couldn’t really blame her because sometimes temperatures were dropping rapidly at night around here.

Standing there for a moment, he just watched her sleeping. Well, now she did know everything about him indeed and Arthur couldn’t even say that he regretted being honest to her at last. If anything he was feeling relieved now, knowing that she probably wouldn’t hate his guts anymore for acting the way he did.

Hell, she had scared the shit out of him yesterday when he found her unconscious onto Calido’s back. One thing he really hated was the feeling of not having full control over certain situations. If he would have had, that bastard Sánchez wouldn’t have been able to even lay a single finger on her.

But since Dutch wanted to have her out of the camp as soon as possible Arthur nudged her gently. He would companion her to Rhodes and there arrange a meeting spot with her for Hosea’s future plan. After that he would keep company with Leigh Gray – in the hope that playing the fellow deputy would come to an end soon.

“Ann,” he urgently said when she still didn’t want to wake up. “Get alive!” His nudging became rougher and finally she budged.

“Fuck you, goddammit. Leave me alone,” the bounty huntress dozily nagged, trying to turn over again but Arthur kept her off.

Certainly not surprised about how much of a morning grouch she was, he removed his coat from her and turned her around, looking her straight in the eyes. “Get up. I need to get ya outta here.”
Chapter XIV: Reaching

“Get me outta here? Why?” Ann asked, frowning while she was walking next to him towards their horses. Arthur hadn’t even given her enough time to completely awaken. At least her head was much better today with the headache gone.

“Because Dutch wants you out.”

Ah yes, Dutch van der Linde. The big boss. Of course Arthur would do as told, being his lapdog. Ann desisted from any back talk though, given that she was still a bit grumpy from being knocked up and therewith dissatisfied with the whole world. He taking Calido’s reins and mounting her horse didn’t really make it better.

Wait! *Her* horse?! Quickly taking the reins away from him, she snapped: “What you think you’re doing, Mister Morgan? May I remind you of your own damn horse?”

“Sure.”

“So…?” She was eagerly waiting for him to dismount but he didn’t.

“So I’m gonna take your Mustang for a ride,” he simply answered, patting the horse’s neck.

“Always wanted to do that.”

Goddamn backstabber of a horse! Ann mentally cursed Calido for being as tame and confiding as he was in the presence of Arthur. At the same time she couldn’t be too angry with him because she wasn’t much better either. Besides, while she was used to the sight of Arthur on a much taller horse he now looked kinda funny sitting on the smaller Mustang.

In the meanwhile the outlaw pointed at his Tennessee Walker. “Take him. We go ridin’ to Rhodes.”

Fine, switching horses it was then. Nodding, the bounty huntress then climbed onto Apollo’s saddle and turned him around. She followed Arthur through the covert and recognized where they had left the thick grove behind: northwest of Rhodes near Flat Iron Lake.

Arthur was immediately speeding up, apparently having much fun with her horse. “He’s great,” he then laughed in a throaty voice. “I guess I’m gonna get me one, too.”

First time, Ann thought, that she saw him easy-going like this. This man loved freedom more than anything else so it was hardly surprising that he couldn’t adapt to the current change this country went through.
Seeing him this way – that she had to concede – was nice, though. It somehow raised her own spirits because last night had been quite burdening for them both. He had taken an important step towards her by telling her everything she needed to know for understanding him. And yet… Where would they end up?

Arthur only slowed her horse down once he reached Gray’s office at Rhodes. Still delighted, he patted Calido’s neck, giving him a sugar cube and praising him. “Really like your horse. Ya got a good taste, Ann,” he said after that, descending with ease. Already being about to enter the office, he stopped again and glanced at the bounty huntress. “Oh and I’d suggest you better stay here. Take a room or somethin’ like that, just in case I need to get back to ya.”

Yeah, Hosea Matthew’s plan; she didn’t forget about that. Finally nodding, Ann watched him disappear inside and then turned towards Calido after she had racked up Arthur’s horse. Seemingly it was time for the deputy charade again.

“Well, looks like he’s ridden the both of us now, huh?” she murmured, flushing a bit when she realized what she had just said to her horse. Every now and then she was also able to come up with a bad pun but this one wasn’t all too bad, she thought. It kind of embarrassed her, though.

“Nobody in here.” Arthur’s voice suddenly sounded again, sticking his head out the door. Welcoming, he then kept it open. “Honorable drunkard’s gone so I guess I’m on holiday.”

Laughing, Ann followed him back inside. “On holiday? You? Trust me, you gonna find a pastime,” she chuckled while she had a look at the notice board. There still weren’t any new wanted posters but a few reports about missing persons. Considering how it all began…

“Is that so?”

When she glanced back at him he was already searching the desk drawers, finally pulling out a money clip. What the hell? What was that? The deputy robbing his boss? Completely rattled, she commented: “Yeah… Looks like that.”

Arthur broke open a chest in front of the sheriff’s bed and took out another money clip as well as a golden pocket watch. With her eyebrows arched, Ann simply kept an eye on him. This cold-blooded calculation really finished her off in a funny way.

“Not a goddamn word,” he jokingly warned her, pointing at her as if he had guessed what she was thinking.

“Okay, okay.” Raising her hands, the bounty huntress smirked. “So, now that you’re on holiday, how ‘bout spending some time? Without either of us ending up drunk, I mean.” Because if she recapitulated their whole story of coming to know each other, this was surely a legitimate objection.

Arthur packed away the valuables and then nodded as usual. “Sure. Whaddya have in mind?”

“No robbing and stuff,” she added. Just in case because after all she wasn’t planning on going down this trail. She even didn’t approve him taking all the stuff from Leigh Gray but also didn’t feel like restrain him from doing so. It simply was none of her business and keeping it this way was enough for her at the moment. Arthur was just the way he was and she knew that she needed to accept that if she wanted to stick to him further on.

“Wanna go hunting then?”

“Hunting’s my specialty, Mister Morgan.”
“Fine.” He nodded his head again, walking through the door again. “Prove it, Ann. Lemme see how good you’re.”

Feeling challenged by him, she passed him and took her horse. “You’ll see!”

“Yeah. Guess what? We go huntin’ this albino moose you’ve told the damn Lemoynes ‘bout back at the church. Remember?”

“Just for the record, this albino moose is real,” Ann mouthed. “I’ve seen it with my proper eyes. Up there in… Roanoke Ridge.”

“I’m sure ya did,” Arthur continued teasing her. “It will be a simple matter since ya so good at hunting. I’m really, really keen.”

The bounty huntress snorted. He wanted to see her hunting down this goddamn rare animal? Well, she would show him! Not that she’d ever seen the moose but she had heard about it. From other people who had heard it from strangers. Probably these strangers had gotten the information from other strangers and so on. God, to be honest she didn’t even know if the moose existed at all.

Arthur just glanced at her, knowingly.

Eventually sighing in irritation, Ann then rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay, I’ve never seen it and I don’t know if it does exist at all. Happy now?”

But he was just laughing, leaning onto his saddle-horn. “Nah, I suggest we go huntin’ for normal animals. Ya alright with that?”

Still feeling caught, Ann murmured a quiet “Yes”. To be honest she wasn’t bent on riding all the way north just to search the area for an animal which was most probably only a legend. Thus hunting normal – local – animals sounded like a more decent plan. “Raccoons?”

“Sounds legit. Main thing’s I ain’t comin’ back empty-handed today.”

“Oh please! You’ve got me. What could go wrong?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

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Arthur’s doubt turned out to be true. Ann was a better huntress for people than for animals – he realized that pretty quickly and couldn’t help but ask himself how she was able to look after herself when she had no roof over her head. Maybe because she didn’t seem to care if her revolver shots nearly ripped her prey up.

And because he knew better he had gladly left the two raccoons to her which they had hunted so far. Happy bullet picking, he was just thinking. A bounty hunter – tough and prideful – who couldn’t properly hunt animals. That was ridiculous.

“You sure you don’t want it?” Ann asked, hooking the animal body onto her saddle.

“You sure you wanna eat this… mess?” Arthur asked in return, looking at the still bleeding and half-gutted raccoon.

“Of course. Anything goes and it’s enough for surviving.”

Without a further comment he took the bow Charles had given him a few months ago. In a way she
was right – even a filthy hunted animal was food indeed – but still it didn’t meet his requirements. Ann wasn’t used to mainly live in the wilderness so she probably couldn’t know better. As a farmer’s daughter she was most likely just taught about how to shoot animals to no further purpose because her family wasn’t dependent on it. He felt kind of sorry for her that this unburdened life had come to an end.

Coincidentally he also called to mind that she was a very dangerous woman at times, though. Cold and calculating and carefully planning her actions. With a bit of training she would be almost perfect.

“So you’re just standing there or showing me how to hunt a raccoon that’s not messy for your liking?”

Puckering, he stared down at her for a moment – he stared at her put on face, thinking that in truth she surely was waiting for him to have a straight talk with her. And rightly so. There were no alternatives, Arthur thought. It was just either-or.

She seemed to guess his thoughts because in the blink of an eye she suddenly looked different – more serious. No, she would never give up anything for him as well as he would never do it for anyone else. And yet she asked that question; the one he had successfully avoided for so long.

“What now, Arthur?”

Breathing deeply, he scratched his neck. She wouldn’t like what he was about to tell her for sure.

“Ya know, I’m Dutch’s best man. He’s gonna listen to me.”

She nodded, averting her gaze from him. “So it’s either coming with you or parting ways, isn’t it?”

“I ain’t makin’ that mistake again,” Arthur explained. “I need ya to stay somewhere safe, somewhere I can step in if it’s necessary. And that ain’t New Austin or elsewhere.” From the look of her face he could easily tell that she was bewildered as well as offended. Of course he knew that she was able to take care of her herself as she was also able to defend herself. Still it had taken him a long time to get over the fact that he wasn’t there when these goddamn robbers murdered Eliza and his son. If they had stayed somewhere near him he perhaps would have been able to save them. Jesus, this was still weighing upon him more than he thought.

Ann knew it; she understood his attitude – he could feel that. At the same time, however, he was well aware of what he demanded from her by telling her that she had to come with him: becoming what he himself sometimes secretly regretted, renouncing the law and very likely becoming a wanted person, too. Over time they all – new members included – had.

“So it’s happening now,” Ann muttered, lost in thoughts. “You’re dragging me at a crossroads.”

“You were already at that point two days ago.” And back then it was him who had put her right, hindering her from doing any shit she was going to regret later on.

“Why don’t you come with me then, Arthur?” Her eyes were sparkling.

“I can’t. These people are family for me, Ann! I need to take care of them!” Noticing how harsh his voice had suddenly become, he dropped it again.

“Family?” She was snorting with laughter now. “Look where this precious family of yours got you into! You’re a wanted man! Dead or alive, goddammit!” Losing it, she turned away from him, apparently towards her horse.
But Arthur caught hold of her wrist, retaining her. “It was my own choice. Could’ve run away ages ago if I wanted to.” He now locked his eyes on hers, panting from the fuss. His palm eventually reached for her neck and pulled her towards him firmly, her lips nearly meeting his. “You don’t have to decide now,” he then murmured, voice throaty. “Just gimme a goddamn kiss.”

And she did, raising herself on tiptoes. Her lips crushed onto his when she clung to the back of his shirt. There it was again, Arthur thought, this pleasant feeling inside of him. Not necessarily pure lust but rather attraction. He wanted this woman in every imaginable way – but not here and not now.

So she stroked her smooth but messy hair and separated from her lips. “Still wanna watch a pro go huntin’?”

“’Course, Mister Morgan. Lead the way.” Nodding, Ann smirked at him. “I’ve never used a bow so I might learn something from you.”

“Oh, it ain’t difficult. I’ve only learned it this year, too.”

“You gonna do a lot of hunting, don’t you?” she asked him while she was quietly following him through the undergrowth.

Arthur then stopped and gave her his are-you-serious-gaze, earning a shrug from her in return. “Sure,” he finally answered. “Ya really think we go on big shoppin’ tours in towns? Not usually, that is. Pearson does. Sometimes. And the women. If they ain’t stealin’ all the stuff.”

Ann was just about to respond when they suddenly heard hoof noises coming nearer. Crouching, Arthur drew the bow with the woman next to him drawing her revolver. “Hush,” he whispered and concentrated, ready to let go of the bowstring any second.

“Arthur?”

The voice was familiar so Arthur dropped the bow and stood up again. It belonged to Charles who was now getting into their view. “Charles. What’s it?”

Stopping Taima, his comrade glanced back and forth between him and his company. Arthur wasn’t sure if he already knew her or if he had seen her at the camp tonight. Either way, he seemed a bit surprised. And why was it that everyone was so stunned to see him around with a woman at all?

“Hosea sends me. Said you shall return and that you’d know why. That’s all.”

Knowing the score pretty well, Arthur nodded to himself. “Already on my way,” he finally confirmed, shouldering the bow. Charles was disappearing as fast as he had come and with him gone, Dutch’s protégé pointed Ann in the right direction.

But the bounty hunter, however, hesitated. “I’m not coming now, Arthur. You probably talk to Dutch first.”

“This does in fact affect you, Miss,” he sighed, eyebrows arched. “So you better get your ass over there because nobody will say a goddamn word.” Well, maybe nobody except of Micah. The rat was probably so keen on finally getting introduced to the scarred whore – as he used to call her – that he’d run riot like so often.

“Fine then. Let’s go.” Giving him a pat on his shoulder, Ann led the way back to their horses.
Chapter Notes

Yay for the update! (¬‿¬) This chapter includes one of my fav missions of the game: 
*Advertising, the New American Art II*

I hope you enjoy reading it - let me know what you think. We'll get back to the Del Lobo guy soon.

Chapter XV: Realizing

Returning to the Van der Linde hideout didn’t take them long and meanwhile Ann had learned that the spot where the outlaws had pitched their camp was called Clemens Point. She was still wondering why it was that they – especially that Dutch guy – had let her go this morning for no reason, though. Seemingly Arthur was just told to get her away instead of kill her despite the fact that she now exactly knew where they were hiding. After all – by being a stranger – she could be a possible threat for them all and she was quite sure Arthur didn’t tell anyone besides Hosea Matthews about her identity. For everyone else she was probably just that female companion from the saloon in Rhodes.

And now she was back again; only a few hours after she had left. Ann was just hoping that Arthur was right about his influence on his boss and that he wouldn’t get into trouble for bringing her back.

As it turned out, however, there was no need to fully return to the hidden camp with Hosea already waiting for them at the fork which divided the road into trails leading toward Rhodes and Clemens Point. The old man was sitting on a rock, smoking a cigarette, when they were approaching.

“Arthur. Good you’re here,” he immediately greeted once he had spotted them. “And Miss McBrady, of course.”

“Mister Matthews,” Ann nodded in response while she and Arthur got off their horses. “So you got an idea?”

“Of course I do.”

“Let me guess. This idea involves killing Sánchez.”

Looking around innocently, Arthur next to her just cleared his throat. He then reached for his satchel and pulled out his own cigarettes, lighting one.

“Yeah, I knew you’d be into this kind of thing,” Ann dryly commented on his gesture.

When he breathed out the smoke through his nostrils he turned towards her again. “Well, you let him live, you also gonna die someday. Don’t even think ‘bout payin’ him off. This asshole ain’t gonna give up on ya.”

Arthur for sure had a point here. *But plainly killing Diandro will end up in even more Del Lobos*
being against you, Ann told herself. Alternatively they would leave her alone at last or – if it came to the worst – the whole Van der Linde gang would get sucked into this. No matter what, Arthur was absolutely right when he was saying that Sánchez wouldn’t let up. And especially not now that she was responsible for the death of some of his men.

While she was remaining silent Hosea rose to speak again. Apparently he had been waiting for her and Arthur to end their little disagreement. “Miss, as Arthur may’ve told you I’m a con artist and I’ve trained him very well. Right, Arthur?”

“Sure.”

Nodding satisfyingly, Hosea eventually continued. “So here’s what we gonna do: With our big boy obviously being the main man you, Miss McBrady, will take him up to your friends. We’ll put him on a cart, you’ll keep an eye on your delivery at the back.”

“’We?’” Ann asked again. “What’s your part then, Mister Matthews?”

“I’m gonna play your coachman. You know, just some random fool who’s gotten paid for driving you around while you take care of this real dangerous outlaw here.”

That sounded reasonable. So they were in threes. Better than two, for sure. The bounty huntress nodded her approval, adding: “What about Arthur? I think he’s a pretty good gunman. We should loosen the ropes so he can get free at any time.”

“No worries, Miss. Since Arthur is indeed our best gunman we can’t just have him lying around and wasting his potential. We’ll indeed prep his bonds so that he can take care of Sánchez,” Hosea explained. “We’ll need a fourth man, though. For covering.”

Indicating at the elderly with the cigarette still between his fingers, Arthur also gave his approval. “Whom you thinkin’ of? Charles? He’s a good gunman as well as a scout, too.”

“Exactly, Arthur, exactly.”

Charles – that was the guy of a moment ago. Ann remembered the name as she remembered the Appaloosa he was riding. The more they were, the better – and that was for sure. Having a fourth person covering their backs was reassuring to know.

“Maybe we also gonna prep the cart,” Hosea’s voice sounded again. “With some dynamite. You know, give ‘em a big surprise.”

When his hands were gesturing an explosion Ann couldn’t help but turn a bit pale. Shooting people was one thing – she had done this often enough by herself in the past – but it was quite another thing to make use of any kind of explosives. Never before had she come into touch with dynamite and even now she wasn’t sure if she wanted to change this circumstance.

But to all appearances she was all alone in this opinion which actually shouldn’t have surprised her. After all these men had robbed many trains and safes and even about the latest bank heist in Valentine it was rumored that there had been explosions. So don’t even think about taking issue with them. In the end everything will be ok, you’ll see.

Arthur certainly didn’t care about that at all. While finishing his cigarette he just stated: “Sure, as long as Charles ain’t blow up my ass I’m fine with that.” Giving her a level look, he then applied his attention to Ann again. “So we do as I said. You gonna take a room at Rhodes where I can get back to ya. Try to contact this Del Lobo bastard. Can you do that?”
“Maybe.” The bounty huntress mentally reviewed her capabilities. She still had some contacts from
the past months she had gotten around the area here, one of them being a fence who seemed to
know everyone and everything. Most likely he already had the pleasure to deal with the Del Lobos
and therewith knew where she could find Sánchez or at least how to contact him. “I… will let him
know that the deal’s done.”

“Perfect!” Hosea Matthews heaved himself up from his rock. “Arthur, you and I get the cart or a
small coach. And we need some dynamite.”

“I thought we need to see the old Braithwaite?”

“Well, I think this can wait. Or we gonna combine the two.”

Ann listened to the two men, her curiosity excited. What were they up to – with Arthur working for
the Gray sheriff and simultaneously meeting the head of the Braithwaites? As far as she had
learned from her time at the state of Lemoyne she knew that both families were at enmity because
of some stolen gold. Here you are, that’s your answer, Ann. They’re after the money. Of course
they were. Just as they weren’t staying much longer at Clemens Point. The Van der Linde gang
was about to move on again.

“Okay then,” she finally said. “I won’t stop you from whatever you’re up to. Talk to you soon,
Mister Morgan. Mister Matthews.” Nodding politely, she went over to her horse and headed
towards Rhodes again – wistful, if she was honest to herself. For her liking Arthur’s self-declared
day off had come to an end way too soon.

Thinking about the kiss earlier, Ann deeply sighed. She felt so damn attracted to him like she had
never before to someone in her whole life. Now it was all up to her to make a decision and although
Arthur had reasoned with her that he wasn’t going to urge her she already knew what this decision
would look like. Maybe – someday – he’d reconsider his way of life, though. And maybe that day
he would be fine with accepting a compromise.

However, there was plenty of time to give thought to that outlaw later. At the moment she was
better going to meet her fence contact – the sooner she knew how and where to get in touch with
Sánchez, the better.

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Cart – check. Dynamite – check. After he and Hosea had paid a visit to Catherine Braithwaite
Arthur had obtained both and then hid it amid the forest that was surrounding their camp. Now
they were on the way to the Rhodes Parlor House to hand out the moonshine they had stolen from
the Braithwaites respectively the Lemoyne Raiders some days ago at the swamp while being with
Gray and MacGregor. With the Gray family owning the saloon, the old Braithwaite was aiming at
score them off.

As always Hosea had made a great plan: Arthur’s role was playing the sad and stupid looking, pipe
smoking idiot called Fenton whereas the elderly man was taking the clown’s – Melvin – part, quasi
doing all the talking.

“No grab two cases of this stuff and follow me.”

Doing as he was told, Fenton palletized two of the boxes and slowly followed him to the building’s
front. Another alias Ann could use on him – if she would witness the whole fun that was going to
follow, that is. A part of him deeply hoped that she had already taken a room and was passing her
time drinking or eating inside. Her horse, however, was standing outside, reminding him that one
day he needed to get a Mustang for himself, too.

Melvin successfully talked two Gray boys into letting him advertise this fancy new liquor for half an hour and then headed inside, ordering Arthur to get behind the bar. Immediately slipping into the role of Fenton, he brought his lip forward and started to squint a bit. Well, time to play the retarded bartender.

“Gentlemen,” Hosea eagerly announced, pacing up and down. “My name is Melvin. That’s my brother Fenton. He’s a bit funny, but boy can he pour drinks fast! For the next thirty minutes the drinks in this here bar, in this here town, are entirely free! The only rule is that you gotta drink them. So hurry up, put old Fenton to work.”

Damn, Arthur thought when the crowd rejoiced at the good news. The saloon was pretty well-attended today evening what probably meant a lot of work. Poking around, there unfortunately wasn’t any trace of his favorite bounty hunter. Maybe it was better that way because the moonshine was quite strong and he knew that she wasn’t all too able to hold her drink.

“C’mon, Fenton!”

So Fenton started serving the drinks, one by one. The whole evening. Meanwhile the majority of the guests were smashed but still having their fun, continuing drinking, demanding for more of the moonshine.

Arthur followed the instructions, now bored as well as tired, when he suddenly spotted Ann who was entering the saloon and probably wondering what the hell was going on here. He watched her glancing around distraughtly and then smirked to himself, keeping his head low. After that – as secretly hoped for – she came towards the bar, craning her neck over.

“Now, that party here’s really happening,” she stated. “Anything for free here?”

“Yes, Deputy Callahan! What a surprise. You’re retraining now?”

The woman was obviously amused and so was he. Pouring her a shot of moonshine, he watched her and then uttered under his breath: “Careful. That’s some strong shit.”

Ann’s eyes met his when she put the glass to her mouth, her forefinger pointing at him. “I’m not even gonna ask, Arthur.”

“Ask what?”

“About this booze’s source.” Speaking of which, she downed the liquor and immediately screwed up her face in disgust. “Urgh, hell! The fuck’s that?!”

“Warned ya,” Arthur smirked, taking his idiot hat back from her to put it on again. “By the way, I got your dynamite and cart.”

“My dynamite? You’re the ones eager for blowing up stuff, not me.” She gestured for a new drink. “But I didn’t sit around doing nothing, either. Found out about Diandro’s alias at Van Horn Trading Post and sent a letter to him about that deal with the request for details. Wrote him that I’m ready. It’s waiting now, I guess.”

Suddenly Hosea was joining them right next to her. “Miss, please let Fenton do his work,” he said,
serious-looking. “Don’t take his mind off things. There’s plenty of folks who still need to be served.”

“Alright, Melvin,” Arthur sighed, rolling his eyes in the most foolish way he was able to. That way he would at least stay within his role. He slid Ann her second shot and after that turned his attention to the remaining men who were already waiting for replenishment. Out from the corner of his eyes he kept her under review, noticing that she apparently hadn’t any problems with tossing down the second glass of liquor in one go. Her grimace, however, spoke for itself.

“Yuck, that’s it,” she coughed. “I’m out.” Clapping her hands down the bar, she blinked her eyes. “So, Fenton, thanks for the drinks but I had a quite long day with a really bad man ditching me for doing some shady stuff. I definitely need to get some rest in my room, third one on the left. Goodnight.”

Impressed, Arthur followed her with his eyes when she exited the main saloon towards the back rooms. Now that had been an invitation in round terms which he normally would have turned down. Basically he was in full control of his sexual needs – after Eliza he had taught himself to keep his drive as low as possible – but with Ann being around he felt this attainment crumbling bit by bit. Fucking her two days ago had felt so damn well; she was so sensitive, so goddamn tight, that he would have done it with her anytime again.

“Don’t you even think ‘bout that, Fenton. We’ve got work to do here first,” Hosea pointed out. Of course he had overheard the whole talk.

“I ain’t think ‘bout what you think,” Arthur responded, attending to pour out moonshine again. Of course he did but what was even worse: He seemed to be predictable as fuck.

“Very well then, Arthur.” The elderly man suddenly got personal. “Although any fool can see that you’re completely nuts on this girl.”

“I ain’t nothin’, okay?”

“You’ve stuck to that code your whole life which is why you lost your Mary, don’t you think?”

What was that supposed to mean? The last thing Arthur wanted right now was Hosea giving him a lecture – and especially not about anything that had to do with Mary. “Wait. Are you tryin’ to say that I should pack up and leave, Hosea? Leave Dutch and everyone else?”

“I’m not sayin’ anything, Arthur. Just suggesting that you make use of your brains. The situation has changed and we won’t make it. You know that.”

Sure he did. He had already noticed himself that especially Dutch was running low on nerves, that his plans weren’t well-conceived anymore, that they were stumbling from one precarious case to the next. By now they weren’t only chased by Milton and Ross, no, there was also Leviticus Cornwall on their tail. The O’Driscolls, the Lemoynes, the Del Lobos… And by playing off the Grays against the Braithwaites they were even risking making more enemies.

“Just keep that in mind, Arthur, will ya?” Hosea gave him a sharp look.

Arthur on his part was just about to answer when suddenly the saloon doors swung open and three armed men entered. Lemoyne Raiders – that he realized quickly.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Melvin took over. After all he was the man of eloquence.

As it turned out the men couldn’t care less about eloquence. They exactly knew who Fenton and
Melvin were and that they were responsible for stealing the moonshine in the swamps.

Arthur saw the escalation coming when the Lemoynes drew their weapons but Hosea was still trying to defuse the situation. “Gentlemen, we’re in advertising. Come on in, have a drink,” he offered innocently.

“That’s our goddamn liquor!” one of them yelled angrily and all of a sudden everyone inside the saloon was sober again, it seemed. The first shots caused a panic and people were screaming, trying to reach the doors to get out of this hell.

Arthur was taking cover behind the bar and reached for his revolver. This was clearly not what he had imagined this mission to be!
Sheltering

Chapter Notes

There we go. I'm dropping a little smut bomb for y'all (at the end of the chapter, that is). (° °)

What is more, I played around with the point of time as well as the course of Advertising, the New American Art II.

Chapter XVI: Sheltering

Since he hadn’t been able to track where Hosea escaped to, Arthur was just hoping that the old man was doing fine. The shooting had started so quickly that he himself only just managed to take cover behind the bar. Damn Lemoyne Raiders! Why on earth couldn’t things run smoothly at least for one fucking time?

“Ain’t you got a home?!” he then yelled at the three troublemakers, suddenly getting up as fast as lightning. Quickly he aimed his revolver at the first Lemoyne Raider’s head and pulled the trigger. The second one followed and with two of them stone-dead he immediately went back to his cover again, taking a deep breath. Surely it was just a matter of time until Sheriff Gray would get in on the act as well, so they were better hurrying up here.

The Lemoynes, however, were foiling him by the dozens of them following through the saloon doors now. Without hesitating they started firing both at the bar and the gallery above where Hosea was. Arthur heard him shouting something from there which he wasn’t able to understand within all that shooting noise. But at the least he was okay. That was something.

Some of the hostile gang members hastened up the stairs, to probably get a clear sight of him behind the bar or to make things difficult for Hosea. Either way, they had to be taken out. So Arthur carefully looked out from behind his cover once more, targeting the men. Succeeding in killing exactly two of them, he suddenly got his straw hat shot off his head, causing him to keep down again.

Hell, that was close! Leaning against the wood, he was looking for a way out. The back rooms! He could probably just take the side entrance – if he made it there, that is, because the very moment he’d leave his bar cover behind him he would make an easy mark for the Lemoynes.

“Arthur!” It was Hosea’s voice shouting from above again. “Get up here!”

Funny old man, Arthur thought sarcastically. How exactly was he supposed to do that in all this blaze of gunfire where he even couldn’t sneak a tiny peek at shit? Swearing vilely, he then thought he had caught sight of a shadowy movement behind the door frame in front of him. Without much thinking about it he fired off a warning shot with his revolver at the direction.

The silhouette retreated and shortly afterwards a well-known voice exclaimed: “Goddamn, Arthur! What’s goin’ on in there?”

Sighing in relief, Arthur ironically yelled back: “Ain’t nothin’! Just go back to bed, sweetheart!”
Because seriously, silly questions, silly answers. Unfortunately this woman was so jumping on the bandwagon in a situation like this, though.

“Alright, goodnight then, handsome.”

Rolling his eyes, he cocked his head, irritated. “Ann! You ain’t got somethin’ heavy-calibered with you by chance?”

It took her a short moment to answer. “Depends. If a good old ordinary rifle’s enough for you, then yep. You wanna have it, handsome?”

“Yes, please!” Arthur grunted in annoyance. “And don’t you call me that! I ain’t your handsome!”

“That’s still to be clarified,” Ann spoke, placing down a repeater carbine on the ground. She nudged the weapon with her foot so that it was sliding right towards him.

“Owe ya one!” Grabbing the rifle, Arthur – glad to finally get his hands on a reasonable weapon – felt daring enough to dash out of his cover and start killing everyone who got in his way up to Hosea. The elderly man was jostling with one of the Lemoyne Raiders for his gun and tried to avoid getting killed by his own weapon.

Eventually arriving upstairs, Arthur immediately took aim at the hostile man. He closed his eyes for a moment, calming down, and then pulled the trigger. The Lemoyne – now with a hole in his brains – briefly staggered backwards and then his limp body slumped down the railing.

Hosea looked at him, beckoning him over. “This way, Arthur!” he shouted and simultaneously kicked open the saloon’s balcony door.

Before he followed Arthur scanned the main floor for Ann. He spotted her firing her revolver at the few remaining Lemoynes, giving him a sign then. “Go! I’m gonna get the horses free!”

Watching her disappear through the side entrance, he nodded to himself and hurried to catch up with Hosea who was already waiting for him on the balcony. Their coach was directly underneath them so the old man didn’t hesitate und hopped over the rail. Arthur followed his suit, hitting the wooden ground ungently. He was hardly on his feet again when he heard him arguing with Ann.

“Miss, what you think you’re doing here? You can’t-”

“I can very well. You’re faster without the damn coach! Just leave the rest of the moonshine here! There’s more of them coming!”

And Arthur saw it – more Lemoynes heading towards them. “She’s right, Hosea! We ain’t got the time!” So he helped Ann to cut free the two horses and instantly mounted one of them, instructing Hosea to jump onto the other one. “You comin’?” he then asked the bounty hunter, already offering her a hand to join him.

“Nah,” she declined. “I go ‘n get Calido. Gonna catch with you up soon!” That said, she turned away and headed for the front side of the Rhodes Parlor House where Arthur remembered her Mustang to be. Of course she wouldn’t leave her everything behind.

“You heard the lady, Arthur. Here, by the way.” Passing his black hat over to him, Hosea spurred his horse without losing any further time. “C’mon!”

Yeah, Arthur wasn’t keen to get into even more trouble than he already had and most of all he didn’t want to lead the Lemoyne Raiders straight to Clemens Point. So he followed the old man,
closing up shortly afterwards and watching their backs for any reinforcements.

They were taking a route in the opposite direction of their hideout and apparently nobody was following them but when they had already diverged a fair way off Rhodes the both of them suddenly heard shooting noises from the direction of the saloon. Most likely Ann versus a bunch of Lemoynes. Again.

Not quite sure whether it was all the same to him or not, Arthur looked back nevertheless. She was definitely able to handle situations like this on her own – she’d already proven very well a few days ago – but since this time she had gotten swept up in this by their fault, he felt a bit guilty. On top of this there was this creeping feeling, warning him that he might lose her as he’d lost Eliza and Isaac. It was eating him up to such an extent that he finally slowed down his horse and was about to turn around when all of a sudden she appeared out of the dark, riding towards him and Hosea at a breath-taking speed.

“What you’re waiting for?! They’re coming!” she yelled, passing them. And how right she was! There were at least five raiders following her.

Gradually being sick to death of all these failed plans, Arthur leveled the rifle she had given him at the pursuers. Combat on horseback wasn’t exactly his strongest point but still it would do to kill the men. With Hosea supporting him they lastly brought down all of them.

“Jesus,” Arthur sighed afterwards, lowering the repeater carbine. “All this over a few bottles of booze. Please remind me never to take up a career in… what was it?” He wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“Advertising, Arthur.” In spite of everything that just had happened the elderly man seemed delighted due to the amount of money they had made.

However, Arthur was rather asking himself whether the old Braithwaite had set them up or if it was just that the Lemoynes didn’t appreciate some new competition. Either way, he needed to speak with Dutch urgently. Not only about Ann but also about the whole Gray-Braithwaite matter. By now he wasn’t sure if the original plan to play them against each other was as promising as they considered it to be.

“So you got them, huh?” It was Ann’s voice; both men turned around when she showed up again.

“You okay?” Arthur immediately counter questioned.

“Guess I am.”

Nodding, he then directed towards Hosea. “So what now? You gonna go back to the old woman? Tellin’ her ‘bout this coincident?”

“I’ll while you go and talk to Dutch. Tell him what happened and ask him what’s planned next.” The elderly man turned his horse, ready to head back for the Braithwaite mansion. “And Arthur?”

“Yep?”

“Keep in mind what I told you, will ya?”

About Dutch – of course he would. After all he had noticed it himself. “Sure,” Arthur thus answered. After Hosea was gone he guided Ann into the right direction to the camp by cocking his head. “You comin’?”
“I haven’t got a choice, have I? The whole saloon’s a mess.”

“Sorry ‘bout that. It just… It just got out of control, kinda.” Arthur handed over the borrowed rifle.

Taking the weapon back, she devilishly smiled at him. “Happens a lot, doesn’t it?”

“Well, ask me somethin’ easier.” ‘Cause it was the truth; he patently was clueless at the very moment. Since Blackwater almost everything had gone wrong. Yet he was still relying on Dutch and his abilities as a leader – so far he had always worked something out and they had always cheated the gallows but now it seemed that their future was uncertain. Arthur needed to have that talk.

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Several minutes later he was already walking her into the camp, watching out for Dutch who was sitting in his tent, having a chat with Micah. This couldn’t mean good for his liking. Micah’s questionable influence on Dutch couldn’t be denied and that was exactly what concerned Arthur. But first things first.

“Just go ahead. Bed’s all yours,” he told Ann, one hand clapping on her shoulder. “I’m gonna sort some things out first.”

She brought her hand up to his as if she wanted to touch it but then faltered, obviously uncertain. He knew, he didn’t make it quite easy for her during the last days and that his constant back and forth was a large reason for that factor, but things would turn for the better – as soon as everyone would have come down and begun thinking clearly again. He wanted to believe in that. No more acting without proper consideration – otherwise they just as well could’ve dug their own graves right here, right now.

Ann was heading towards his tent and of course Micah immediately locked his eyes on her. What else had Arthur expected at all? And for sure there was more to come from him about her; witty comments that were obviously the contrary. Lewd and low down, that is to say.

“Arthur,” Dutch greeted him with open arms as he joined the two men. “I see ya bringing your little acquaintance again although I asked you not to.”

“Yeah, I know what ya asked me, Dutch, but she’s just helped me ‘n Hosea with the Lemoynes at Rhodes. She’s pretty sneaky and well, very good at shootin’. We need people like that, that’s what you’ve always said. And now more than ever.”

Sneering, Micah just listened and started to clean his guns. Oh, he was definitely up to something but for the moment still contained himself.

“Times have changed. We can trust no one,” Dutch pragmatically continued. “I thought you’d have my back in all of this, Arthur! What if she works for the damn government? You can never tell.” Throwing a look at Micah then, the rat simply nodded in a know-it-all manner.

“She ain’t,” Arthur concisely retorted, irritated by Micah’s existence as a whole.

Of course now the little rat didn’t hold itself back any longer but instead spread its American venom. “Well, well, Morgan’s new lady friend! I was expectin’ more, you know? From what our darkie friend Lenny told. This Mary on the photo in your tent looks by far more promisin’. But hey! No need for bein’ a beauty to have a good poke. You’re the best example, Morgan.”

Gritting his teeth, Arthur clenched his fist. There were so many fucking reasons for smashing in
Micah’s face right now – most of all that damn racism – but he knew that Dutch didn’t welcome murder within his camp. He couldn’t, however, deny a proper answer. “It’s kinda funny then that I ain’t seen you with a woman before.”

While Micah wasn’t obviously all too amused Dutch looked back and forth between the two men. Finally he intervened: “Stop it both, will ya? And Arthur, this girl… What’s her name again?”

“Ann.”

“Well, Miss Ann can stay for tonight but I insist on having a talk with her tomorrow. I want to know who’s brought in my camp.”

“Sure, Dutch. It ain’t a problem.” The first issue being finally clarified, Arthur moved on to the second topic: the Gray-Braithwaite conflict. He was really anxious to hear what kind of idea Micah had put into Dutch’s ear. “So whaddya thinkin’ about the folks around here? You wanna go on like we do now?” he eventually asked.

“Why not?” Micah responded, putting away the first cleaned weapon. Now he turned his attention to the second revolver. “Works out well so far, doesn’t it?”

Dutch agreed, nodding. “These fools have tons of money and we need money. Now we have the opportunity here. Nobody gonna know we was here.”

“Nobody?!” Arthur snorted. He couldn’t believe what he had just heard. “The old Braithwaite most likely just set us up! We can consider ourselves lucky if Sheriff Gray ain’t smell a rat! Dutch, them folks may be degenerates or hypocrites but they ain’t that stupid. We’ve lawmen in three different states after us!”

But Dutch still didn’t want to see the truth. He was too blinded. “They won’t know it was us and not the other family who robbed ‘em, Arthur. Think of it as a payback for my daddy.”

“I ain’t in the revenge business. Least of all for something that happened a long time ago.”

“Well, I guess we all gotta pay for something. Now if you would excuse me, Arthur. I got to write a letter. And get me that girl tomorrow!”

_Invincible_, Arthur bitterly thought. His former mentor was already too infested by that parasite called Micah. Going from one extreme to the other wasn’t characteristic for the old Dutch he knew and whom he was raised by.

“You heard the man, cowpoke. We’ve got work to do.”

Not this time. Arthur needed to consider some things first and letting himself get provoked by this rat wasn’t conducive to do so. “Just shut it, Micah,” he fended him off, simply ditching him.

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Arthur was returning from his little chat with his boss – Ann heard him approaching, already lying on her side with her back turned towards him. Denying that she was indeed dead on her feet would’ve been a lie. “So…?” she eventually asked, curious for Mister Van der Linde’s reaction to his protégé’s concern.

“What do I know!” Arthur responded, clearly unstrung. “You can stay, I guess. But he wants to talk to you tomorrow.”
She turned onto her back and now watched him tossing his revolver as well as the whole belt aside onto one of the crates. His hat followed and she realized that he looked as exhausted as his voice had just sounded. “You’re joining me, Fenton?”

“Not that name again,” he growled, sitting down on his bed and turning off the light.

Knowing that his bed wasn’t quite the broadest, she made herself as small as possible by rolling on her side again. Arthur eventually lied down close to her, wrapping his left arm around her body, spooning her.

Ann closed her eyes, her heartbeat increasing so significantly that she almost feared he would hear it within this deathly silence. She even hardly dared to breathe; this just felt so unreal. A few days ago having him with her for the night was everything she had wanted and now that he was indeed sleeping next to her she felt uptight after all. His hot breath in her neck didn’t make things better. If any, it got her goosebumps all over. Goosebumps and… well, needs.

His hand resting on her body suddenly began moving downwards slowly until it reached her waistband. He wasn’t gonna…?! Right here and now, where any privacy effectively didn’t exist?

Her breathing became more rapidly once his fingers unbuttoned her pants and still continued wandering down her body where they only stopped underneath her drawers, right between her thighs. He gently started to rub his fore- and middle finger up and down her folds, coaxing her to let out a quiet sigh when she began moistening them.

“Huh,” Ann breathed, face slightly turned towards him now. “What if anyo-”

“No one ain’t seein’ shit and no one ain’t hearin’ shit if you keep it quiet,” Arthur interrupted her, playing with her clit at one go.

The bounty huntress immediately squeezed her eyes shut at the sensation that was suddenly running through her body. “Oh shit…” Silently whimpering of lust, she then turned her face away again when his touch became firmer.

“That’s it,” he whispered right into her ear. “We’re just sleepin’…” Now starting to kiss the sensitive skin of her neck, his fingers ran over her folds again, finally entering her at one go. Considering how wet she already was for him it didn’t pose a problem at all.

Heavily breathing, Ann ground her hips against his fingers that were now thrusting in and out with an increasing speed. He added his thumb to the game by rubbing her clit and when she already thought that her lust couldn’t become more intense she felt a slight movement behind her back. He undid the buttons of his pants with his free hand! And… he started to jerk himself off once he had pulled out his hard cock.

That wasn’t happening! It just couldn’t…! He stroked himself firmly, voice hoarse in her ear, driving her into madness.

“Arthur,” Ann desperately whispered, nearly on the edge. Both of his hands were working faster and harder, turning especially her hole into a complete slick mess. She couldn’t hold back any longer with all his desperate silent grunts in her ear, knowing the orgasm would overcome her severely. And it did. To keep herself from moaning the whole camp down, she quickly covered her mouth with her own hand while heavily twitching around his fingers. Her hips bucked backwards and Arthur still continued fingering her.

Gaspig, he passionately placed kisses all over her neck again until he eventually jerked a few
times as well, cumming right into his palm. Then he became completely silent again and after a few minutes his warm and still slick hand left her drawers.

She felt him sitting up and turned around to see what was going on. His right hand was glistening from his cum and he obviously was looking for an opportunity to wipe it clean. When he finally reached for one of the shirts that were sticking out of his chest she immediately knew what he was up to. “Oh no, you’re not gonna do this,” the bounty huntress warned him, still anxious to keep her voice low.

But he had already used one of the shirts – to crown it all a dark one – to clean his hand. After tossing it to the ground recklessly he lied down again and pulled her close. “It needs to get washed yet again anyway.”

“Just for the record: I’m not the one doing this,” Ann murmured, enjoying his body warmth.

“You ain’t have to, no worries.” Arthur was just stroking her hair for a while until he suddenly switched topics. “No matter what’s happenin’ tomorrow, you’re not gonna tell Dutch ‘bout your job. By no means.”

“Didn’t mean to.”

Arthur nodded. “Good ‘cause I need him to get back down again first.”

“You think he’s not able to act rationally at the moment?”

“Not as long as Micah’s ‘round him.”

Ann looked at him. “Micah? As in Micah Bell?”

“Yeah, you know him?”

“Not exactly. Just saw his wanted poster back at Blackwater.”

“Course you did.”

Ann figured it might be best not to continue this discussion for now. After all they had just shared such an intimate and satisfying moment – she really didn’t want to ruin the mood. So instead she just kept it with that, closing her eyes and listening to his breath while he was still stroking her hair. She wouldn’t say a single word about being a bounty huntress in the presence of anyone.
Chapter XVII: Receiving

It wasn’t yet dawning when Ann woke up. Around her it was nearly quiet – apart from the crackling of the nearby campfire. Her eyes now open, she turned her head backwards. Arthur was still lying behind her, quietly snorting. His arm also still wrapped around her, he provided her pleasant warmth – so pleasant that she really didn’t want to give it up at all. So she lay down again, closed her eyes and thought of him, of last night and of what he had done to her.

God, Ann still couldn’t believe it. Literally in the middle of the camp – and he just didn’t give a damn shit about it. With these thoughts in mind it was hard to fall asleep again and of course she failed in trying so.

What else then was she supposed to do to kill the time? Wake Arthur and beg him to repeat his treatment from yesterday? For a short moment Ann really took this into consideration but then was recalling how cute he looked now that he was sleeping and not killing anyone. His usual hard facial features seemed peaceful and relaxed at this very moment and damn, he was such a beautiful man!

Didn’t he say something about washing clothes yesterday after he had cleaned his hand with this one shirt that was now lying on the ground? Ann remembered that her few pieces of clothing actually were in urgent need, too. By now Calido surely had to smell 10 miles upwind because he was the poor soul that carried the bag with her laundry inside stowed on his saddle. Also, Ann was now sitting directly at the source with Flat Iron Lake all around the camp.

Basically all she had to do was getting up and walk over to her horse but doing so also meant that she had to give up on Arthur’s body warmth. Decisions, decisions.

But before she was now beginning to toss and turn to wake him up in the end, she decided that it was probably better to silently crawl out of the bed. After carefully lifting his arm she was finally able to slip under it and sincerely hoped not to cross paths with any of the other gang members – so far she only knew Arthur and Hosea in person and to be honest she was a tiny little bit upset about how to encounter everyone else all by herself. They all were criminals after all, she needed to recall that.

Neighing, Calido already greeted her when she headed towards the stallion. “Hey boy,” she smiled, patting his neck immediately. “Guess what? We gonna get you free from my mess. At last.”

Opening her laundry bag, Ann pulled out at least two blouses, two drawers and one pair of pants. Smelling at them, she came to realize that yes, these clothes definitely needed to be washed. They probably could even serve as a killing tool for Sánchez. “God, I’m so sorry, Calido,” she then muttered, a bit embarrassed by her own sloppiness.
With the small pile of laundry on her arm, she finally returned to Arthur’s tent and considered whether she should kindly take his smudged dark shirt with her to wash it as well. Meanwhile there was an unmissable white stain on it, so the answer was clear. The bounty huntress reached for the piece of clothing and threw it onto her own. Sighing, she then glanced at his chest. For sure there were some more shirts in there that needed a bit of water as well. And while she was at it… Gracious as she was, she eventually took out at least two more shirts – one of them being the blue one he had worn on their first encounter. Ann hesitated. The blood stain on the side along with the hole in the fabric caused by her knife was still there. Apparently Arthur had kept it and hadn’t even touched it since then.

Shrugging her shoulders, she added the two shirts to the pile on her arm and turned down the photograph of Mary while passing by towards the riverside. Somehow that picture gave her the uncomfortable feeling of being watched and if this relationship was really as long gone as Arthur had stated, putting it away wouldn’t be a problem.

Arriving at the water, she put down the whole laundry pile and grabbed her clothes first. Dunking her blouses under water, she then started rubbing the fabric clean. It wasn’t much but it would do. After wringing out the wet cloth, she threw it behind her onto the lawn. That way it wouldn’t get all dirty again.

Her underwear followed and when Ann was finally occupied with Arthur’s stained shirt after some time she suddenly heard footsteps approaching.

Alarmed, she immediately spun around and looked into the face of a man Arthur had talked about yesterday evening and whom she had seen on a wanted poster in Blackwater: Micah Bell, the probably most striking member of this gang.

Well, since Ann knew herself best and therefore also knew that it really didn’t take much to provoke her and drive her up the walls she preferred to turn away and continue without a word for now. That – so she thought at least – would be sign enough for him to just go on and leave her alone. But apparently this guy didn’t care at her gesture at all; instead of just passing by he was still standing there, eying her in an awkward way.

Tolerating this creep playing his game for a short while, it finally became too much for her. “So you’re just standing there staring, or what’s it you want?”

“You’re Morgan’s little slut, ain’t you?” Bell finally brought up, waiting for her reaction then.

Ann tried so hard but couldn’t stop herself from looking daggers at him in the end. What a goddamn disrespectful and condescending son of a bitch! Now she exactly understood why Arthur didn’t think highly of that guy. Men like Bell were scum, to say at least.

So she never let him out of her sight for a second, especially not when he eventually began to move and – passing her – stopped not far from her next to her pile of wet clothes. “See, you’ve got that nasty scar on your face our boy Lenny told us ‘bout when he saw you hangin’ out with Morgan.” While Bell was talking his shit he picked up one of her drawers and had a look at them. Whistling, he then commented: “Nice. Slimly built, huh?”

Gritting her teeth, Ann turned away in silence and wrung out the shirt at her hands. If that moron continued only a little bit, huge harm would be done to him. Then again it probably wouldn’t have benefited her, if she celebrated her possible debut with a murder. That, plus she had left all her weapons at Arthur’s tent.

“Ain’t you talkin’ to me, girl?” he continued to press her, now squatting right beside her. “Because
I’m not him?” Grinning disgustingly, he let the still damp drawers fall into the sand to make sure they got dirty again.

Pure intention and Ann wasn’t willing to put up with his shit any longer. Thus in response she glowered at him, raising her voice soft but firm. “You know, I used to know a lot of men like you.”

“Really?” Bell sounded amused.

Putting on a smile, the bounty huntress nodded. “Yeah. You wanna know what I did to them?”

“Tell me,” he spoke under his breath, still with that grin on his lips.

“I cut off their fucking balls,” she whispered back. “And you’re next if you don’t fuck off and leave me alone already. I am none of your servants here, so watch out what you say to me, got it?”

Bell’s facial expression only changed for a split second before that disgusting grin took over again. Standing up, he eventually admitted: “Wow. You really are on fire, I’ll give you that.”

Now in the belief that he had finally understood, she found the time to wring out Arthur’s shirt at last. Micah was apparently leaving – she could tell from the footsteps that were moving away and didn’t expect anything bad when he suddenly grabbed her by her braid. Roughly tearing her head back, he brought his face close to hers, sneering.

“Now let me tell you somethin’, little one. I know who you are and what you are. A fucking bounty hunter that stabbed Morgan. In fact that makes you our enemy, although I must admit I’m a little bit sad that you failed in killin’ him.” Jerking her hair, he nearly brought tears to her eyes. “If you wanna stay here with your precious cowpoke, I suggest that you better back off a bit. See, daddy Dutch no longer ain’t listenin’ to what little Arthur says. Understood?”

Ann reached for his wrist, squeezing it as hard as she could, but his grip on her was viselike. “Fuck you,” she then just growled.

“Watch out, little slut!” Another jerk before Bell finally let go of her braid, tossing her to the ground. “I’m warnin’ you,” he advised and mercifully moved away from her towards the campfire.

Bewildered, Ann gazed after him. The hell was that?! And why on earth did he know so well about her when Arthur said that he hadn’t told anyone anything? One had to treat Bell with caution – that much was certain. It took her a while to calm down enough to pick up her now dirty drawers to wash them again.

It was eventually dawning when Ann finished Arthur’s remaining shirts. She was just about to throw them onto the pile when suddenly there were footsteps behind her again. Assuming that it was that moron of Micah again, she quickly turned around and asked in irritation: “What you want again?!” But then she realized that it was just Arthur and sighed. “Sorry. I thought you were that scumbag.”

“So you met Micah?”

“I had no idea that scumbag’s his alias,” Ann kidded, amused by the fact that he immediately associated the word scumbag with Micah. Certainly a hard-earned reputation.

“Well, now you know.” Smirking, he put a cigarette in his mouth and lit a match on the sole of his boots. After the first drag he asked: “Did he do anythin’ to ya?”

“He’s good at insulting, definitely.” Ann deliberately concealed the rest of the story because as she
knew Arthur by now he could be a very protective person at times and chances were high that after a serious confrontation either of them would no longer be.

“Just don’t listen to him,” Arthur said before paying attention to that pile of damp clothes in front of him. “I thought—”

“Yeah, I know what I said,” she quickly interrupted him before he was able to end his sentence, feeling the need to explain herself. “Look, it’s just because we talked about this yesterday and then I remembered that I’ve still got a bunch of dirty clothes on my saddle. Couldn’t sleep anyway and while I was at it, I thought that washing your stuff wouldn’t hurt, either.” Apparently her short monologue had amused him; she could tell from his face.

“Calm down, Ann. I was just jokin’,” Arthur grinned after putting out his cigarette with his boot. “Anyway, thanks for that. I’m gonna hang these up at the tent.” Then he grabbed the clothes and brought them to his tent.

“Arthur?”

He halted, being all ears.

Was she supposed to tell him that Micah knew everything about her? It was kind of hard for her to weigh up his reaction to this, so maybe it was better to keep quiet about it for now. Keep quiet until she was talking to Dutch, that is. On no account Ann wanted another one to have a hold over her. Sánchez was enough to deal with – she really didn’t need Micah Bell as well. As a consequence she might benefit from just telling Dutch the truth about her life, about her as a person. At least that way she would take the wind out of that scumbag Micah’s sails. And with Arthur on her side, what could happen in the worst case? She doubted that she was getting shot – or so she hoped. Arthur’s influence on that Dutch guy was hopefully not as low as Micah claimed.

Her decision being made, Ann eventually smiled. “Nothing. Just forget it,” she said, determined to spoil things for that scumbag.

***

Still unaware of all of this, Arthur later brought her toward Dutch’s tent, hand on her shoulder blade. She had resisted for quite a while but he in turn wanted things to be resolved at last. And because the timing was perfect as always they gatecrashed a fierce dispute between Molly and Dutch. Basically it was the same story as always with her accusing him of looking after other women, not treating her like a lady and well, Arthur was really weary of all this drama. Right now, however, he had to bear it until Dutch had a sympathetic ear for him and Ann.

He noticed her questioningly look and then just shrugged his shoulders, muttering: “It’s always the same. Ya better ain’t questionin’ anythin’ here.”

“Well, then we better put it off until later.” Clearly uncomfortable, Ann knitted her eyebrows. She already turned away, ready to leave, when Arthur grabbed her by the wrist und pulled her gently back.

“Stay here. We gonna do this now and not later.” And to prevent her from running away after all he loudly cleared this throat to get Dutch’s attention. Indeed the quarrel suddenly stopped, so he was able to bring up what was important now. “Dutch, I brought you the girl.”

Dutch now stepped out of his tent, ignoring Molly as well as the argument that was going on a few seconds ago. His gaze fell back and forth between him and Ann. “Arthur. And Miss Ann.”
“Actually it’s McBrady. Ann McBrady,” the bounty hunter explained, holding out her hand.

Dutch, however, hesitated and Arthur didn’t come around to remind himself once more that apparently things had significantly changed.

“Well then, Miss McBrady. May I ask what brings you to our cosy ambience?”

“My travels.”

“So you’re getting around a lot?”

Sighing inside, Arthur already hated this unnecessary cross-examination. All these questions were more than ridiculous and out of place. There had been a time when Dutch was delighted at getting new capable folks and didn’t completely tear them apart like he was doing now. Hopefully Ann was sticking to their agreement.

“Yes, indeed,” she finally replied. “See, Mister Van der Linde, I had some problems with a local gang here while travelling through. Arthur helped me.”

From his facial expression Arthur could quickly tell that Dutch wasn’t satisfied yet. Especially not after the mention of his name. Since this wasn’t going to plan he decided to intervene. “C’mon Dutch, she was injured. You saw that!”

“I did, Arthur. Still, what’s the meaning of all this right now? If she’s such a good shooter as you said, she ain’t dependent on us. And if she’s such a great traveler, she ain’t starving out there.”

Staring at them both seriously, Dutch cocked his head. He knew that something was wrong here.

“Listen, we need people like her, Dutch!”

“Moles, you mean?”

“Goddamn, Dutch! She ain’t working for-”

Arthur was suddenly interrupted by Ann stepping forward and crossing her arms. “Okay then. Let’s quit playing games, Mister Van der Linde. I’m no traveler. I’m a bounty huntress and I wanted to kill him. He survived but instead of taking revenge he saved my life,” it blurted out of her. “I do work independently and not on behalf of anyone, so I’m no threat.”

Great! Deeply panting through his nostrils, Arthur turned his head away. Knowingly having a bounty hunter in the camp wasn’t quite conducive to Dutch’s already weak nerves at the moment. It wasn’t for nothing that he had advised her to keep the truth to herself.

Tension was in the wind while Dutch was just standing there, saying nothing. Then – to Arthur’s great surprise – he suddenly burst into laughter. “Arthur, I like your girl, I really do! That’s quite the balls she’s got. Comes here and just tells me that she’s been hunting us.” Patting him on the shoulder, his mentor pointed towards Ann. “You know, I believe everything you said about her but whether she’s as clever as you claimed, however, I don’t know after this move here. Anyways, I like her. Let’s give her a chance, shall we?”

“Sure. I make sure she does her part.” Despite all the trouble Arthur had to admit that the whole thing had turned out unexpectedly well in the end, that she had done well. He felt the urgent need to have a little conversation with her in private afterwards, though.

And he did so immediately after being instructed to introduce her to the rest of the gang. That was when he took her aside, grip firm on her upper arm. “Next time you gonna scrap any plans on your
own, tell me!” he huffed.

Ann, however, acted unimpressed. Arching her eyebrows, she replied: “Finished with teaching?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Good. Then let me tell you something.” Her gaze was piercing. “I had to do it ‘cause scumbag
knows about me and frankly I don’t feel like being cornered by another asshole. Now he doesn’t
have shit on me.”

Rubbing his bearded chin, Arthur pondered on what she had just told him. That very well
explained her sudden change of heart but still there was one unanswered question: Where did
Micah took his knowledge about her from? After all he had only told Hosea, Charles probably also
knew who she was, as he had seen her from the plateau back at Horseshoe Overlook. Both of them
were absolutely to be trusted. Then again, in the end it really didn’t matter since Micah was
disarmed and Arthur had Ann with him. Being in full control of the situation was reassuring him.
Only thing missing now was dealing with Sánchez.

“So you gonna check on your mail today?” he asked her, changing topics from one rat to the other.

“Yeah, that’s what I was planning.”

“Ask Dutch if there’s anythin’ you can take for him before you go. He was talkin’ ‘bout a letter
yesterday evening.” Giving a good account of oneself couldn’t hurt.

Nodding, Ann walked over to his tent. “So what are you doing?” she asked, checking on the
laundry.

“Probably nothing good. I’m gonna go check on Hosea ‘cause well, you were there yesterday. He
ain’t back yet.” And that could either be good or bad. Arthur just hoped that the elderly man was
still on the Braithwaite estate and that no further incidents had occurred. “You gonna be okay?” he
then turned to Ann, looking to the left and right. When nobody seemed to pay attention he quickly
pulled her close and placed a kiss on her forehead.

“Yeah, I guess so,” she responded in surprise. “Just try not to be killed, handsome.”

Now smirking, he put on his hat. “See ya later then,” he said, on his way to the horses. In the
knowledge that she was gazing after him, he simply took the reins of Calido and mounted him.
That was for calling him handsome again. Besides, he really liked that horse. It was fast and
graceful and it liked him – just like its owner.

From the corner of his eye he saw Ann running towards him, obviously protesting against his
purpose, but by that time he had already spurred the Mustang and was on his way out of the camp.
He knew, she wouldn’t be all too mad at him when he returned.
Participating

Chapter Notes

Drawing lessons with Arthur. Who wouldn't want that? (˘quivo˘)

Also, slow but steady we're approaching the home stretch.

Chapter XVIII: Participating

Well, that didn’t go all too bad. Apart from Arthur’s cocky theft of her horse, that is. On the whole, however, Ann was quite satisfied with acting on her own responsibility – for one thing because Micah had nothing against her anymore, for another thing because she earned sympathy and trust by Dutch. For now that was enough.

Keeping it in perspective, not much would change for her, except that she would have to hand over half of her payment in the future. She could live with that, especially because she hopefully was getting rid of this burden called Sánchez in a few days. After that she would no longer be necessary dependent on a lot of money. And maybe someday Arthur would be even willing to change his mind. Ann wasn’t giving up hope yet.

But for the time being she was completely busy. As Arthur had advised her she had asked Dutch if there was anything she could attend to while she was on her way to Rhodes this morning. Indeed he had thrust a letter into her hand then, asking her to dispatch it as well as to buy some supplies from the local grocery – after all she was the only one with a clean record here.

Unfortunately there hadn’t been any letter from Sánchez at the post office today which, strictly speaking, wasn’t particularly surprising. Receiving a reply within only a day would have been a miracle. So Ann was hoping for tomorrow.

However, when she had returned from her trip to Rhodes Pearson – the camp cook – had shown up, asking her to go fishing. Of course she had also complied with that request because spoiling things up with anyone around here wasn’t quite what she needed at the moment. Bring yourself in, Arthur had told her, be nice to everyone.

Yeah, and that was what she was doing here, now sitting by the lakeside a bit west of the camp, waiting for another fish to bite. For lack of alternatives she had to take Arthur’s horse to get here, still mad at him for simply stealing her Mustang. Now Apollo was grazing not too far from her while she was boring herself to death.

At least Arthur had introduced her to the others earlier before he had left – to those who were present, that is. Even Micah, who probably still thought that he could blackmail her. Scumbag obviously wasn’t yet aware of his luck. Who she got along with right away though was Miss Adler. In a way she was entirely different from the other women around the camp. Ann didn’t exactly know why yet, but surely she would have time to talk to Sadie in peace soon.

Sighing, the bounty huntress stared out at the lake. Fishing had honestly never been one of her favorite hobbies – plainly and simply because nothing happened. So far she had caught three fish which in turn had taken her two hours or so. Precious time she felt she could have spent with
something more productive. Yawning, she finally supported her chin on the palm of her hand.

It wasn’t too long before she suddenly heard hoof noises behind her; a horse was stopped. Calido! She immediately realized it was him because she knew him inside and out. So without turning around, she dryly commented: “Thank you for bringing my horse back to me, Arthur.”

“Ya welcome.”

Ann secretly cursed that man again although she couldn’t really be angry with him at the same time, no matter how hard she was trying to persuade herself. Especially not when he was behaving like now, squatting behind her and resting his chin on her head.

“So how’d it go?” he then asked, voice as throaty as ever.

“No letter today. Tomorrow then. Hopefully,” she answered, trying to look up. His hat was providing her shade. “But I took Dutch’s letter with me. Did some shopping for him as well.”

“Good girl,” Arthur whispered, letting go of her just to sit down right next to her. God, whenever he spoke like that it made her flesh crawl and she could absolutely do nothing about it. She just had completely fallen for this man.

“And you? Found Hosea?”

“Well, yeah.” Briefly taking off his hat, he rubbed the back of his head. “Trust me, you ain’t wanna know what happened today.”

Ann skeptically glanced at him from the side. If he acted like that, then there was a good chance that something had escalated once again – and of course she wanted to know! Because he had put her damn horse in danger! As well as himself, obviously. “Oh, I think I do.”

“We burned down the Grays’ tobacco fields with the remaining moonshine.” He eventually told it as if it was a trifle.

Hesitating for a moment, the bounty huntress then grimaced. “With the moonshine? But we left it at Rhodes. I thought—”

“Hosea managed to get it back somehow and the old Braithwaite sent Sean and me to Caliga Hall and well, the rest’s basically us shootin’ down everyone.”

“Good Lord.” Ann just shook her head in disbelief. At least that explained why he smelled that much of smoke. “So you’re done with playing Deputy Callahan then, I suppose? Sheriff Gray won’t tolerate his lawman killing his relatives.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Arthur patted her head. “I think we made it out unrecognized, ’cause ya know, we ain’t rookies.” He then nodded towards the bucket next to him which was containing the three already caught fish. “Fishin’ ain’t yours either, is it?”

“Just shut up,” Ann retorted. “Pearson forced me to. I’m not good at it but it was you who said I should be nice to everyone and so I’m sitting my ass off here. Really could imagine better things to do.”

“Well then, I ain’t wanna stop ya from workin’ hard. Just gonna take a rest for a while.”

When he stood up and moved away she gazed after him, watching him settling down against one of the trees behind her. “No more business that needs your attention today?” Ann asked.
“Nah, nothin’ but watch you try fishin’.”

Despite of rolling her eyes she somewhat found his words kinda sweet. Basically, he had only conveyed that she was his priority for the rest of the day and that he wanted to spend time with her alone. And despite of his unconventional nature she now exactly knew how to judge his comments and behavior.

Thus smiling mischievously, Ann poked around. It seemed that Arthur was now busy with his journal and Calido had meanwhile joined Apollo, bearing him company while grazing. *Alright, Ann. Back to the damn fishes!*

After what felt like an eternity, a fish finally bit and then was caught by her. Unfortunately it turned out as a small one once again, so that Ann gradually really wondered why the hell she was doing all this. Slow but steady running out of steam, she eventually put her fishing rod aside and stood up. Curious for what Arthur was doing there, she went over to him and had a look over his shoulder after sitting next to him.

Without even looking back he only asked: “Finished?”

“Rather tired of that shit. So what’s it you sketched? Show me.” Knowing how talented Arthur was and how great his sketches looked, she became nosier and nosier. And in fact he held his journal out to her without much hesitation.

What she saw then made her jaw drop open: He had sketched her – not as rushed as many of his other pictures, but neatly worked out and… “Wow! This is… I wish I was that good.”

“It’s just practice.”

She laughed as she had to think back to some of her drawings she had done as a child. “Oh, I don’t think so. I was never particularly gifted when it came to drawing.”


Completely taken by surprise, Ann simply blinked at him. Really? He wanted her to draw something into his journal? That was foredoomed to failure. “Err, and what?”

“How ‘bout your horse?” he suggested, pointing at the two grazing animals. “It’s simple. Just watch and well, draw what ya seein’.”

“What a great advice, Arthur. Really.” The bounty huntress swallowed, though. She would fuck up so hard and be ashamed to death afterwards for having sketched nothing but a stick figure. That, and his look of expectancy which made her nervous. “Can you please not watch me while I’m failing?”

“Well, okay.” Now smirking, Arthur leaned back and pulled down his hat a bit so that most of his face was covered. “I’m gonna take a nap. Just wake me once ya done.”

This man couldn’t…! Well. He could. He really managed to nod off right away and Ann honestly wondered how he was able to do so. At the same time she wished she could do the same; simply sleep on the spot, at any time of the day. Preferably with a sharp ear for her surroundings, just in case something happened. Oh yes, there had been several times she’d have given anything for something like this.

*But now…* Time for practicing on the living object since she didn’t want to disappoint him at last.
So Ann tried so sketch her Mustang, quickly realizing that the whole thing wasn’t as easy as it looked. Damn, Calido was just a horse with four legs – why the hell did he look so awkward on the paper? Staring at her messy sketch, she then stroke through it and tried again. Accordingly, it wasn’t surprising that it was taking her a long time to create a simple sketch which – in her humble opinion, that is – didn’t come close at all to what Arthur was capable of.

Sheepish, she finally nudged him. “Done, Sir.”

And indeed, suddenly he seemed completely awake again. After flicking up his hat again he grabbed his journal and had a look at her drawing. “Ain’t that bad,” he finally commented after a short while.

“Oh, it is,” Ann laughed, nudging him again. “Now you’re the one telling lies.”

“Well, maybe,” Arthur admitted and then closed his small book to put it away into his satchel. When he was finished she lay down, placing her head on his thigh. His hand quickly found its way to her hair and began stroking it slowly.

The now eventuating stillness was like balm for Ann’s soul, especially after being under pressure for half the day, permanently thinking about Sánchez. Thoughts about whether he had already read the letter at all or whether he had sent his men again to secretly observe her bothered her. Maybe he or his people were also already waiting for her behind the next fork. After all Diandro was an unpredictable moron and betting that he’d keep his word was probably naïve. Don’t think about him now, Ann. Just relax for a moment.

In fact the bounty huntress almost succeeded in calming down, if it hadn’t been for the sudden neighing of Calido. She quickly raised her head, glancing at the two horses.

Arthur, on the other hand, remained motionless. “Probably just a snake,” he assured.

Just a snake – pshaw! A fucking snake was bad enough and yes, Calido did balk at snakes indeed but his current behavior was different. Something seemed terribly wrong here. When Ann wanted to get up completely she was quickly grabbed by Arthur who then dragged her back, indicating her to be quiet. Apparently he had noticed it, too.

“Sánchez,” she whispered, hiding behind the tree trunk.

Picking up his rifle, Arthur silently replied: “Quite possible.” Then he carefully sneaked a peek into the forest.

Ann followed his suit – with the difference that she had to make use of her revolver since all her other weapons were still located on the saddle of Arthur’s horse where she had stored them on her way here. “You see someone?”

“Ain’t seein’ shit, maybe-”

Distant male voices suddenly interrupted him. They both turned around and caught sight of two strangers next to their horses – armed and not looking like they’d be interested in having a cup of coffee. Arthur grabbed Ann once again and pulled her behind another tree in order to avoid direct visual contact.

“Just a snake, huh?” she teased.

“Whatever,” he grumbled back, looking out of his cover again. “Might be Lemoyne Raiders looking for us.” He then put the rifle away and instead reached for his hunting knife. “Seems there
are only two so let’s take ‘em out quietly and get outta here. I ain’t want ‘em pokin’ ‘round here.”

“Okay,” Ann whispered, pulling her knife as well. “You take the one right, I take the one left?”

“Yeah, just wait a second.” He gestured her to stay until the two strange men were paying their
attention to the horses and therewith were turning their backs on them. Giving her a nod, Arthur
finally took the lead and creeped up on the Lemoynes. Ann was right behind him and watched him
silently count to three until they both struck simultaneously.

While Arthur clearly had a physical advantage, she had quite a few struggles to get proper hold of
the raider until she was able to ram the knife right into his throat. While he was bleeding out she let
 go of him again and watched him rattling for a few seconds. Then he completely silenced.

Taking a deep breath, she eyeballed Arthur next to her who was already searching the other man’s
body. “Let’s see who sent ya,” he uttered, frisking every part. When he didn’t make a find he
switched to her victim and started the same procedure again.

It was already looking like they wouldn’t find any clues here either but then Arthur suddenly
pulled out a letter. The envelope was partly covered in blood and yet Ann managed to read the
recipient’s name on it: Miss Ann McBrady. That could only mean that these men weren’t Lemoyne
Raiders but Del Lobos, sent by Sánchez to deliver the answer to her letter. Two more dead Del
Lobos on her name.

“No, shit,” she just panted, turning white.

End Notes

Well, shit happens. (orget)

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