

Book 4

National Award-Winning Author

Out of Phase

A Time Traveler's Chronicle

Kat Jaske

Kat
Jaske



Science
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Excerpt: “Try not to interrupt and I’ll try to give you a short version of the whole story.”

Guillaume sat stunned.

“During a maintenance check in the 26th century, Konrad was accidentally taken from about 1640 and jumped forward in time to 2059 or 2060. When he got there he really messed up the course of twenty-first century history, and then he somehow returned to the seventeenth century and assassinated Laurel.

Before the time distortions reached them, Daryl, Keith, and Jala jumped backward in time to 1641, before Laurel’s murder, looking to find people who knew Konrad and could help them find him in 2060 and then bring him back to 1641. You understanding this so far?”

Guillaume’s eyes were serious as he nodded. Jean-Pierre continued his narrative. “In the twenty-first they met up with a fellow compatriot from the 26th century who had just been assigned as a time observer back in 2060. That observer was Cynthia.”

“Your mother?”

“Exactly,” Jean-Pierre confirmed. “Between them and some help from twenty-first century sources, they caught Konrad and sent him back to 1641, along with Athos, Porthos, Aramis, D’Artagnan, and Laurel. However, the only one who doesn’t remember anything about the entire incident is Konrad—because they wiped that section of his memory but were unable to do that for the others.”

“Your mother? Your father?”

“Hold a moment. I’m getting to that.” Jean-Pierre took a breath and prepared to explain his scenario. “Cynthia made a play for Porthos during the time they were in the twenty-first century, and she got him. However, once she got back to her own time, she found out that due to time distortions, the birth control they’d given her hadn’t worked and she was pregnant with me. So I was conceived in the twenty-first century by Porthos and Cynthia and then born in late 2514. Finally, in 2537 after ten years of intensive training and testing, I became a member of the historical guild and claimed my right to come back here and see my father—Porthos.”

When Jean-Pierre spoke these words out loud, it still sounded confusing to him, and he had had two decades to get used to the notion.

By Honor Bound Series
by Kat Jaske

Book One
For Honor: An Adventure of What Might Have Been.

Book Two
Gambit For Love of a Queen

Book Three
Righting Time

Book Four
Out of Phase: A Time Traveler's Chronicle

OUT OF PHASE

A Time Traveler's Chronicle

Book four of BY HONOR BOUND

Kat Jaske

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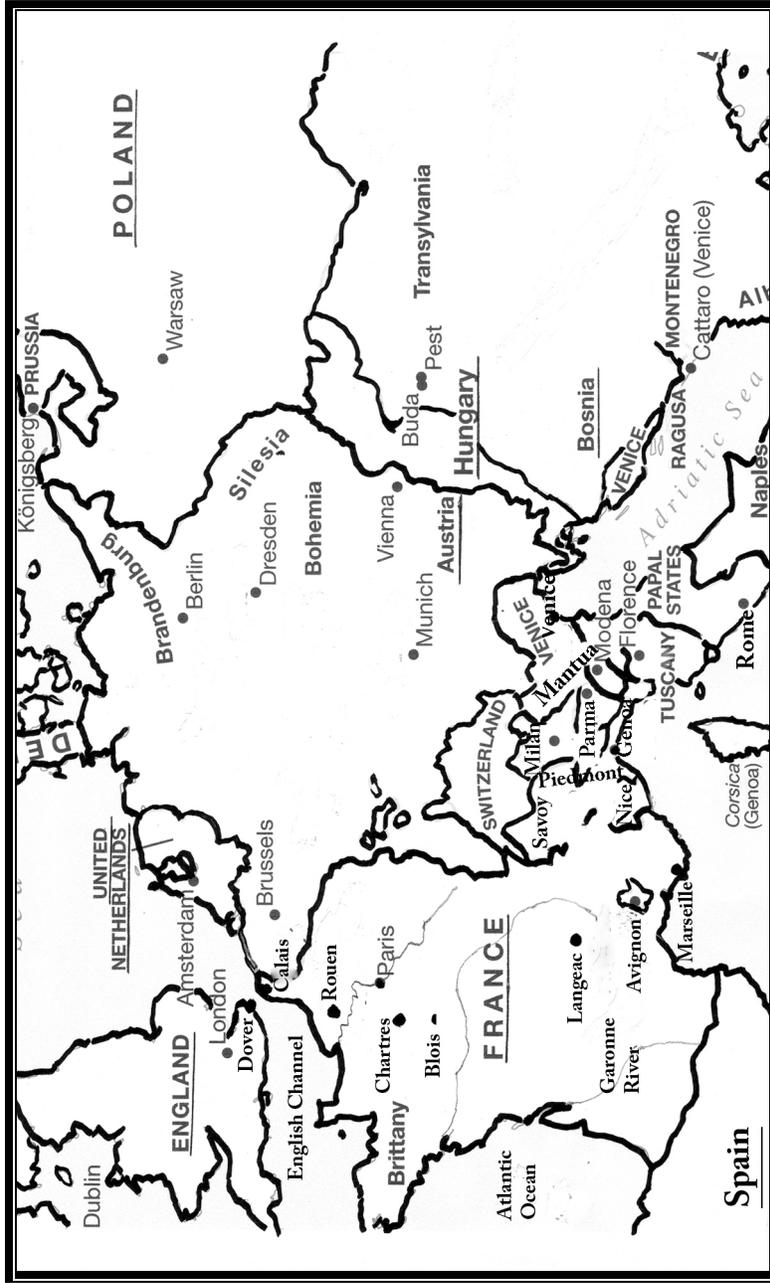
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OUT OF PHASE

A Time Traveler's Chronicle



Map by Karen Jaske



Time Periods for Action in *Out of Phase*

2537 to 2539 and 2550

San Antonio, TX. The far future, where the war for humanity's survival begins.

1652

France. Much of the adventure takes place in this era.

1631

France. Laurel as a teen and her stepsister's staunch supporter.

1618

France. Laurel's parents meet.



Prologue

2537 A.D.

A tall—six and a half feet give or take an inch or two by old customary measure—broad-shouldered, young man with dark brown hair knocked lightly on the door frame, politely letting the occupants of the room know he was there. Though, all things considered, he was fairly certain they already knew. The security system had likely alerted them—that and their innate psionic abilities made them almost impossible to sneak up on.

Was the usual course of things.

Keith, Cynthia, and Daryl all looked up at the sound.

Cynthia beamed broadly in welcome and bounced to her feet as Jean-Pierre entered the room. The dainty woman dashed forward and threw her arms around his waist and hugged him fiercely with a strength that always surprised Jean-Pierre. Without reluctance he hugged her back, and then she finally released him after he said, “It is good to see you too, mother.”

Greetings to his mother completed, he turned his attention to Keith and Daryl—Daryl who was about the same age as Cynthia after his stint in Japan of the twenty-first century. That would put him right about 67 standard solar years, or so. “Daryl, Keith.” He acknowledged them with a swift kiss to each of their cheeks. Sometimes he wondered if these were just about the only people in

the galaxies he would ever really feel comfortable with. Wondered if he'd feel truly comfortable anywhere. Belonging, that sense of rightness, had always been foreign to him.

Keith folded his hands across his chest and leaned back against his chair. Silently surveyed the young man, trying to decide if Jean-Pierre had more of his father or more of his mother in him. Or perhaps it was more of his aunt, Tamree.

“So you're going to make us ask?” The dark-skinned man directed the question at the brown-haired, sun-browned man who would be twenty-three in a matter of weeks. All things considered it was strange to see Cynthia's son as a full-fledged adult of recognized legal status.

“Hmm.” Jean-Pierre feigned an innocent look that fooled no one. Sometimes these people knew him too well, knew him even better than his closest friends. Of course friends were often difficult to find since those who did not have psionic gifts were not inclined to trust those who had them. That, and Jean-Pierre was truly an oddball due to the “unfortunate” circumstances of his conception and birth.

Daryl decided to call the game to a close this time. “So did the guild accept you?”

Casually Jean-Pierre leaned against the tree in the arboretum. “I passed all the tests and psychological profiles and completed the training program satisfactorily. Yes—” The young man finally dropped the suspense. “I am now a full-fledged novice member of the time traveling branch of the historical guild.”

Keith smiled approval and added his quieter congratulations to those of Cynthia's and Daryl's. Without reservation Jean-Pierre returned Keith's smile. The older, deceptively reserved man, had taught him a lot over the years—been the only father he had ever really known. Nor did he look anywhere near his 80 plus years of age—more like thirty-two or so. If that even. Keith was just . . . well . . . Was an exceptional man, though that pallid description did not do him justice.

Suddenly Keith's expression changed, and Jean-Pierre knew that he had not shielded his thoughts closely enough. Once again it was driven home to him that Keith was frighteningly observant, especially with his telepathic talent. The game was up. “What else is going on, Jean-Pierre? Or more specifically, what have you brought with you?”

The young man expelled a breath and gestured for everyone to be seated. Please. Before he took the unoccupied chair, he verified that the security proofing and intruder alert were set. Gingerly he placed a disk at his side and directed a thought at it.

Shimmering, the little silver disk keyed into the thought and morphed into a valise which Jean-Pierre unlocked using DNA access. Deliberately he opened it and reached inside carefully. His hands gently wrapped around the item secured inside, and slowly he withdrew it and set aside the case.

This done, he turned to face his mother, Keith, and Daryl. The item remained perched on his lap untouched for the moment. Jean-Pierre met Keith's eyes, and he swallowed deeply, knowing he was about to be crossing into territories that were simply not entered anymore. "They assigned me to Jala's former residence." He paused to see how the three who had been closest to the woman would react.

They did not blow up at him as he half expected they might, considering Jala and her disappearance; her breaking of the code some twenty-one years earlier was a strictly taboo subject. Keith finally filled in the awkward silence. "So they gave you her quarters?" It had only taken them twenty-one years to reassign.

Jean-Pierre nodded and took Keith's words as permission to carry on. "I moved in a few days ago. Been cleaning up the place and decorating it and, well . . . that type of thing, you know." The older members of the guild nodded in affirmation. They'd had a similar task themselves at one time. Just as they had their oaths—oaths that only one person had broken over the centuries. One person who had been just about the last person they'd ever thought might do so.

Jean-Pierre lifted the item and held it gingerly in both hands. "While I was cleaning, I accidentally shifted a code box and it intersected with a hamlyre burst. Anyway, the two together opened a little cubbyhole where I found a bunch of documents written by the leader of Louis XIII's and Louis XIV's spy ring. Laurel d'Anlass, *Duchesse de Rouen*," he confirmed in response to the silent question. He extended the item he had in his hand to Keith, who accepted it with great care. "I also found this journal Laurel d'Anlass had written."

At this point his mother interrupted. "What did you do with the documents you found?" Her voice had a slight edge that only

those in the room would have recognized as frankly guarded, wary, and alert all at once.

“I turned those over to the guild for historical processing,” her son answered more defensively than he’d intended. Funny how parental figures could make you feel like you were scarcely out of the proverbial nursery. Not that Cyn could really talk, considering her reckless streak and the way she ran through men.

“Why didn’t you turn over the journal too?” Daryl unknitted his fingers and directed the query at Jean-Pierre. The impassive demeanor he had cultivated over his years in the latter half of twenty-first century Japan did not fluctuate.

“After reading it, no way. The information is far too sensitive and tends to violate many of the conditions of the code. It would have been destroyed.” Would have been a great shame too. A lot of the information it contained was fascinating. The last, however, he refrained from saying aloud.

Cynthia looked over Keith’s shoulder at the old and fraying journal. “Jala must have found it when we took that vacation at Langeac years ago. No wonder she didn’t tell me she’d found anything if it contained *that* sort of information,” Cynthia murmured to no one in particular.

“Why’d you bring it to us now?” Keith asked without looking up from the journal, his finger lingering on the frayed binding. At that moment the young man wished he could better read Keith, but then again Keith was too experienced to easily allow such a thing.

Jean-Pierre cleared his throat and leaned forward, his hands folded atop his lap in an effort to mask his jumbled emotions. “I think it explains the mystery of where Jala went when she time traveled without explanation or clearance, and maybe even why.” Jean-Pierre reached forward and opened the journal to the entry dated October 12, 1652. Most of it had been scratched out, by Laurel apparently.

The young man pointed to the two fragments that were legible, and his companions scrutinized them.

“They say that sometimes life gives you a second chance . . . but even I didn’t think that Athos and—”

Then much further down the words:

. . . “on second thought, Jay, you already know, or you will know soon enough.”

“But what does it mean?” Cynthia questioned aloud, not quite sure how to interpret those piecemeal words. She understood her son suspected that Jala had gone back to 1652, but she wasn’t sure how this little passage supported that conclusion.

“I can’t tell you exactly. However, I think it means that Jala took that as a cue for her to go back to 1652. I think. . . .”

“She had already been there,” Keith finished for the younger man. “That’s probably at least part of the reason why Laurel scratched that entry out. She didn’t want to let Jala know what Jala had done in the past because then it might alter things far too much or it might even have prevented her from going and doing something she was supposed to do by Laurel’s way of thinking,” he further hypothesized. What a jumble things could quickly become when exploring time. Not to mention the grammar was “impossible” when traveling time. Come to think of it, more and more over the years, he’d been convinced time was not truly linear in nature.

“More than that though, Keith. Judging from what Laurel has written in this journal, she seems to believe that Jala fell in love with Athos.” There was a stunned outburst of talking from the older members of the guild. Only when they had finally dropped silent did Jean-Pierre continue. “If Laurel was at all correct, and Jala saw the name Athos in such a cryptic manner, that may well have been a driving reason behind why Jala left the way she did.”

“The old adage,” Daryl mused, “that for love people might well do almost anything.”

“So whether she had been there or not probably didn’t matter all that much to Jala, if I’m guessing right,” Jean-Pierre said and met each of the older people’s eyes. He was all too conscious that he was likely treading on some toes by speaking the way he was about something he knew so little about.

Keith sighed, slipped the journal back in Jean-Pierre’s lap, and stood. He turned around and faced toward the gardens, his back to his companions. “So what do you want us do about it now? Jala left more than twenty years ago, and we don’t even know what exact date she arrived at or even if she disguised herself or not. What precautions she took, if any.”

“You don’t have to do anything.” Keith turned around to send a piercing glance at the young man.

“I would like to go back and meet my father. No one can rightly prevent me from doing that. It has been my legal right since soon after I was born.” The young man hardly shifted his position despite the nervousness that had seized him.

Cynthia had always kind of expected that sooner or later Jean-Pierre would claim his right to see his natural father. Even so, she was still startled. Nor had she expected it to come along with the information about Jala. “So you will go back to 1652 to meet your father?”

“He shouldn’t be that hard to find,” Jean-Pierre told his mother. Cynthia almost shook her head; her son didn’t know the half of it. “And finding Porthos might lead me to Jala eventually. Don’t say it. I don’t know what I’ll do yet if I run into Jala. Maybe I’ll ask her to come back with me—at the very least I’ll find out what happened to her so I can let you know.”

“When are you leaving?” Cynthia and Keith asked simultaneously.

“I would like to leave today. That’s why I came to you three. To invoke my right, you must be there, and Keith must set up the timeflux for me.”

After a very long pause, Keith abruptly disengaged the security screens and declared, “Well, let’s go and get you ready. Then send you on your way.” He really didn’t like Cyn’s look any more than he trusted his own muddled feelings. . . . He certainly hoped he wasn’t going to regret this.

Section One

Time and date unknown

Time stood still, as if ceasing to exist for a fraction of a moment, what could have been a fraction of a moment or what could have been an eternity. Or, to all appearances it stopped, leaving a handful of beings in motion without the constraints of its presence.

All the settings are in place? The question was part statement and part demand on the highest level of understanding that is.

The vaguely humanoid creature blinked, and a thought morphed the control panel. With its clawlike hand it adjusted several buttons and knobs that were too sensitive to chance a psionic command. *The settings are made to your specifications, Great One.*

The luminous visage of the Great One did not shift. *Kylaborian'par, Parlianth'par.*

Both partners bowed their human heads as the Great One looked them over. Obviously searching for any flaw in their Terran facades. On the most basic level, the Great One pronounced the partners' guises as passable. Soon enough her agents would completely soul morph into humanoids of the era. Then they would begin their sabotage of earth's history.

Oddly enough, the hum of engines echoed through the floorboards even though time was held motionless. Several whirs and clicks echoed through the deck, joining the undercurrents of telepathic communications and the trills of psionic power being discharged.

Great One, I beseech your humble forgiveness, but might I speak?

The Great One sensed fear on every level of the technician's mind speak. Mentally she gestured for the male to continue. He stumbled and found himself quivering against the psychokinetic currents.

The humanoid form of Parlianth'par shuffled forward in that awkward Terran rhythm. *Great One, I believe that Tianlyar'par has discovered that a few Terrans have been as suspicious of us as we have of them. That is to say they have discovered what we are about and have taken counter measures to prevent it.*

The time circuitry tells you this?

Yes—among other things—Parlianth'par, Kylaborian'par, or Tyianlyar'par informed their superior. Their resonances had mingled.

A long moment went by as the physical eye slits and mind slits surveyed the technician. He began to shiver and quake as he struggled not to fight the mind sifting of his superior. The Terran-masked Mov'arith made no effort to communicate as the Great One continued sifting Tianlyar'par. Twice, the male technician convulsed and then dropped motionless to the deck. A mindless husk.

Kylaborian'par, Parlianth'par. We will proceed with modifications to the original plan. The Great One broadcast on the most rudimentary levels.

The technician's body shriveled and dissipated into the weave almost immediately. The Great One turned to the partners. *Here is what you will need to know about the changed situation. Now go and honor the memories of our forbearers. The Terrans will fall.*

* * * * *

June 1652 – French countryside near Avignon

The horse blew a large gust of air, reminiscent of a snort, as the young man pressed his heels into the animal's flanks asking for more speed. The sleek chocolate-colored mare, as anxious to

be on her way as her master was, pushed forward, and her master allowed the high-spirited animal her head. Been too long since he'd enjoyed a truly vigorous ride.

Free—for a little while at least.

Several peasants looked up from the fields as horse and young man galloped by perfectly synchronized with one another. The young man's hat flew from his head, and he bent low, the wind whisking through his shoulder-length blond hair.

One field hand shook his head and said to his fellow, "There goes the young lord of Avignon again. That boy's always in a devilish hurry."

The other field hand looked up from his hoeing. "His father," Athos' name hung unspoken between them for an instant, "was much the same at that age. Always tearing off at break neck speeds. 'Course one could understand why that one wanted to get away from his own father as often as he could."

Understand why young Athos, the older Lord of Avignon, wanted to get away that is. Beatings were not the easiest thing to take, particularly when you were unable to spare your sisters a beating and they consequentially died. Well eventually they had died. That, and the way the no good former *comte d'Avignon* had beaten his wife in front of Athos—all too impressionable lad—had been unforgivable, to put it mildly.

The first man shook his head. "Y're right there. Our young lord's father didn't have it none too good," he stated and went back to work caught only for a moment by the reminiscence of the two older girls who had died before Athos had reached his tenth year. Been killed by their father, if young Athos had been telling the truth.

Much to both field hands' surprise, the young lord wheeled around and brought his mare to a stop a few arms lengths away from them. "Cédric," the young man called down to the older of the two field hands who had never set down his hoe.

"What can I do for you, young m'str?"

"You haven't by any chance seen Laurel, *Duchesse de Rouen*, around here today?"

"Sorry lad, you just missed 'er. She left 'bout a day or two ago. Said something 'bout being sorry to have missed you, but that she had important business to attend to that she could not be late for."

Under his breath, the young man cursed and adjusted his sword to a better position at his side. Cédric smiled into his neatly clipped beard. Guillaume blushed and asked the other man's pardon. 'Twas not gentlemanly to curse in front of servants, ladies, or children. And regardless of what anyone might accuse him of, he was a gentleman. And he had outgrown his childish starts . . . mostly.

Cédric set the hoe aside and spoke again. "She did ask me to find out how you liked the horse."

The horse? Guillaume was confused a moment and then realized that Laurel must have been talking about Diable, his mare, and the horse she had given him. Three-year old mare. A horse from Rebelle's direct bloodline. Still Rebelle had been the *duchesse's* best horse for years; in fact she'd only recently put him out to pasture.

Guillaume let out a sigh and then offered the men an engaging grin. "The horse is great. But they're going to skin me alive if I don't get to Paris by Monday." Three days from now. One of these days he'd learn not to cut things so close.

Cédric nodded in a knowing manner. The young man could make it from the outskirts of Avignon to Paris within the allotted time period, but he'd definitely have to push to do it. Of course, after all the trouble his friends and parents had gone to to arrange a proper celebration for the lad's ten and eighth birthday, the least he could do was help see to it the young man got to Paris on time.

"You can't be goin' by yer'self now. Road's ain't none too safe 'bout here, 'specially with them bandits who have been prowlin' round here recently."

Guillaume frowned. He and his father still needed to take care of that problem with all due haste. "*Je sais*. That's what I wanted to ask you about. You don't by any chance know of anyone nearby who's heading north do you?"

Cédric's brow furrowed, and this time the other field hand spoke. "Actually there's this new young lad stayin' over at the tavern. Big, burly young man. Giant. Honest truth. Think he might 'a been on his way to Paris." Actually calling the man big wasn't even enough to do justice to his enormous stature. Perhaps giant was even a pale term.

Without further ado, the young man thanked the servants and wheeled the horse around, taking off for the nearby tavern.

June 1652 – Near Avignon

“Do not even think about it,” the young dark-haired man said in highly cultured tones. The large man’s hand tightened around the would-be thief’s wrist tightly enough that it was apparent the man was strong enough he could easily shatter every bone in the thief’s hand. “My purse stays where it is. We understand one another?”

“Oui, *monseigneur*,” the thief replied pitifully. “Promise. *Ma parole*. It won’t happen again.”

“It had better not. And I had better not even hear rumors of it happening to someone else,” the young, well-bred man said forebodingly and released the thief’s stinging arm. The thief scurried away, and the dark-haired stranger returned his attention to his meal, biting into the crusty slice of bread.

The man looked up from his plate as a handsome, broad-shouldered man, whose supremely assured demeanor proclaimed him a lord, strode purposely up to the bar and asked the barkeep several questions. He saw the barkeep gesture in his direction and watched the young lord making his way towards his table.

The dark-haired man set down the partially eaten piece of bread and looked the sandy-blond-haired young man up and down. The lord was solidly built, and a mass of muscle even though he could not be a day over twenty. Young man was probably right around six feet tall by old measures too, maybe a bit taller. Obviously, though, the lord was waiting for an invitation. “Why don’t you have a seat and join me. I’m Jean-Pierre, and who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Guillaume.” He extended his hand and firmly shook the large dark-haired man’s hand. “*Seigneur d’Avignon*.”

Jean-Pierre’s eyebrow rose. Couldn’t be. Yet now that he looked more closely he saw the marked resemblance this lad had to Athos, one time *capitaine* of the musketeers and *comte d’Avignon*. So this was Athos’ oldest son and heir. Strange meeting him in the flesh when he had died centuries earlier, that is earlier than Jean-Pierre had lived most of his life.

Then again Jean-Pierre was very well aware he was an anomaly. That factor had punctuated his entire life.

“And what might I be able to do for you *monseigneur*?” Jean-Pierre’s voice was deep and reservedly welcoming and carried despite his lowered voice.

His blue-grey eyes met brown eyes and Guillaume blinked once. “Truthfully, I was looking for someone who was going to Paris. Looking for someone to travel with. As I’m sure you’ve heard, the roads around here aren’t too safe until the bandits are disposed of.”

“And you were told I was heading that direction,” the other man concluded without difficulty as he took a swig of ale. Surprisingly enough, he really liked the taste of the brew, but then according to Cynthia, his father had always favored ale. And if that story could be credited as true, what else was true in the tales he had been told of his father?

“Are you?” Guillaume asked and his eyes did not drop from the other man’s face for so much as a moment. Suddenly his expression completely changed, and he did a double take. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

Jean-Pierre couldn’t restrain a laugh, though heaven only knew why he was laughing. Perhaps it was Guillaume’s expression. Well, didn’t matter anyway. He took another swig of ale with gusto and let the tankard hit the table. “I can safely say that we have never met before today.” In fact Jean-Pierre had only been in 1652 for three days. Needless to say, his appearance had drawn many comments, already. Terran men his size were rare in Jean-Pierre’s own time and almost never seen in the seventeenth century. In fact, men of even Guillaume’s size were rather rare in the era.

If anything the young lord looked even more befuddled. Under his breath he mumbled, “But I could swear I know your face from somewhere.”

“*Voyons, maintenant*. Were you wanting someone to go with you to Paris or not?”

“Oh. *Oui*.” The lord shook his head as he said yes, suddenly allowing himself to be drawn back to his original task. “I was looking for someone who might be able to leave today. You see I need to get there by Monday. My parents and their friends, Aramis, Laurel, D’Artagnan, Porthos are expecting . . .” his voice dropped off and he scrutinized his companion closely. “That’s who you look so much like. *Oncle* Porthos. Are you related to him or something?”

“You could say that,” Jean-Pierre allowed, not dismissing the option, and pushed away from the table to his feet. Guillaume too stood and was startled to find that his companion was probably taller than even the mighty Porthos stood. Jean-Pierre tossed several pistoles on the table and then drew his purse closed again. “Shall we be on our way?”

“Well of course, but—”

“You do have a horse don’t you?” the larger man asked as they headed out the door, and Athos’ son nodded. “Then what’s the problem?” Jean-Pierre knew a moment’s trepidation that Guillaume might suspect him of being an enemy. Quickly he dismissed the feeling. What must be done must be done, as his Aunt Tamree had always insisted in her quiet manner.

“Why are you suddenly so interested in going to Paris with me?” The shorter man asked in the same no-nonsense style as his father.

The question seemed to hover between them as the two men continued on their way to their horses and saw to it the animals were ready to ride. Satisfied everything was in order, Jean-Pierre and Guillaume mounted their animals and turned to head toward Paris. As they made their way toward the empty road Jean-Pierre said, “Let’s just say I was on my way to see Porthos anyway.” And hopefully he wouldn’t be too badly afflicted with a case of the nerves once he did actually manage to find his father.

* * * * *

There was a horrific snap, followed almost immediately by a terrific splash. Water shot upward. Spurting and then lolling back to an easy, gentle rhythm. Skittish, the horse danced about on its hind legs, then clambered from the stream to the relative safety of the bank.

Dazed, a young man in muddy, water-soaked livery stared at the mare, trying to catch his breath after the fall. That, and ascertain that he wasn’t badly hurt.

The man yanked his hand from the stream and fought to regain his feet as a large branch was swept by with the leisurely current. Without thinking, the rider rubbed the palm of his hand across the expanse of his chest, gingerly. Indeed, it had been that branch which had hit him square in the chest and hurtled him into the stream for an unintended bath. Quickly he snatched his hand

away from the expanse of his chest he was sure was rapidly bruising into a rainbow of variegated colors. As his horse had done before him, he clambered from the stream and made an effort to wring the majority of the water from his sopping clothes.

The messenger shook his head again. Appeared the only injury was the bruising and his battered pride, of course. Yet he was lucky to be alive after a tumble like that, lucky the water had absorbed the worst of the impact. Hand over hand the man soothed his mount, whispering gentle words as he stroked the well-cared-for coat.

Still holding the reins, the man scanned the woods. No sign that anyone was nearby, luckily. Hastily, one last time, he double-checked the pack. A sigh of relief passed his lips. The missive he'd been entrusted with was still intact—the missive from the Italian States.

Now to safely get the message to Paris and into the hands of its rightful recipient. Inserting his foot into the stirrup, he swung his leg up and over, straddling the horse, and then urged the horse, northwestward to Paris. Thank goodness it was a warm, sunny day, and he should at least be spared from taking a nasty chill.

* * * * *

France – The road to Paris

Every so often the leaves of the trees near the dusty, uneven road rustled and danced in the wind. Then dropped still as the breeze faded away and the sun caressed the fibers of their deep green surfaces like an indolent lover. Again the breeze picked up, providing some small relief from the sweltering heat of a midsummer day.

On the road, side-by-side, rode the two men. One mounted on a fine chocolate-colored mare. The other sat mounted on an equally well-bred, but much larger mare, of a rich brown with a white star on the bridge of her nose. And of course they both carried the mark of gentlemen—fine swords worn with casual confidence. Hopefully, a deterrent to would-be brigands.

Jean-Pierre couldn't conceal his sense of relief as the wind whipped at his body, providing desperately sought cooling. How noblemen of the era gallivanted about the countryside or elsewhere in so many layers of clothing during the summer he began to think was far beyond his ability to comprehend. Now,

though, he understood why there tended to be a mass exodus from the city during the summer months. The heat and the stench even here, several leagues from Paris, were very unpleasant and only likely to get worse as they descended upon the city. As for the rampant disease, that was something the time traveler did not even want to consider.

The dark-haired man sporting a two weeks growth of beard glanced over at the younger man. Other than pulling the brim of his hat lower to shield his eyes from the sun, Guillaume d'Avignon seemed remarkably impervious to the baking heat of midday. Then again, the young man had grown up in this era, so perhaps he was accustomed to this type of thing and had learned to deal with it regardless of how much or how little he liked it. Jean-Pierre squelched the envy that had briefly risen in him and continued to direct his mount.

Feeling the older man's assessing gaze lingering on him Guillaume glanced over at his companion. A smile played about the corner of his lips. "The heat won't be so bad after nightfall, *monsieur*," Athos' son attempted to assure his companion. And the slight breeze was helping matters too.

"*S'il vous plaît*," Jean-Pierre wiped away a trickle of sweat from his eyes with his gloved left hand, "call me Jean-Pierre. It sounds like you're addressing my father or my grandfather when you address me like that." Besides, depending on the whim of the situation, he might well end up a lord anyway, though he'd rather face that eventuality later than sooner. Until then he didn't really have time to waste on being nervous.

"*Je sais*. Do I ever know," Guillaume repeated emphatically and could not prevent a hearty, warming chuckle and a boyish grin that suffused his features. "Titles. But make you a deal . . . Jean-Pierre. You call me by my first name, and I'll make sure I am not so remiss as to call you by a title. Well, unless you wish me to," he concluded, his baritone voice rich with amused sarcasm.

Sometimes titles were entirely too much bother, especially ones that put mothers and daughters to scheming you into wedlock. Not that Guillaume didn't like girls. He'd had his share of lighthearted flirtations, and, well, *Oncle* Porthos had seen to his sexual education whether he had liked it or not.

But marriage—that did not bear thinking of for at least a goodly number of years to come. He supposed that was one of the advantages of becoming a musketeer. Even though you were

noble, you could gain a remarkable amount of obscurity by using an assumed name. Porthos, Athos, Aramis had all done that and achieved near anonymity for a number of years.

The tip of Jean-Pierre's tongue darted over his lips, moistening them slightly and tasting the tang of salt in the process. Discreetly he watched the play of emotions across Guillaume's face. How odd to find a man with the endearing innocence and zest for life of a child. "Let me guess. Women?" The word hovered in the air for a moment and reluctantly Guillaume gave a swift nod, not even bothering to ask his companion how he'd deduced Guillaume's train of thought.

"They're not all bad you know," Jean-Pierre remarked thinking of some of the women from across the five galaxies with whom he had trained. Then again, women of the seventeenth century were, well . . . different in many respects.

"Just you hold on to that thought when they start coming after you for your fortune and simpering and batting their fans, not a wit of intelligence that God gave a dog in their heads."

Bashfully Guillaume glanced down at his hands, feeling Jean-Pierre's startled gaze. "Pardon. Yvette and Constance aren't half bad; neither's Anne. And *Tante* Laurel is up to every trick—a real goer. Just don't say I didn't warn you about the young women of Paris though." Jean-Pierre said he wouldn't think of placing blame on the younger man. He knew enough of the marriage system and socialization of women of the time to be very wary. "What is it, Diable?" Guillaume bent lower over the horse as her ears twitched back and forth.

Jean-Pierre pulled back on his own mount, slowing her, feeling the oddly increased bunching tension of the mare's muscles. Obviously the horses sensed something, and were trying to communicate it to their riders.

From his side Jean-Pierre extracted his flintlock revolver and with a deft action of his hands primed the weapon. Suddenly aware of Jean-Pierre's action, Guillaume drew his own horse slower and primed the gun that had been a recent gift from Yvette, oddly enough.

"Duck!" Jean-Pierre commanded as he jerked his horse around to avoid the whiz of a bullet cutting the air. The horse whinnied in protest, but obeyed. Turned on a dime, as his mother would have said.

Too busy trying to control his mount and determine the direction of the attack, Jean-Pierre failed to note whether Guillaume had followed his command. Fortunately for Guillaume his reflexes were quick and he had ducked, cradling the pistol close to his chest.

Diable sidestepped at that same moment. It was those actions together that saved Guillaume's life. The ball that would have impacted him near his heart merely shot off his hat instead.

The young would-be musketeer reacted astoundingly quickly, almost as if he were a veteran of many battles, and Diable responded likewise. He cast a quick look at his companion to assure himself that Jean-Pierre was in control of his own situation, and then Guillaume spurred his horse forward toward the copse of trees.

An armed man catapulted out from behind the tree, attempting to avoid being trampled by the charging horse, and leveled his gun on the young lord of Avignon. Guillaume banished all thoughts but survival from his mind, and as per his hours of training, aimed the gun and pulled the trigger.

The shot rang out, and clutching a splotch of red across his chest the attacker toppled to the ground, and after a few seconds lay still in the steadily growing puddle of his own blood. Come to think of it, it wasn't so strange that Yvette had given him a gun, considering that she was a phenomenal markswoman when she ever chose to exercise her skill.

In fairly rapid succession, Guillaume heard several shots ring out, and whirled his horse around to identify what was going on. There was a faint trail of smoke coming from Jean-Pierre's gun and two dead men not far away. Apparently Jean-Pierre hadn't been shot, though there was blood streaking his face from where it looked like he had taken a blow. Huffing, Jean-Pierre looked up at his companion and nodded, to assure him that he was fine, thanks to Guillaume's quick reactions and responsive forethought.

"I think I'd better duck again," Guillaume mouthed as he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The dark-haired man nodded ever so slightly and with a bow of his eyes Jean-Pierre signaled his companion. An instant after the young man crouched lower, Jean-Pierre discharged the pistol, taking out the other assailant. Guillaume came up straight in his saddle, ran his gloved hand through his hair, the one that wasn't holding the gun. "You think that's all of them?"

“Let’s make sure.” Jean-Pierre hadn’t even begun to speak the words before they both made a search of the area and found that the four who had attacked them were the only ones. The four who were dead in pools of their own blood. Jean-Pierre wheeled his horse to a stop next to the younger man. “What do you think; bury them?” He asked as he dabbed the blood away from his nose after holstering his gun.

He’d almost forgotten how messy old firearms were and not exactly common or trustable either in 1652. But this was a violent, messy century despite the veneer of polite civilization. That, and he was beginning to fear that even his extensive training had not prepared him for the reality of this primitive time.

After a moment suspended inside himself, Guillaume mechanically shook his head, expressing a silent no. As if from a distance, he heard his newfound friend asking him who the men were since Guillaume seemed to be somewhat familiar with them. Guillaume’s jaw tightened in a reaction much like his father, Athos, would have had. “I think they’re political militants. Part of the power struggle that has been raging throughout Paris and throughout France ever since Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu died.”

Carefully Jean-Pierre controlled his expressions. He had almost forgotten about the civil unrest in France. Almost forgotten about the *Fronde*, which had left many innocent and not so innocent victims. Though, if he were right, according to history there should within the next year or two be a reasonably stable government in place under Mazarin, Louis XIV, and Anne d’Autriche.

Fortunately Guillaume did not find Jean-Pierre’s question overly odd and instead turned his attention to making sure his new friend was truly all right. When both men were satisfied that the other was well, they continued toward Paris at a quicker clip.

“You know, Guillaume?” Guillaume shot back that Jean-Pierre should enlighten him. “I don’t think it would be a wise idea to mention this little incident to the people we are paying a visit.”

A shudder passed through the blond-haired man’s form. God forbid, he prayed. He could just see Athos and Yvette’s reaction to that and Constance’s too. He’d never find himself let out on his own again. “Can do,” he shouted back to the man. “We’ll just make sure we clean up before we get there.” Now, to avoid any further, unexpected difficulties.

Paris

Anne shook her head and glanced at her nearly ten and two-year-old son, Louis XIV, briefly and then looked back to Athos. Already he looked happier than he had ten and four months ago. Of course that could have something to do with the fact that he had handed over the captaincy of the musketeers to D'Artagnan and was now simply a musketeer and a full time lord, father, and husband. "At this rate it looks like your son will be late to his own birthday celebration," the queen of France observed wryly, just barely preventing herself from adding "as usual" to her statement. They were assuming Guillaume would make an appearance at his own fête.

Louis, observing, rolled his eyes and settled himself firmly on his chair. Sometimes he wondered, really wondered about women. Guillaume would be here. Louis knew that. Besides Guillaume was Louis' best friend and brother/mentor despite the royal and six-year age gap, and they hadn't seen each other in months.

Suddenly Porthos came up from behind Anne and slipped his arms around her waist, half lifting her from the ground as he nuzzled her neck. "Come now *chérie*, don't go teasing Athos. Haven't you learned by now, the man doesn't have much of a sense of humor." Anne swatted at the large musketeer ineffectually and then settled for kissing him soundly, her feet dangling several inches up off the ground.

Aramis shook his head at the public display of affection. Porthos may have had to wait a few years for Louis XIII to die, but now he had Anne. Of course few outside of this room knew—except for Guillaume—that the large musketeer had been the queen's lover since soon after her husband had died. That would be Athos, himself, Yvette, young Louis XIV, Laurel, Constance, D'Artagnan, and the queen and Porthos too, naturally. He was sure others suspected, but Aramis did not worry about them. Most did not wish to tangle with either Porthos or his friends. There was a lot of talent in this room, not to mention power, influence, and wealth.

Porthos released Anne just as several of Guillaume's friends from training came into the room. "He's here," one of them told the queen. No need to ask who he was. Quickly they all took their

places, and as Guillaume entered the room they all jumped out, patting him on the back and congratulating him on his birthday.

For a moment the young man was speechless. Laurel drifted forward and winked at him as if sharing a private joke. She'd known he would be here on time, and she also had known he'd get here barely on time.

Guillaume polished off a drink, lingering a moment to allow things to settle down; then the young lord gestured toward his large companion who had hung back by the door, essentially unnoticed despite his size, surprisingly enough. "*Tout le monde*, I'd like to introduce you to my new friend, Jean-Pierre. Jean-Pierre, everyone." From there he proceeded to introduce the dark-haired man to each person in the room, individually.

As he got to presenting the young man to Porthos, Porthos' jaw dropped slack, and he seemed to be having problems gathering his wits about him. "Who are you?" the musketeer and new, within the past three and ten months, *comte de Vendôme* asked.

Jean-Pierre met his father's eyes for the very first time, wondering if he could possibly speak through the constriction tightening his throat. A moment longer he looked down on the man an inch or two, perhaps three. Porthos then read the unspoken message there—the one about whether he really wanted that information disclosed here. Porthos nodded his head in response to the unasked question, and the young man drew a deep breath. Attempted to relax. "I'm your son." Jean-Pierre understood what it meant to truly feel like one had been flung into an abyss while having no idea when one might slam into the bottom.

"*Parbleu*," Aramis murmured, and the whole room dropped into silence, eyes fixed on the two largest men they'd ever met.

Mighty Porthos blinked several times as he struggled to find his voice. "How old are you?"

"Two and twenty," was the automatic response. Nearly three and twenty, but Jean-Pierre wasn't going to quibble over the matter of a month or two.

"Who's your mother?" The whole room poised in tense watchfulness, waiting anxiously for the man's response to that question. Laurel met Jean-Pierre's gaze, and in that instant the young man knew that she already realized who he was and when he was from. Even with her powers somewhat latent, the beautiful *duchesse* somehow knew.

“Cynthia,” he murmured softly. Thunk. He was pretty sure he had hit the bottom of the chasm.

“Cynthia,” Porthos echoed, and his son nodded. At the same time Aramis, Athos, and D’Artagnan all seemed to grasp the significance of the boy’s parentage. Porthos’ son from over eight hundred and eighty-five years in the future. “By all that is . . .”

“Look, would you like to go somewhere we can talk privately? I really didn’t want to interrupt Guillaume’s celebration.”

Guillaume laid a steadying hand on the suddenly vulnerable man’s—his friend’s—shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. Ultimately nothing’s more important than family.” It was about time Porthos had children anyhow. Everyone seemed to take this Cynthia thing in stride. But it was hard to fathom Jean-Pierre waiting so long . . . well unless his mother hadn’t told him his parentage until recently. Besides Guillaume rather liked Porthos’ son. Sneaky, secretive little weasel . . . in more ways than one.

Porthos glanced at Guillaume. “You said it, *fiston*,” he announced and wrapped Jean-Pierre in a fierce bear hug. “It’s good to finally meet you . . . son.”

* * * * *

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” a guard stopped on the threshold of the room, “but I’ve been sent with an important message for *Madame la Duchesse de Rouen*.”

Laurel, looking no older than a day or two over four and twenty and some ten years younger than her actual age, stepped forward. Stepping out of the mass of celebrants. “That would be me. What can I do for you?” Laurel was sure to reveal her signet ring as she asked the last question.

From inside his doublet the messenger withdrew a rolled, sealed piece of parchment. Without ceremony he handed the sealed message to the *duchesse*. Laurel asked if there was anything else, and finding out there was nothing, she dismissed the young guard. As the messenger retreated Laurel withdrew to a more private area of the room and broke the seal on the missive.

Quickly she scanned the contents. Suddenly her face paled several shades, and D’Artagnan and Yvette both rushed to her side, helping her to sit, encouraging her to sit even though they were well aware Laurel was not prone to fainting bouts. At the

same time Aramis and Anne saw to it that the party was moved to another room, leaving behind only Aramis, Laurel, and D'Artagnan.

Aramis knelt in front of his wife and took his wife's hands in his own. They were like ice. "What is it Laurel? *Chérie?*" His voice was softly coaxing. All she could do was extract her left hand and point to where the missive had fallen.

D'Artagnan bent at the knees, half crouching, and picked it up. Quickly he read what Laurel had read moments before and then looked up from the piece of paper, his blue eyes revealing confusion for a moment.

Over Laurel's head he met Aramis' eyes. As calmly as he could the new *capitaine* of the musketeers said, "It seems that Laurel's father is being held prisoner in the Italian states—southern Italian states more precisely."

"Her father," Aramis murmured, almost incredulous. "He was killed in Belgium in 1638." Some four and ten years earlier.

At that moment Laurel's strained voice broke into the conversation. "I thought so too, until about around two years ago."

"What?" both musketeers said in a united exclamation of disbelief.

Half-heartedly, Laurel smiled and retrieved her second hand from Aramis, telling him she was going to be fine. She was no dainty little thing. Darned if she was going to be treated that way either despite the soft spot she had for these men, especially her husband. "About two years ago I began to suspect that one of the men who had been feeding me important international political information for a number of years was my father."

"Why is that?" D'Artagnan ran his fingers through his light brown hair and sat down next to his friend, the letter still clasped between the tips of his fingers. Even if the letter was right, Thomas would be an old man by now—some seven and fifty years or so.

"Don't get me wrong, I never *knew* anything," she began, looking first to her husband of roughly eleven years and then to the new *capitaine* of the musketeers. "Wait, let me start over. I began to suspect something when I kept getting the feeling that many of the messages I got on vital international affairs had the distinct flavor of my father's style—his way of operating and his manner of presentation."

Laurel glared at Aramis, stopping him from interrupting her. “May I go on? *Merci*. I never asked or knew the identity of the agent who sent the information, but the information was always accurate. About two years ago, though, I decided I wanted to try to figure out if my father was responsible for the messages fed me over the years.”

Laurel poised her finger touching her lips briefly. “No one had any idea who the agent was. No one. Not even me or my best agents.”

“So for the past two years you have been searching extensively for this man who you say has been feeding you information for years. And who you think is your father? And how is it that you never mentioned it to anyone?” D’Artagnan asked, forgetting that Laurel could be a fine one for keeping secrets.

The director of France’s secret spy ring nodded her head and plucked the paper from D’Artagnan’s grasp. Some things one had to keep to one’s self. She folded it and waved it in front of her. “This little ‘gem’,” she said with bitterness in her voice, “confirms that I was right about the informant being my father.”

“But you didn’t expect him to be a prisoner to a hostile government when you found him,” Aramis commented, knowing he was right. That was when he saw the determination surge into Laurel’s face and posture. “Oh *non ce n’est pas vrai*, Laurel. You cannot just go traipsing off to the Italian Territories. You have many responsibilities here. The king, the children . . .”

“Aramis, the king has his loyal musketeers to protect him, and the children are old enough that I do not have to be with them all the time, not when something of this importance comes up,” Laurel informed him. She was well aware that she and Aramis had agreed that they would raise their children rather than shipping them off to nurses and nannies or other servants. Yet, in her opinion, three, six, and eight years old was enough that they didn’t have to have their mother constantly at their beck and call. “And, *cher*, this is their only other living relative I’m talking about going after. Okay, barring my good-for-nothing wastrel cousin.”

Her eyes were resolute as she met Aramis’ gaze.

A moment later her hand drifted upward and brushed his cheek as lightly as a ray of sunlight. “He’s my father, Aramis, *cher*. I haven’t seen him in fourteen years. If he dies and I do nothing—never even see him again—I’d never be able to forgive myself.” She placed a hand on her husband’s shoulder. Ran her

fingers down his neck. “I have to try, Aramis.” He felt the pleading of her tone mirrored in the gentle touch of her fingers.

“I’m coming with you,” her husband announced, and D’Artagnan closed his eyes, anticipating the battle that was sure to arise. That was about the only predictable thing about Laurel and Aramis; they argued. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear that they rather enjoyed, possibly even thrived on, the conflict.

Reluctantly, Laurel shook her head. D’Artagnan thought he could detect an air of sadness in the brief gesture. “I need someone good, someone I can trust, to watch over the spy ring for me while I’m gone. I’m going to need the best information I can get from France, and you’re the best I know.”

“Athos or Porthos can do it, Laurel. I am not going to let you get killed.”

“Aramis.” Laurel lost patience. “I have no intention of getting killed, and you well know neither Porthos nor Athos knows enough about the operation to effectively lead it. Hey—listen to me. *Je t’en prie*,” she ordered and begged at the same time when he seemed ready to shout her down.

“Aramis, come on. Listen to your wife a moment,” D’Artagnan interceded, and against his better judgment, Aramis dropped silent.

“I never said I would go alone. In fact, I know I need help as much as I need allies here. Of course I was thinking of taking Porthos and Athos with me. Yvette and Anne would never forgive me if I let something happen to them, though.”

“You better take more than those two,” D’Artagnan said softly. “Athos and Porthos are not so young as they used to be, and,” he added anticipating Laurel’s objection, “I cannot come with you since I am desperately needed here to protect Queen Anne and young Louis from the machinations of Cardinal Mazarin. I promise, however, that I will back you up in any way I can.” D’Artagnan paused, knowing neither Aramis nor Laurel would like the option. “You could take Guillaume with you. He’s been training since he was very young for this sort of thing.”

“He’s only a boy,” Laurel countered, not quite aware of what she was saying. Rather it was her automatic reaction. She had watched him grow up, but still.

“He’s no boy anymore,” D’Artagnan pointed out. Grudgingly given, but he pointed out the fact none the less. “He’s a man now—as old as I was when I went searching to join the

musketeers. It's true, he's a young man, but that's no crime. We were *all* that young once. Besides you know he is an excellent fighter. What's more, Yvette taught him Italian so he can speak it fluently." Probably wasn't a half bad marksman either, thanks to his stepmother.

"He has a point," Aramis agreed though he was reluctant to do so. "Plus, I daresay Porthos' new-found son is at least as well trained if not more so, and it looks like you'd be stuck with him too, since he and Guillaume have become all but inseparable." If Jean-Pierre had gone through even half the rigorous training routine that Jala, Keith, Daryl, and Cynthia had all hinted strongly at, Aramis knew Jean-Pierre could well be better trained than some of the most seasoned leaders and fighters of Aramis' own time.

"*Bon*," Laurel agreed and before her companions could take off said, "I'll take those four and only those four provided they agree to come and know what the dangers might be ahead of time."

Ruefully Aramis closed his eyes. With Laurel one just did not always know what the dangers might be.

* * * * *

Italian States not far from Mantua

"Aiee." The man could no longer hold his cries back as the whip bit into his bare hunched back. "The names. Now," the man holding the whip demanded. He allowed just a moment to go by, to learn the prisoner would not reveal anything, before he brought the whip down on the man's back again.

"Enough Stéphaneos," another voice interrupted, and Stéphaneos reluctantly lowered the whip to his side as he watched a man of about four and forty years with thinning brown hair enter the room. Antonio. The man was indeed still handsome, but Stéphaneos knew him to be cold. Merciless and calculating. He'd been that way for all the years Stéphaneos had known him. Decades.

"*Ciao, Monseigneur* Thomas d'Anlass," Antonio said as he approached the prisoner.

Calmly he observed that despite his age and the hunched shoulder caused by a gun shot years earlier, the prisoner was remarkably strong. With equal deliberateness he yanked at the

chains that bound Thomas to the wall, and the Frenchman cried out.

Thomas had lost count of how long he had been there, though he knew it could not have been more than two or three weeks. Lack of light and human companionship had a way of destroying a person's sense of time. "So—you are the legendary Thomas d'Anlass and the best spy France has ever known. It was a mistake to let anyone know that you did not really die fourteen years ago in Belgium."

Antonio paused and turned on his foot. "Yet, I do believe that you are a most valuable operative for the secret spy service to the king of France, even over the years you were rumored to have been dead." Antonio placed a finger to his lips and listened to the ragged breathing of the prisoner. That breathing was the only clue that Thomas was still conscious. "That would make your recovery invaluable to the leader of your organization. In fact, I think that the leader of your organization may be on the way here to try to rescue you."

Even through his pain Thomas carefully noted that Antonio did not use a gender or identity. That meant he did not know that Laurel was in charge of the network, did not know it was Thomas' daughter Antonio was trying to play games with. Nonetheless, Thomas could well believe that Laurel was coming here. It would be precisely like her, and he had known it would be only a matter of time before she discovered who was feeding her information vital to France. "In that case you had better be prepared to die," was the only verbal response he made. *Les jeux sont fait*. The die was cast.

"I thought you might indeed know who I was talking about." Antonio did not allow any traces of anger into his tone. "So sad that I was the one who leaked the information to the network leader about where you were. So sad that your countrymen will be walking into a trap." Antonio smiled and Thomas' blood ran cold.

Laurel! *Non*. Not his daughter, his daughter's dear friends or husband. There had to be something he could do—anything.

Antonio seeing no other reaction was forthcoming walked away from the captive. "He's all yours Stéphaneos. Learn what you can. Just see to it he stays functional until our guests arrive."

Soon he would bring down one of his greatest opponents—destroy the one spy ring which had kept him in check all these years. Plus, he had just sealed a deal that was going to make him

one of the most dangerous men in Europe. What a sweet elixir power was.

Italian State of Milan

“I don’t like it, Laurel,” Athos growled grimly as he dismounted from his horse and began brushing the animal’s coat. From the corner of his eye he caught sight of Jean-Pierre and Guillaume. To Athos’ experienced glance they too appeared ill at ease. This was one time they did not seem likely to accuse him of being too much the pessimist.

Laurel finished tending the well-trained stallion, another blood descendant of Rebelle, called Vent. “I don’t like it either, Athos. This whole thing has been far too easy. It should have been harder to track my father, harder to get this far into the Italian states.”

“Harder?” Guillaume questioned, overhearing Laurel’s words. They’d already been nearly ambushed, survived several raids, and had had to go out of their way to avoid several patrols. It hadn’t been easy. Although he was honest enough to admit that it could have been harder too. Anything was possible. Better to be prepared.

“*Oui*,” Porthos agreed. “The people Laurel works against are better than this. They would better protect their grounds and any knowledge about the best spy France has ever known.” Unless there was a specific reason not to . . .

“I think it’s a trap,” Jean-Pierre spoke for the first time that day. “I think someone’s setting us up. What I want to know is who and why and what they get out of doing it.”

Morosely Laurel agreed. She too would like to know the answers to those particular questions.

“I think I might be able to answer some of your questions,” a voice none of the companions recognized said. All five drew their swords and fanned out in such a manner that they could cover one another’s backs.

“I’m unarmed,” the same voice said, and this time they could tell it was female.

“All right then.” Athos took charge, signaling the others to fall back toward the small fire and sheathe their swords while at the same time remain ready for anything. Athos left his sword

unsheathed and continued, “Come into the light where we can see you.”

There was some rustling, and the companions heard some shuffling of feet. The figure came into the dancing light of the fire. The jumping, flickering light revealed a tall, slim woman in a ragged dress soiled by days of dirt. Her normally bronze face was incredibly pale, and the woman’s dark blue eyes were bloodshot. Black hair that reached her shoulders darted out at every which angle, matted.

“So I look that bad?” the woman commented in a voice much stronger than her appearance hinted at. “*Bonjour Athos. Bonjour Laurel. Porthos.* It seems that I am needed here again.”

“Jala.” It was not Laurel or Athos who said it—or even Porthos. Rather it was Jean-Pierre who said the one word in a louder voice than he had intended.

Jala did a double take, looking way up at the dark-haired young man. It couldn’t be. Still there was no other explanation. Had to be Cynthia’s son. Much older than when she had last seen him, but there could be no doubt. Or very little at any rate, and that niggling doubt could easily be disposed of.

“Jean-Pierre, I must say that you have grown.” The young man did not gainsay her. In fact a brief flash of telepathic information skirted her mind, letting her know that he was indeed Cynthia’s son.

Without so much as a double take, Jala continued to speak aloud, “I believe, though, that there were some questions that you wanted answered. I think I can give you some answers.” None that they were likely to really want to hear. Not that she was exactly sure of what was going on either. Exhaustion among other things, she was honest enough to admit to herself, had taken a severe toll on her.

“Sit down first,” Laurel said and handed her a canteen of water, ordering her to drink.

Jala gulped thirstily, licking any trickles before they could escape her tongue. She brought the canteen down and looked at the group she had stumbled upon: Jean-Pierre, Laurel, Athos, Porthos, and the last had to be Athos’ young son—not so young any more. In fact, he was a very handsome young man in a rugged way that was very reminiscent of Athos. Jala found herself ruefully smiling at that particular thought. Somehow she hadn’t

thought to believe in the old adage of like father like son. Well she'd been wrong before . . .

"What can you tell us?" Laurel asked, scarcely believing that after eleven years Jala had returned to the seventeenth century. That and the fact she had shown up in this sorry condition.

"They're after you, or at least I assume it is you, since very few people, let alone people in this century, have any covization powers, Laurel, and they're using your father to get to you." Or at least they seemed to be trying to locate her somewhat ineptly. Thank the fates of the galaxy for that favor, as small as it might be.

Jala turned and her gaze rested on Guillaume, who was squirming uncomfortably in an obvious effort not to appear ignorant about something everyone else seemed to understand, before focusing on Athos. "They're after a man near Guillaume's age too. So they may decide to come after him, though I couldn't tell you precisely why. Two names, however, that I can give you are Stéphaneos and Antonio, but they are nothing. They are the front men. Merely pawns even though they are the ones who physically hold Thomas d'Anlass. I'm not even sure they know they are being used."

"My son," Athos gasped. "Who is after my son and why? I can see why they'd be after the leader of the spy network, but why my son?"

"Wait . . . Me? *Pourquoi?*" Guillaume questioned so softly Jala did not hear, but Jean-Pierre did and whispered matter-of-factly that Jala was a time traveler who had once worked with Laurel and Athos and Porthos and their friends. Guillaume had no chance to say anything more. Honestly his voice wouldn't work, and all he could do was stare at his newfound friend as if Jean-Pierre were the devil incarnate.

While Jean-Pierre was thus occupied, Jala tried to give Athos an answer to his question—within the limits of her knowledge. "Athos, they aren't after just the leader of the network. They are after Laurel specifically and not simply because she is the leader of those spies. They think she might be ty'va'tar. As to why they might be after your son, as I said before, Athos I don't know. I was lucky to escape when I did."

Jala's eyes roamed the circle of companions. "Whoever is in charge of this thing is not human, and they even knew I was not a native of this time period. In fact, I don't even think they are from this epoch themselves. Let me remind you too, they aren't sure

what young man they are after—just one roughly Guillaume’s age.” For that matter they weren’t all that sure about Laurel either. They were simply sure that Thomas d’Anlass would lead them to a coviziant they wanted.

“Let me guess,” Porthos put up his hands, speaking with them. “Now they are after you too.” Jala nodded and took another slug of water. Let it sit on her tongue for a long moment and then swallowed. “*Parfait*,” Porthos commented sarcastically; yet despite it all there was a glimmer of curiosity and enjoyment in the tone. He did love his work, after all.

Too startled to speak after numerous revelations that he didn’t even comprehend, Guillaume glanced toward Jean-Pierre. The large young man, who was Cynthia’s son, raised his eyes from the fire where he had been staring. “You said they weren’t human. Do you have any idea what they are?”

Jala took a quick breath and shook her head. “They are no race I am familiar with. But they are similar to shapeshifters. However, they do not just take on a shape—they drain a soul and then seem to morph into a new body and their . . .” she stuttered. “Their mental powers are astounding.” Their mental powers had almost broken her, and she had been rigorously trained against those kinds of attacks. Longer, and she would have been lost.

“Mov’arhit,” Jean-Pierre concluded.

“Mov’arhit.” An instant Jala stared mutely at the young man. “They’ve always been isolationist from the confederation. Why would they suddenly come to Earth?”

“Not just Earth. Earth of the past. Now,” Jean-Pierre pointed out. “They apparently have figured out how to time travel, although fates of the galaxy only know how they did it since all knowledge on time travel is restricted to the time police and the historical guild.” For good reason too. Something like time travel just had so much potential for being abused.

Athos leaped to his feet and stalked around the fire, trying to keep his temper in check. Jala’s eyes followed him. She had hoped never to bring Athos pain again, but obviously she had. “That still doesn’t explain why they are, might be,” he corrected, “after my son or why they are setting a trap for Laurel.” He enunciated each word carefully. Clearly he was at the edges of his self-control.

“I know it doesn’t,” Jala admitted, unable to say anything more enlightening. “I’m hoping that together we can figure that out before it’s too late.”

Laurel raised her hands, silencing anything Athos and Porthos might have said. “Let me help get Jala straightened up. She’s in no condition to help us anymore right now. Porthos, please, see if you can help Athos regain his temper. And Jean-Pierre, see if you can help explain everything that’s going on to Guillaume. Take as long as you feel you need,” Laurel concluded as she led Jala toward the nearby stream.

Porthos led Athos a little distance off, and Guillaume turned mechanically towards Jean-Pierre, his hand clutching the hilt of the sword he had only just sheathed. Jean-Pierre had a sinking feeling he’d be getting much more of a reaction than he’d gotten to the one statement he’d already made regarding Jala’s true nature.

Fair! It wasn’t fair, and something told him he wasn’t going to enjoy the coming scene, though Jean-Pierre would deal with it. A good time travel agent had to.

In a voice distinctly unlike Guillaume’s typical tone, the young lord said, “Not from this epoch? Historical guild? Time police? Mov’arthit? Earth the past?” His voice rose a fraction on each question.

Jean-Pierre placed his hands on both of Guillaume’s shoulders and urged the young man to look at him. “Easy, Guillaume. You’re going to be fine.”

“Fine. I’m going to be fine. I’ve got some soulless, mind-stealing shapeshifter out to get me and time travelers and heaven knows what else, and I’m going to be fine!” Guillaume’s voice was clearly defensive and hostile. “Just who, *diantre*, are you anyway?” His voice stopped abruptly on the upward crescendo.

“They *may* be after you. They don’t seem to be sure.” Jean-Pierre tried to placate the younger man to no avail. “Guillaume. Guillaume,” Jean-Pierre shook the young man none too gently until he was able to stop Athos’ son from going completely hysterical. “I have never lied to you. I am Jean-Pierre, and I am Porthos and Cynthia’s son. The only thing is my mother is from the 26th century, and my father is from the seventeenth.”

“How is that possible?” Guillaume’s voice was more wonderstruck than anything else. Apparently Athos’ son was looking for a reason to believe rather than disbelieve. Appeared Athos’ son was a romantic too. Like father like son ran true to form again.

“My parents met in the twenty-first century. Jala, Daryl, and Keith traveled back in time to 1641 to find people who knew *Herzog Konrad: D’Artagnan, Laurel, Aramis, Porthos, Athos—*”

Guillaume interrupted. “Wait a second Konrad is from this time. Why would you need to find him—okay not you, Jala and them?”

“Try not to interrupt and I’ll try to give you a short version of the whole story.”

Guillaume sat stunned.

“During a maintenance check in the 26th century, Konrad was accidentally taken from about 1640 and jumped forward in time to 2059 or 2060. When he got there he really messed up the course of twenty-first century history, and then he somehow returned to the seventeenth century and assassinated Laurel.

Before the time distortions reached them, Daryl, Keith, and Jala jumped backward in time to 1641, before Laurel’s murder, looking to find people who knew Konrad and could help them find him in 2060 and then bring him back to 1641. You understanding this so far?”

Guillaume’s eyes were serious as he nodded. Jean-Pierre continued his narrative. “In the twenty-first they met up with a fellow compatriot from the 26th century who had just been assigned as a time observer back in 2060. That observer was Cynthia.”

“Your mother?”

“Exactly,” Jean-Pierre confirmed. “Between them and some help from twenty-first century sources, they caught Konrad and sent him back to 1641, along with Athos, Porthos, Aramis, D’Artagnan, and Laurel. However, the only one who doesn’t remember anything about the entire incident is Konrad—because they wiped that section of his memory but were unable to do that for the others.”

“Your mother? Your father?”

“Hold a moment. I’m getting to that.” Jean-Pierre took a breath and prepared to explain his scenario. “Cynthia made a play for Porthos during the time they were in the twenty-first century, and she got him. However, once she got back to her own time, she found out that due to time distortions, the birth control they’d given her hadn’t worked and she was pregnant with me. So I was conceived in the twenty-first century by Porthos and Cynthia and then born in late 2514. Finally, in 2537 after ten years of intensive

training and testing, I became a member of the historical guild and claimed my right to come back here and see my father—Porthos.”

When Jean-Pierre spoke these words out loud, it still sounded confusing to him, and he had had two decades to get used to the notion.

“I see. *Mince alors*. I’d like to say you were lying, but somehow I know no one here could possibly dream up such a convoluted tale.” His father, despite the outburst, and Porthos and Laurel had all taken the news too calmly, as if it hadn’t been that terribly unexpected. The young man drew his shoulders straight. “Don’t worry. If my father could take traveling time then I can maybe accept that all this happened. That doesn’t explain why Jala is here, though.” Guillaume, all in all, was taking things far better than Jean-Pierre had feared he might. Of course, that could be shock rather than poise. After all he had no reason to even believe a future beyond next week existed.

“The most I can tell you about that,” Jean-Pierre said, “is that in late 2516 Jala stepped into the time portal, illegally, and never came back. I came here looking for my father, but also to try to figure out what happened to Jala.”

* * * * *

Without moving her mouth, Kylaborian’par, called to Parlianth’par. He looked straight at her, finding the human morphed form that Kylaborian’par had taken was not unpleasing even though it was male. *No sign of Jala yet?* Kylaborian’par said telepathically.

None? I can only assume that she went to warn her friends of the trap, and we can’t be sure where they are either— Parlianth’par responded.

We must find this Laurel and this boy. You have not been able to find out more about the ty’va’tars? At least, that they suspected it might be a woman called Laurel was the message that was communicated on a far deeper level.

Parlianth’par shook the head of his assumed form. *I know only what you know, what we were told when we came back in time. Find at least the two ty’va’tars, Laurel and this boy, and bring them back to Golianpibynal to be wiped. But Kylaborian’par would it not be easier to go back and destroy the one who was supposed to become Laurel’s mother? the male alien questioned.*

Mentally Kylaborian'par cuffed her compatriot. *You know very well our time travel is limited and that we were unable to go to the decade where Thomas d'Anlass met his second wife, married her, and had Laurel. I think that human woman from the future knew what she was doing and chose carefully when tampering with the seventeenth century. She knew how important Laurel, the ty'va'tar, would be and made sure that she was born safely. Laurel—one of two who would bring down our people years from now and counterdimensionally. And the other human knew what he was doing when he threw his couple together and made sure they conceived a son with the power of nilpar, the nila. Together, the nila and Laurel will bring us down.*

Parlianth'par sighed and shrugged his human shoulders. They knew who they were looking for, more or less, but they had never known humanoids very well. Never had learned much of the human systems and therefore had a very hard time finding certain humans they were looking for. All they knew for sure was that they would know the ty'va'tar when they saw them. At least the female they would know.

Find out more from Antonio, Kylaborian'par said mentally. We've only got six months to challenge them before we resume our dimension and time and zip back to the beginning of 2539, to the war which we are doomed to lose if the ty'va'tars come forward and work together with the forces of the G'dyia, the Galactic Psionic Corps. Do it, now.

Parlianth'par walked impossibly quickly and jerkily for a human out the door of the time craft. The ty'va'tars would be found and wiped at any cost. He would see to it personally.

In the meantime he and Kylaborian'par had to keep their human servants from figuring out who they were working for. It was ever so tedious to go about eliminating hundreds of the puny little things. Of course, there were a few harder to eliminate than others, but almost no one in this epoch could really challenge them. Now to find Antonio.

Italian State of Milan

“Jala?”

The woman remained in her crouching position. Just cocked her head and looked toward the blond-haired, blond-bearded man who had softly called her name. “Athos,” she acknowledged, more wary than she had intended to be.

Awkwardly the *comte* stood. Shifted on the balls of his feet and then crouched beside her. He felt her direct gaze on him—almost looking through him. For a moment he had nothing to say. The musketeer folded his hands in front of him and glanced toward the stream that ran placidly by them.

“Would it help if I said I understood?” Jala said.

“Do you?” Athos responded as if he were a very long ways away. The time traveler shrugged her shoulders and smiled ever so faintly. He unfolded his hands and a finger gently touched Jala’s wan face. “*Je suis désolé*, Jay. Truly sorry. I believe I have managed to behave like a what do you call it again—a jerk? Quite possibly I have shown no consideration for you.”

Rueful, the woman shook her head. “It is a rather singular talent that you seem to have honed,” she teased. Then dropped to seriousness. “Don’t worry about it, Athos. Let’s just do what we can to figure out exactly what is going on and how to protect those we love.”

“As the lady commands.”

“And they say you have little sense of humor,” Jala briefly touched his cheek. “Go ahead and get going. I know you’ve got a lot to do.” He offered her a wordless thanks and then retreated.

Jala’s attention had just returned to the stream when another voice called her name.

“Yes, Jean-Pierre,” the woman said without turning around.

“Could I ask you a question?”

Jala turned, remaining in her seated position facing the stream, and leaned her head on her knees. She cocked her head up at the large man as he seated himself in front of her. “What is it that you would like to know, *hara*?” She used the term of endearment for those cherished as relatives, dear friends, or lovers in historical guild standard. At some point she might call him *mi hara*, but she did not know him well enough to use a term with that much power. “Why I came back here?”

“That’s one thing that I’d like to know, but only if you’re willing to give the answer,” he told the dark-haired woman. “I guess what I’d like to know more is why you didn’t even come back home. Surely they wouldn’t have barred you for very long—not after all you’d done. They owed you and Keith much already.” Well, she’d have to have gone through extensive retraining, but they would have allowed her back.

Without humor Jala laughed. “The answer to your second question is actually pretty simple right now. I can’t. My comstat has been seized from me by the Mov’arthritis. Don’t worry; it isn’t functional.” She’d made sure that they wouldn’t have much to study and the comstat had already been in bad shape anyhow. “My guess is that I might never get what’s left of it back, and therefore that’s probably the biggest reason I haven’t made it back by the time you came back looking for me. As to why I left. I found out I was back here anyway—” At least, Laurel’s journal had hinted at that conclusion.

“And that Athos might be in trouble,” Jean-Pierre added softly. Jala looked sideways at him.

“Yeah. That too, *hara*. How did you guess . . . Athos?”

“I didn’t,” Jean-Pierre contradicted. “I read the journal, and Laurel seemed to believe that you cared about Athos very deeply.”

Laurel. Figured. Jala got to her feet and offered the young man a hand up. He accepted it and stood, looking down on her. “Well now I know there was more to it than that. I’ve got to help Laurel and Guillaume, I guess. Got to figure out what the Mov’arthritis are up to and stop them from fulfilling any plans which alter earth’s history.”

“Maintain the integrity of the time line.”

“Yes. *Toujours*, as they say here.” Always a primary duty for her despite her breaking of the code.

“What about Athos?” Jean-Pierre asked gently.

“What about him?” Her voice was pitched so quietly Jean-Pierre could hardly hear her. “He’s an old-fashioned and genuinely God fearing man, and he’s happily married to a woman I very much admire. I have no intention of changing that, particularly not by trying to force ideals from another time and place on them. No, I’ve got a job to do and friends and relatives to protect. That’s what I’ve got to do and what I’m going to do.” Jala’s head jerked toward a minute sound, and her heart steadied when she realized it

was only Guillaume who had stumbled upon them. Popular today wasn't she?

Jean-Pierre and Jala scooted apart as Guillaume came into their presence. "I couldn't help but overhear some of what you said. I'm sorry, but I have to ask." The young lord looked at the much-changed woman—much changed after a little cleaning up. A very beautiful, exotically so, woman at that. "What about my father?"

Porthos' son glanced at her, and a slight shake of her head and fleeting mental touch informed the young man to go ahead and go. Excusing himself, he left the streamside and left Jala facing Athos' son. Jala rubbed her left cheek upwards, and standing, met Guillaume's softly inquiring gaze. So young. He had so much to learn.

Had she ever really been his age? It hardly seemed possible considering how old she felt at the moment, even though she was very young according to her life expectancy. Not even socially an adult in her own age. And he was so expectant and idealistic. How could she tell him nothing? Jala sighed. "I came back because of your father. I came back to help him. Now I've found out my friend and great-great-grandmother several times removed, Laurel, needs me too."

"And that I might be in need of you too," the young man added and saw a wry smile flitter across her lips.

"*Oui*. You're right about that one. Though, still I can't figure why such a powerful race would be after you two, what they would consider pathetically weak humans. Hardly a challenge, at least in your time, since humans don't even really have mental psionic powers in your age. Certainly not ones they use at any rate." Those who might have had them were probably burned as witches or murdered in other creative ways.

The young man saw her shiver, and it wasn't because of cold. He took a step closer and saw the moonlight fall on her throat, illuminating crisscrossing streaks of black and blue from the base of her neck to the base of her chin.

Instinctively the young man's ire mounted. No one had a right to abuse a lady like that. He reached forward, gently tracing the marks as if trying to sooth away any pain. "They hurt you."

"This," Jala pointed to the marks as Guillaume's hand fell away. "I don't feel anything there anymore. That's not the bad part." Never really had been.

“What did they do to you?” Guillaume looked the perfect picture of outraged protectiveness, outraged honor.

Jala shook her head. “Guillaume, the outrage isn’t going to help. It’s done, and I have to cope now. I’m a grown woman, and I am responsible for taking care of myself.” Regardless of how desperately lonely that task could sometimes be. Best not to think too much on that.

“Don’t treat me like I’m some know-nothing young fool. I am no child,” he said, conviction strong in his voice. “And I wish people would stop treating me like a child and just let me do my job to the best of my abilities.” Jala blinked twice. Now that was an attitude that was far more mature than the ten and eight years Guillaume had to his name. He tried again more calmly and with genuine concern that Jala found reminded her of Athos, an Athos untainted by bitter disappointment and harsh life experience. “Now what did they do to you?”

Jala shivered again and wrapped her arms around herself. In a detached voice she recited, “They tortured me physically, emotionally, and telepathically. They almost ripped my soul. If it weren’t for my own strong shields, mental powers, and years of training, they would have reduced me to a mass of plasma in an instant. Completely at their mercy, and they feel none.”

Guillaume put his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her gravely. “They will never harm you again. *Je vous le promets.*”

Jala shook herself free from the young man. “Don’t make promises like that, Guillaume d’Avignon. You don’t want to break them or be forced to break them. You’ve got too much integrity to break them without destroying yourself.” Just like his father in that respect, basically.

“That is my choice,” he insisted. “I promise you that they will not ever treat you in such a way again. I won’t let them. My word on that.”

“Oh, Guillaume, you would have to be like your father in this wouldn’t you?”

* * * * *

Paris

“*Monseigneur.*” Aramis looked up from the desk and the piles of paper sitting neatly upon it to see a young man rush in.

Swiftly he set down the plume he had in his hand poised above the sheet of parchment.

“You have news of my wife and friends?” The *duc*’s voice was lightly inquiring and completely diplomatic.

The young man shook his head. “*Mes excuses*, I have heard nothing from them in the past few days.” The young man took this opportunity to study the *duc*. The young man could well understand why woman of all ages were after Aramis—even at about six and thirty the tall, dark-haired man didn’t look much older than a man roughly ten years younger. In fact, in appearance neither Aramis nor his wife had seemed to have grown older during their marriage—simply changed their clothes as the fashions changed. His wife . . . too bad for the other women of France that the man was completely besotted with her still.

Aramis felt a distinct urge to swear, which he squelched. He should have known, and he did know that when a small group of agents penetrates a hostile territory, it is hard to keep in contact with them. Bloody hard, to borrow one of Athos’ more apt expressions. Apparently he was going to have to trust that those who had gone would do their job well enough that all of them would come back in one piece. That didn’t mean he had to like it though. “What can I do for you then?” the *duc* said with a studied calmness and politeness that belied his inner qualms.

“*Sa majesté*, Anne d’Autriche, and D’Artagnan, *le Comte de Garonne*, request your presence at the earliest possible moment in the Petit Trianon.”

“*Le petit*, they said?” The guard nodded as Aramis shifted the paper aside and inserted the quill into a neatly crafted case. “Tell them that I am on my way. You may go.”

As Aramis stood, the young man disappeared. The *duc* took only a moment to grab his best sword from its resting place at his feet and then buckle it around his waist. In a deft action he grabbed an overcoat, gave the room a once over, and then was out the door and en route to the Petit Trianon.

“Anne, please.” The *capitaine* of the musketeers, D’Artagnan, gently grasped her arms and halted her pacing. “Sit down. Wearing a hole in the floor is not going to change matters. It certainly isn’t going to help them . . . sit down, please,” D’Artagnan repeated, coaxing.

Reluctantly the queen regent allowed herself to be led to a chair and seated in it. “You will do something.” It was not a question, and D’Artagnan knew it to be more of a royal command.

“*Oui*. I will.” He put a gentle finger to Anne’s lips the way he had seen Porthos and Constance do on occasion. “First we wait for Aramis.” Aramis was far better at knowing what to say in these types of situations. His presence usually had a calming effect.

“Then you need not wait any longer,” a voice both occupants of the room knew well announced. Aramis eased the door shut and bolted it after checking to see that the three of them would remain undisturbed. He sketched the queen a perfunctory bow and then began. “I understand the two of you wished to see me. Might I be so bold as to inquire what about?”

D’Artagnan pivoted on his foot with a grace that was uniquely his own and faced his friend. However it was Anne who took the words from his mouth. “My son has vanished.”

“Mazarin?” was Aramis’ one word response. Richelieu’s successor was almost as bad as Richelieu in some respects—as far as he could gauge.

D’Artagnan shook his head. “I don’t think so, Aramis. Anne found this cryptic little note sometime this morning when she was going through his stuff, just before she realized that Louis had disappeared.” D’Artagnan handed over the brief note.

Aramis’ dark, gold-flecked eyes scanned through the hastily scribbled writing of the boy who was to be his king as soon as he came of age. If possible, Aramis’ eyes darkened. He balled up the piece of paper in his hand and looked at his companions. Anne looked at him expectantly. “I think it is as D’Artagnan probably suspects. Louis has decided to follow Laurel’s party.”

“How did he get out, though? We’ve all been watching him—Mazarin most of all,” Anne questioned. A mother was entitled to be protective, especially given the volatile political climate of France.

“Guillaume,” D’Artagnan and Aramis concluded together.

D’Artagnan continued on alone. “Athos’ son probably showed him the secret passages and more than we would like Louis to know about sneaking around and sneaking out.”

“Does Mazarin know Louis is gone?” Anne shook her head in response to Aramis’ query. She was well aware that Mazarin might want to take advantage of the situation by seeing to it that the young king never returned. Of course Louis had never had the

most stability in his life—aside from Guillaume and his musketeers—so he might have taken the opportunity to get away from the man he had never much liked, not realizing the danger in doing so.

Anne took a deep breath and drew herself up regally. “Find my son and bring him back to me before Mazarin finds out what has happened,” she commanded.

“As you command, *votre majesté*,” Aramis seconded D’Artagnan. “For now I think we should put it about that Louis has gone to visit Constance and her children in Garonne. D’Artagnan, would Constance be so good as to keep an eye on my children as I accompany you in your search for our king?”

“*Volontiers*, Aramis.” D’Artagnan confirmed it would not be a problem as he rose to his feet and then helped Anne to her own feet.

A fleeting smile touched the man’s lips—a smile that confirmed that D’Artagnan, despite his four and thirty years, had never lost his boyish charm. In fact it was his engaging grin and attractive, lithe form of a much younger man that still drew the ladies. Of course, as long as Constance was around, they knew they didn’t stand a chance. Those two were “disgustingly” infatuated by one another. Then again maybe love that strong was part of why D’Artagnan had stayed so young and happy.

Aramis and D’Artagnan excused themselves. Aramis paused to tell Anne, “We will deliver your son back to you safely. Our word of honor. The Lord bless you and keep you well until that time.”

Italian State of Milan, not far from Venice

“Get down!” It was Jean-Pierre’s voice that bellowed the order as he leapt from his mount, pulling the animal down with him to the ground. An enormous feat of strength that the young man did not even think twice about at the moment. He cursed in his native tongue under his breath as he saw Diable, Guillaume’s mount, jerk away from shrapnel which, had it been any closer, would have shattered her hind leg.

At Jean-Pierre’s cry, both Athos and Porthos wheeled their edgy horses to a stop. In a maneuver much similar to that of the younger man they dismounted and urged their horses down with

them. Too bad they hadn't thought to train their horses for the battlefield. Then again they never had expected to be riding back into a war zone after the past somewhat less-war-plagued years.

Another shell exploded only a few feet away from the musketeers and spat up dust, coating the horses and their riders in a layer of red, brown film. With all their strength the two attempted to calm their skittish, terrified horses. Athos spat dirt out of his mouth and drew the flintlock revolver he had taken to carrying with him over the years. He glanced up over his horse that seemed to be crouching as low to the earth as she could. Porthos mimicked his friend's movement.

Just as suddenly, both men hit the ground face to face. "*Nom de nom!* Artillery and militia. We're in the middle of a *satané* all out siege."

"You could say that," Porthos agreed with the older man with an almost unsuitable amount of glee as he looked out over his horse and fired the gun, taking down a foot soldier who had been nearly upon them. "So we going to fight our way out of this?"

"What other choice do we have?" Athos yelled over the booms of guns. He lifted his own loaded gun, cocked it and fired it with deadly accuracy, bringing down another foot soldier. He did not even have time to wonder how they had stumbled into this quagmire without any warning.

Jean-Pierre pushed several inches up off the ground and sprang to his feet. He had to get to Guillaume.

With a swiftness that belied his size, he dodged whizzing balls and shrapnel that peppered the area around him. The young time traveler ducked for cover as a nearby piece of turf exploded. He, however, did not slow his pace. In fact he hardly noticed the burning pain that ripped through his right shoulder, so intent was he on his task. Seconds later Jean-Pierre was upon his young friend and yanking him from the horse that was still skittish from her near-brush with a shattered leg. Within an instant, Jean-Pierre's lunge brought Guillaume flat to the ground. Diable whinnied in protest as the two men pulled her down to the ground with them, but she obeyed, nonetheless.

"You all right?" Jean-Pierre yelled next to Guillaume's ear.

After Guillaume had caught his breath, the young man nodded. He brought his right hand to his ribs and touched a sticky warm substance. In confusion he searched for a wound and then finally realized it was not his blood. His face darted to the large

dark-haired man. “You fool. You’re hurt. You stupid fool,” Guillaume repeated and pushed himself out from under the large man. “Don’t you dare go getting yourself killed for me,” the blond-haired man ordered as he ripped off his surcoat and wadded it, placing it firmly against Jean-Pierre’s shoulder, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

Jean-Pierre winced as previously unnoticed pain seared through his shoulder. However, he did not pull away from his friend’s ministrations. Jean-Pierre gave an exaggerated grin and winced at another shot of pain. “Guillaume, I have no intention of dying. The wound’s not serious.” Hurt like the blazes, though. Of course a metal ball ripping through muscle, sinew, and skin was not going to be pleasant or painless.

“Provided we can get you out of this war zone and get you some proper attention,” Guillaume shot back at him and glanced around looking for a way to escape. Porthos and Athos were pinned down together. Turf exploded all around them. He saw no sign of Vent, Jala, and Laurel. Rapidly he dug through his saddlebags and retrieved two revolvers, both of which he loaded. Looked like he was going to have to try to fight for his life. Both their lives.

“Give me one of the guns, Guillaume. Now already.” Guillaume fixed the wounded man with an incredulous look. Regardless of his formidable strength Jean-Pierre’s badly torn up shoulder was not going to allow Jean-Pierre’s to handle the kickback of the weapon. “Guillaume. I’m not right handed. I’m left handed. Give me the gun. I promise you I can use it without injuring myself further.”

Reluctantly Guillaume thrust the weapon at his friend, but first. Jean-Pierre grabbed it and turned and fired it, taking down the man closest to him. Just what had he gotten himself into?

“There,” Jala yelled in Laurel’s ear, and Laurel directed Vent behind the outcropping of stones. Here the noise of the fighting was muffled. Laurel didn’t question how Jala had been able to direct them to this place of safety. For all she knew it was part of a talent Jala had. For her part Jala did not try to figure out how Laurel had been able to maintain control over her horse. She’d realized that was one way Laurel had channeled her partially latent powers. She had used the surface psionic energy flow to calm the horse and block the sounds away from it.

The two women dismounted from the horse, and Laurel secured Vent to a small outcropping of stone. “What next? You know we can’t just leave them out there. Nor can we stop a siege.”

Jala did not ask who they were—she already knew Laurel referred to Athos, Porthos, Guillaume, and Jean-Pierre. She was also well aware they could not simply stop a siege, not with their pathetically limited resources. “There isn’t much we can do now unless—”

“Unless what?” Laurel demanded.

“If you weren’t latent, your powers might be able to take out this siege crew.” Of course the untamed power could well seriously harm Laurel.

Laurel slammed her hands against the stone, not paying any mind to the scrapes that bit through her palms. “I can’t. Once I take them out, that is if I can get the stupid powers to work, I’m helpless—completely exhausted. And then they’ll probably burn me as a witch.” Jala did not dispute the veracity of the other woman’s words. The *duchesse* was right. Laurel yanked her hands from the stone, whirled to look at the dark-haired woman. “Does Jean-Pierre have a comstat?” Jala’s look was uncomprehending so Laurel repeated the question.

“No, Laurel. We can’t just go jumping around in time, and you know the charge is limited.”

“Jay, we haven’t any other reasonable choice. Look, I know this much. I can use my power to cover for us long enough to get our group together, but you would have to see to it that we made the time jump.”

The other woman’s face was unreadable. A long moment slogged by. Jala unlashed the horse and mounted, her decision made. “Fine. Get me to our friends safely, and I’ll put us forward one week and somewhere in northeast Italy, Venice, where there isn’t any fighting until 1654.”

Athos was completely stunned at the dust storm that kicked up, pushing the siege group away from himself and Porthos. Moments later he was more surprised by the sight of Laurel and Jala riding up on Vent. Jala barked terse commands, telling him and Porthos to mount and follow them. Athos didn’t argue, didn’t even question why Jala was clutching Laurel so tightly. Moments later Jala wrapped Laurel’s arms around the horse, dismounted, and then mounted the huge horse that Jean-Pierre used. Swung the

beast around and directed them all toward where Guillaume and Jean-Pierre fought for their lives.

Porthos looked down as he came upon the young men. Sprawled against the ground, half-conscious was his son, his obviously-wounded son. However, Porthos did not have time to do so much as dismount before Jala's search of the saddlebags was finally successful, and she whipped out the comstat, adjusted the settings, and engaged it. The bluish bubble appeared and Jala said, "Get through there quickly. Guillaume, send Diable and then grab Jean-Pierre and bring him through with you."

Jala's tone brooked no argument, and each of the men disappeared into the bubble-like portal. Last of all, Jala led Laurel and her horse into the bubble and then warped it closed.

* * * * *

Italian State of Venice, not far from Mantua

Antonio brought his hands down from the window sill and turned to face Stéphaneos. "What do you mean there is no trace of them? I thought you were able to confirm the reports that a small group, most likely from France, had penetrated our border and was on the trail of Thomas." Antonio's voice was so cool Stéphaneos failed to repress a shiver.

"They had been following the clues we left," Stéphaneos said. "In fact, they were finding their way here, just the way you planned they would."

"Then what happened?"

"The path they were on led to the siege. You and I both know they had to have fallen into the siege." Stéphaneos laid several papers in front of Antonio. "In fact there were several reports of a small group which had tried to oppose the siege. I assume that to be our group."

"However?" Antonio prompted.

"However, a brief dust storm kicked up, stalling the fighting for a few minutes. When that storm abated there was no sign of the little group." Stéphaneos took a deep breath. The bearer of bad tidings had ever been punished, but then again Antonio was not in the habit of killing those who bore bad tidings. He was more inclined to destroy those responsible for the news—like those who let the band escape and the Frenchmen themselves. If Antonio

were true to form, Stéphaneos could well escape this room with his life.

“Now there is no sign of them. Has been no sign of them for more than a week.” Stéphaneos confirmed the other man’s assessment. “They cannot have just disappeared. I want you to scour all the Italian States for any trace of them. All of them. I’m going to Prussia to see if they tried to flee there and to get in touch with my contacts.”

“Yes, *signore*,” Stéphaneos replied and mentally made a list of things he had to look into and the expenses he had to arrange for. “What about Thomas?”

Antonio’s jaw tensed fractionally. “I’ll take him with me. I think I know someone who would be more than willing to hold onto the man for us and watch him very carefully. Anything more?” Stéphaneos knew that Antonio really did welcome any reminders of things that he might have overlooked. That was part of what made the man so good. He chose his advisers well, and moreover, he listened to them.

“Nothing that I can think of.”

“Then we go. I should be back within a fortnight or just a little longer,” Antonio said and exited the room followed closely by Stéphaneos. Not for the first time in the past seven weeks Stéphaneos wondered just what kind of game was going on here. For he knew there was more than met the eye.

“Greetings, *Monsieur le Marquis de Langeac*.” Thomas barely raised his head at the sound of Antonio’s melodic Italian voice. Truthfully, Thomas did not have the strength to do more than that. His back was a mass of pain as were his arms and legs where they had been rubbed raw by shackles. Nor was he a young man anymore. Mending was an excruciatingly slow process.

With a deft flick of his wrist, Antonio unlocked the manacles at Thomas’ wrists and ankles. Abruptly the old man sagged, and Antonio barely caught him in time to lower the weak man to the ground. The Italian knelt next to the Frenchman and from nowhere that Thomas could see, produced a bucket of warm soapy water from which he grabbed a sponge. “It is time we made you presentable,” Antonio said, but there was no trace of human warmth in his voice. All the same, Thomas did not protest as the water washed away layers of sweat, blood, and dirt. Nor did he complain as the languid warmth seeped into his abused back like a

balm. Not that he had the strength to protest even had he wanted to. So pitifully weak was he.

Antonio did not stop at the sponge bathing though. Clearly Thomas' surprise showed on his face and in his eyes. The other man smiled—a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "You must be quite presentable to meet the gentleman we are going to see. It would not, after all, be fitting to offend a powerful nobleman," he commented as he trimmed Thomas' beard and hair so that they were neat, spread a balm on the man's back, and then provided him with a clean change of clothes and boots.

Awkwardly, under Antonio's sharp eyes, Thomas wrestled with the ties of the breeches and pulled them up over his hips after several tries. He paused for breath. He truly was pitifully weak. The Italian made no comment, merely handed the older man a fresh tunic and doublet that Thomas wriggled into with greater difficulty than the breeches. But he did manage and then managed to get the boots on too.

A shadow of the nobleman he once was, Thomas stood as tall as he could. He did not think he wanted to know why Antonio seemed to be showing him human decency. Thomas did know that it was only to further purposes he would not like. Finally his mouth seemed to respond to his instructions, and in a voice that obviously hadn't been used in a while he said, in response to Antonio's assessing gaze, "So will I do?"

"As a matter of fact, I think you will." Antonio drew a razor sharp dagger and directed the older man toward the door. "And now I think we'll be on our way to see an old friend of yours."

"An old friend. Sure," Thomas said under his breath.

"Oh pardon me," Antonio said as he escorted the French man down the corridor at dagger point. "I should say we are going to see an old friend of your daughter's. But I do think *Herzog* Konrad will be more than willing to accommodate you."

Under his beard Thomas blanched. For once he was grateful his back was to his jailer so that Antonio was unable to see his reaction. He remembered all too well Konrad's actions against his daughter and her friends some twelve years earlier. He had been there, been there just in time to help his daughter elude being recaptured by the man known as Konrad. *Non*—he would rather have died in that little cell than meet this particular man. Then again there was always a slim chance he could escape en route, not much, but a chance was better than nothing.

Italian State of Piedmont

“That way, D’Artagnan.” Aramis gestured with his head, and D’Artagnan deftly directed his horse toward the country lane. D’Artagnan well knew that Aramis was a very good tracker, or he had acquired the skill over the past ten years. Of course he was good at everything, or at least it seemed like everything sometimes. Aramis took to it like he had been born to the skill.

“What are you looking for?” D’Artagnan asked as he ducked out of the way of an overhanging branch. Precisely, and with no waste of words, the *duc* described the track he was looking for to the *capitaine* of the musketeers. The *capitaine* nodded and scrutinized the ground and surrounding shrubbery as well as he could and still maintain control over the slow progress of his horse. “Aramis.” D’Artagnan pulled his horse to a stop and pointed to a set of tracks that led into hill country. “I think I may have found something.”

Aramis dismounted, and his finger traced the tracks in the ground, and he carefully inspected several of them. His back straightened, and he came back to his horse. With his hand poised against the horse’s neck he told D’Artagnan. “Ride for the hills. Our young would-be king seems to have passed this way.”

In one smooth motion, Aramis swung his leg back over the horse and clucked. The horse responded instantly, and the musketeers advanced in pursuit of their runaway charge. Not long now. The young king had led them a merry little chase, but his inexperience had hurt him, and now his brief excursion to freedom and adventure was about to come to an end.

Section Two

Italian State of Venice, 1652

Vent nickered softly and cocked his neck, trying to prevent his rider from falling off. Porthos' neck whipped around at the sound, and he directed his own horse over to Vent just in time to steady Laurel's limp body and prevent her from plummeting to the ground. Porthos shifted the reins out of his hands and awkwardly slipped his hands under the *duchesse's* arms. Satisfied he had a good grasp of her, he lifted her from the saddle and slid her across his lap. The horse pawed the ground at the addition of weight but, other than that, remained docile.

Athos looked up at his mounted, longtime friend. "Is she dead?" Athos asked.

Porthos felt for a pulse and found that it was strong and steady, and her breathing was even. "Always an optimist aren't you, Athos." Porthos allowed his sarcastic side free rein and then changed gears. "Actually, she seems fine to me. Strong pulse. Breathing sounds good, and she's not wounded. My best guess is that she passed out. Just don't you be so foolish as to tell her she did something so missish as faint." Athos rolled his eyes. As if he'd be such a fool to insinuate in any way that Laurel was incapable or weak; he valued his personage. Porthos shifted the position of the woman.

Athos moved his sword out of the way and spread his feet, readying himself for receiving extra weight. Then he reached up his arms as Porthos lifted the *duchesse* and lowered her as carefully as he could from his perch into Athos' outstretched arms. "I've got her," Athos informed his friend as he grasped Laurel more securely to him.

Porthos released his hold on Laurel, and Athos shifted on his feet, readjusting his hold on Laurel. A quick moment he let his eyes run over her face. Then he carried her over to a copse of trees where he carefully laid her down. Quickly Porthos arrived at the same spot where Athos crouched over the blond-haired woman. "I almost hesitate to ask," Athos began more harshly than he intended before he got control of himself again, "but what did you just do, Jala?"

The frown vanished from Jala's face, and she carefully rewrapped the comstat and tucked it back into Jean-Pierre's saddlebag. Time later to worry about how very low the charge on that unit was after the stunt she had just pulled. Jala's dark blue eyes met Athos', and she swallowed after licking her lips. "I did the only thing Laurel and I could think of that might save all our lives. I used Jean-Pierre's comstat to bring us forward in time eight days and place us in what will be northeast Italy. Just a second, and I'll get to Laurel's role. Laurel, Laurel used what she could of her partially latent powers to spur energy into creating a dust storm directed against those who were attacking you. We didn't dare any more without removing that partial latency seal."

In nearly perfect synchronization, Jala approached the threesome and knelt at Laurel's side, her shoulder nearly brushing Athos'. A brief touch assured her that her great-grandmother some times removed was only exhausted. "She should be fine. Still, directing that kind of energy has utterly exhausted her. Give her some time to sleep and plenty of food when she wakes up, and she should be as well as she was before the entire affair."

"Do you mean to tell me we are not only dozens of leagues northeast of where we were but also eight days into the future? That we have simply skipped eight days of our lives?" Guillaume questioned abruptly as he turned his attention away from Jean-Pierre who seemed to be resting comfortably despite his wound.

Athos stood and folded his hands behind him as he looked toward the rising moon. "That's exactly what she means to say, Guillaume. What's more is that she's obviously telling us the

unpleasant truth.” Athos’ son dropped silent, turning his attention back to his wounded friend.

Suddenly Athos shouldered leadership responsibilities again. They were, after all, his responsibility in the end. “I assume that we are safe here for at least the next few days?”

“That’s right,” Jala affirmed. Athos didn’t approve. She could tell it in his posture, but he understood that she and Laurel had really had no other choice, being under attack and under a severe time constraint. Truth to tell, she didn’t like it any better than he did. Aye, but he was prickly. Was Guillaume destined to become that way too?

“Set up camp then,” Athos turned around as he spoke. His eyes looked straight at Jala. “See what you can do for Jean-Pierre. You obviously know more about effective medical techniques than the rest of us do.” The dark-haired woman nodded. Now that was a man who was in one foul mood.

Seized by the wish not to feel so helpless, Guillaume moved away from his friend and set about securing the borders of the camp. At that same moment Porthos saw to it a fire was started and that the bedrolls were spread out nearby. For his part, Athos turned to retrieve supplies for fishing in the nearby lake when Jala’s soft touch on his arm stayed him. “I don’t like it either, Athos,” her voice was sincere. “I wish I could have found another way.”

Jala’s hand dropped, and she lifted her skirts, turning toward the unconscious Jean-Pierre. Athos’ voice brought her up short. “This isn’t going to be easy is it?” Jala knew that he was talking about more than this crusade they had all gotten involved in.

“*Non*. It won’t be,” Jala agreed, “But we will all do as we must. We always do.”

Neither said anything further. The time traveler adjusted her skirts and knelt down next to the wounded man. With a deep breath she fortified herself and then uncovered the wound. Time to see what she could do for Porthos’ son. With luck something might be salvaged from this disastrous affair.

Guillaume rinsed his hands. He was grateful to be clean again and wearing clean clothes even if they were a bit damp. He took several steps away from the lake and sat himself down, after drawing his sword and laying it by his side. Right within easy reach. The young man glanced to where *Tante* Laurel and Jean-

Pierre lay. Jala had said Jean-Pierre would be fine and recover quickly and fully; he was just going to sleep a while. As for Laurel, well she was still sleeping. In fact only he, his father, and Jala were awake at the moment. He was supposed to be on watch for the next few hours. Couldn't figure out why Jala and Athos hadn't decided to get sleep as soon as he had taken up his post. A finger traced patterns in the soil before Guillaume stayed himself. Never would understand his father. Naturally he loved his father dearly, but he would never understand the man. A movement caught his eyes, and he found his gaze drawn to the turn of Jala's ankles.

Instinctively, as per his gentlemanly training, he looked away, instead focusing on her trim waist and the way she moved with cat like grace. *Diantre*. He shook himself. One did not go staring at ladies even if they were ladies from the future. It wasn't polite. There were proper outlets for those urges. Guillaume suddenly grabbed his sword and set it across his lap. He wasn't going to think about it. Besides he'd seen the way Jala sometimes looked at his father, particularly when she thought Athos wasn't aware of it. He shifted uncomfortably at the track his thoughts had taken. He didn't like the idea of a woman other than Yvette looking at Athos that way. That wasn't to say he thought Jala was going to try anything. To the contrary, he was convinced she wouldn't.

At that moment, as if she felt his gaze, Jala raised her head and smiled in Guillaume's direction. He waved, then let his hand fall back to the hilt of his sword. Watched as she and his father settled down to sleep. Something told him this was going to be a long watch duty and an even longer trip.

* * * * *

Italian State of Piedmont

A hand shot up and D'Artagnan went motionless. He did not even dare to breathe. That same hand beckoned him forward and to the right. "Over there. Go around that way," Aramis mouthed to his friend.

D'Artagnan gave the *duc* a thumb's up and then circled around the opposite direction from Aramis. As the *capitaine* made his way around the clearing he looked on the stationary form of the young man they had been sent to find. Question was, could he and Aramis get close to the boy without alerting him as to their

presence and then having to give a chase? The musketeer slipped into place and looked across the way. Aramis flashed him the signal, and both men emerged from their places, coming to stand over Louis.

Louis started into awareness and reached for the sword he had laid by his side. “Looking for this?” D’Artagnan teased as he revealed the sword he had just snagged.

Louis looked first at the *capitaine* of the musketeers and then at the *duc de Rouen*. No way he was going to be able to make it past them and out of here before they could stop him. He felt the distinct urge to throw a fit but dismissed the notion as unkingly. Kings did not throw fits. “Figures my mother would send you after me,” he settled for saying as he folded his arms across his chest. So what if he sounded a bit sulky.

“Exactly right, young *majesté*,” Aramis replied as he moved the boy’s horse out of easy reach. “First thing tomorrow, you’re going back to France. To Garonne, your mother, and Constance.”

Louis was brought up short and he set himself stubbornly. “I won’t go back. Please,” he opted for politeness, “do not try to make me go back?” He had to see Guillaume—warn Guillaume, for his friend would know what to do after that.

“Louis.” D’Artagnan looked at the boy who reminded him a bit of his own oldest daughter, the one and ten year old, just a year younger than Louis. “It’s our duty to take you back. You know you’ve worried your mother very much. She doesn’t even know whether you are alive or dead. It’s really a bad idea to worry one’s mother. Take it from someone who knows.”

The lad swallowed and refortified his composure. Bravely and with a surprising amount of dignity the would-be king replied, “I am sorry for worrying my mother. I never meant to hurt her. But I am your king, and I tell you that I cannot go back.”

D’Artagnan sent a frustrated look at his companion. Children could be difficult, royal children were no exception to the rule. Often, he knew, royal children could be worse. The *duc* shrugged his shoulders. He’d rather not drag Louis back either, but this had to end soon. Once again D’Artagnan focused his attention on his young monarch. “Why can’t you go back?”

Against his will the boy’s lower lip trembled. “They’re after me. If I go back they will kill me.” He was not ready to die yet.

“Louis we’re here to protect you,” D’Artagnan insisted. “All of the musketeers are here to protect you. We’d never let anything happen to you.”

Louis jerked away from the musketeer’s gentle hold. “You don’t understand,” he cried out. “They’re after me. They’re going to kill me.”

At that moment Aramis put a hand up signaling D’Artagnan to stop. He may not have had children for as long as his friend, but he had learned to recognize when a child was afraid. Despite his best efforts to appear courageous, Louis was terribly afraid. “Louis.” The boy looked at the dark-haired man. “We know a lot of people don’t want to see you take the throne, but they have not moved against you because of your mother and your musketeers. Are those same people the people who you say are after you?”

“I know they’re after me. They always have been,” Louis stated boldly.

“But it is not them you are most worried about is it?” Louis silently agreed with Aramis. “Who are you most worried about?”

“I don’t know their names. They came to me in dreams.” The boy’s shoulders shook, and he looked at the adults as if daring them to laugh for being afraid of dreams. “They showed me things that haven’t happened yet. Almost unbelievable things.” D’Artagnan looked at Aramis without interrupting the boy, watched as Aramis prompted the king. “I saw them kill Laurel and Guillaume. But they weren’t human. They were something else. Something else that steals souls.”

A chill slowly traced its way up Aramis and D’Artagnan’s spines. Aramis wanted to disbelieve the child’s story. Still there was one thing the *duc* couldn’t dismiss: Louis believed every word of what he was saying, was convinced it was the truth. “How do you know they are after you now?” D’Artagnan asked the question which was on Aramis’ mind too.

The young boy shivered again and wrapped his arms around himself. “‘Cause they accidentally found me in Paris. They tried to kill me, to make me believe I’d died in my dream. I knew if I had any doubts I was alive I would die.” Both adults asked if he was sure they tried to kill him, and the boy nodded gravely. Dreams that could kill you if you had any doubt that they were dreams? It was unthinkable. Ghastly—yet rung frighteningly true.

“Why did they try to kill you,” D’Artagnan questioned. “You know why, don’t you?”

Gravely the boy met D'Artagnan's gaze, and in that gaze the musketeer knew that the boy understood exactly why he was being hunted. "They tried to kill me because I know what's going to happen," Louis informed them. The boy pointed to his head. "I see it all in here, and if I don't or somebody doesn't do something, Laurel and Guillaume will die. I have to warn them."

* * * * *

Parlianth'par stalked around the time craft. Human shapes were so awkward and hard to master. Of course part of his problem was that he had not drained this human's soul. Instead he had adopted the body. Thus, if the human were strong enough, and it appeared he might be—well then after he vacated its morphed body, then the human would come back into control of its faculties. Sorry, his faculties, not its. Besides he found a certain benefit to not having excised the human soul. This way he did at least have partial access to information that the human being knew. Partial access to its memories and knowledge.

Of course, understanding how these Terran humans thought was another matter. Underdeveloped mental skills. They had to use faulty speech patterns that hardly expressed half of what they were trying to get across. Of course there was that one, Jala. Now that one had been different. Then again she was also a time traveler—a member of that blasted humano-terranoïd historical guild that had tried to bar any knowledge of time travel. Not allow anyone outside of their group to know anything. Wanted all that power for themselves.

Yes—they claimed that they only wanted to protect the time line from those who might try to corrupt it, and to observe without interfering. But who declared them more noble than any other race? Parlianth'par was not fooled. Humano-terranoïds were liars, Terran humans in particular.

They thought they had the right to rule the galaxies. Thought they were so far superior to everyone else. They would learn better soon. Without their precious ty'va'tars they would be nothing. Ah yes. That was what he had to do—figure out how to get to them now that they seemed to have disappeared completely.

Parlianth'par you have not found the boy yet. Kylaborian'par made the perfunctory statement.

No great Kylaborian'par. I regret that he has not been found. The boy was stronger than he looked. How could we have known he would disbelieve the dream completely? Parlianth'par said the last on an even deeper level while on the regular level he sent mentally, Unfortunately, like Jala, the boy ran away before his physical location could be pinpointed. When humans run they can be very hard to find. Especially these particular humans.

You know his name. Send a human to look for him then—Kylaborian'par concluded. After all, this human is one many would willingly pursue, from my understanding. Send several humans after him. The boy human must be found. He sees. He knows what is going to happen.

It will be done as you say, Kylaborian'par. I will see to it that Mazarin is informed.

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December 2537

“Cynthia, enough of this moping around.” Cynthia looked up at the fierce face of her twin sister. She might as well have been looking in a mirror. They were identical except for their hair length, clothes, and expressions. The older twin tapped her foot and looked down at the seated woman with shoulder length flaxen hair. “I absolutely refuse to let you wallow in self-pity. Your son will either come back or he won’t. You knew that was the risk from the day you gave birth to him. Moreover, you knew from the moment you sent him back to 1652 that he could choose to stay if he wanted.”

“Tamree, you’re not helping,” a dejected little voice replied.

Tamree’s gruff expression vanished. The dainty woman knelt and took her sister’s hands in her own. “Come on Cyn, *mi hara*. I love you no matter what happens. Keith loves you. So does Daryl. And look on the positive side like you usually do—it’s only been three months since he left. Three months isn’t all that long as you well know. Give him some time, *mi hara*. I know you love him, but give Jean-Pierre some time.” Little wonder she believed in the sacred bond of marriage. A child deserved to grow up, in love, with both his or her parents, and a situation such as her sister’s just served to reinforce that belief.

With a strength even greater than Cynthia’s (which was incredible for a woman her size) Tamree pulled her sister to her

feet. “Now Keith and Daryl were so good as to invite you along on their excursion to X-mYla. You are going to go along with them. Right? No arguments. And you will have fun whether you want to or not.” X-mYla was a pleasure planet so popular one had to make reservations five solar standard years in advance. In fact it serviced all sorts of beings from humanoid form to molecular glop.

Against her will Cynthia smiled and gave her sister a quick hug. “How come I can never stay angry at you? You always seem to be able to get me to do things I hadn’t planned on doing.”

Tamree quirked her eyebrows. “Dearest, it must run in the genes. As I can recall, I believe you’ve been accused of doing the same thing to others and to me as well. Now skedaddle. I expect a full report later.” Cynthia, slowly dragging her feet, made her way out of the receiving room. “On second thought,” Tamree said loudly enough that Cynthia could hear her at a distance, “forget the report. Have fun. And give my regards to Keith.” Cynthia just gave her sister a saucy wink and told Tamree she’d think about it, then exited to the sound of Tamree’s chuckle. Now that was more like Cynthia. Almost, she wondered what unfortunate male would grab her sister’s fancy.

“Garrett don’t even think about sneaking up on me.” Tamree turned and looked up just slightly at the Movarid humanoid. He looked human except for the fact the whites of his eyes were pale blue, and he was much shorter than human males. Well that, and Movarid were born with only four toes on their feet and had a much slower heart rate than humans. A few other minor internal differences, all in all though—remarkably close to Terran human. Basically he was shorter than the average woman of the late twentieth century, and Garrett was tall for a Movarid. “I probably shouldn’t have challenged you to surprise me if you could.”

“Tamree, what’d you find out? Don’t honestly tell me you want me to believe that you found nothing,” Garrett said in tones that sounded exactly human. The Movarid stared straight at the human woman. Not blinking.

That was always slightly disconcerting. Movarid could go without blinking for an hour. Tamree knew, but it was still disconcerting. She triggered the security field and motioned for the small man to sit down. “Garrett, I can’t get a confederation council to believe me, but I’ve got strong circumstantial evidence that the

Mov'arhit have discovered a very rough but functional method of time travel."

Garrett shrugged at an odd angle. "They are bureaucrats you know. And the Mov'arhiths are extremely xenophobic isolationists. They, the council, aren't going to see the dangers of an isolationist race having minor abilities to travel time."

Tamree sent a thought and a disk plopped into her hand, coalescing from the air. With another thought she enlarged the disk and handed it to the other man. "Absorb that. That's the latest report I've gotten from our spy equipment on the Mov'arhit home planet along with some closely run observations on the time line."

Garrett extended a finger and slowly opened his mind; finding the information untampered, he readily absorbed it. Then with a thought deactivated it and handed it back to Tamree. "It looks like there have been minor, unexplained manifestations in the time line. And yes, it is likely consistent with time tampering. What convinces me that you're right is that it is centralized on Earth. Were it just fluctuations throughout the galaxy I'd say they were normal temporal aberrations."

Tamree sighed. "You know the Mov'arhit better than anyone else I've ever met. You tell me what do you think they are up to?"

"They don't like you very much. You being Terran humans," Garrett clarified while pondering the likelihood that the Mov'arhit were responsible for too many deviations. "Maybe they want to destroy you." Garrett suddenly flushed sheet white and called forth another absorption disk. "Good gracious. Tell me it isn't true." His voice was so calm it belied the expression.

"What?"

His eyes wide with shock, he lost his customary Movarid calm and barely choked out. "War, Tamree. War like the galaxy hasn't seen in more than two hundred years."

"You think they mean to destroy the confederation?" Disbelief mingled with fear tinged her voice. Garrett nodded gravely, momentarily bereft of speech. "We have to stop them, Garrett."

"Then you'd better start by having people in your past who can fight them on their level."

"What do you mean?" she asked the Movarid.

"They have incredible mental powers. Therefore you must have people who have mental powers to counter them."

“The power,” Tamree began and stuttered to a stop. “The power you’re talking about to counter that type of attack would have to be enormous and centralized. And you’d need a channel, a nila of unheard of proportions as well as those with unheard of levels of talent at covization and telepathy and strong mental shields.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “There would have to be many joined together to stand against the Mov’arhit if they’ve been massing their powers as long as I suspect, as many centuries as I think . . . And a nila with dispersion talent or nilpar and incredible mental shields would be a must. But I think we do not have much time. No more than a year.”

“Then we’d better make the time,” Tamree’s voice was frighteningly determined. “Let’s find ourselves two difficult-to-reach windows of time that are within twenty or so years of unexplained time deviations in earth’s history.” Study and prayer sounded like a good start to her. Of course, it always had.

“I’ll get on it. And you research as much as you can about the best gene pool for breeding a nila of unheard proportions,” Garrett told her, and both time travelers set off frantically to figure out how to combat a menace that was about to descend on an unsuspecting Galactic Confederation, which might well have no good way to defend itself.

* * * * *

Late June 1652 – Italian State of Venice

Swiftly Jean-Pierre drew a stiletto from the instep of his boot. He scarcely pulled back his stroke in time to avoid slashing a deep wound across Guillaume’s chest. “Don’t ever sneak up on me like that again. I almost gutted you.” Jean-Pierre sank back against the tree in a seated position. He winced as he jostled his very tender right shoulder.

Jala may have safely and cleanly extracted the bullet and then stitched up the wound, but it still hurt like there was no getting over it. Guess that’s what a ball wedged into skin, tendon, muscle and flesh at high speeds and covered with powder did to one. To quote Jala: “What a mess.” Yes, metal balls, he knew were messy weapons when propelled at high speeds.

Guillaume extended his hand and accepted the knife which Jean-Pierre extended to him hilt first. “You want me to sheath it back in your boot.”

The young man nodded and added, “Be careful.” Guillaume closely scrutinized the boot before carefully inserting the knife in the cunningly crafted sheath, in one slow smooth motion.

A nearly silent footstep alerted both men that someone was approaching. Or more precisely that someone had arrived. Both young men looked up and saw Jala. “So how’s the patient?” She winked at Jean-Pierre.

“The patient is ready to get up and help do his share of the work,” Jean-Pierre informed her and tried to cross his arms, only to discover that it was a little too painful. So he desisted.

Jala looked at Guillaume. “Between you and me, I think he needs to take it easy a little while longer. After all it’s only been two days since he took the wound. Gunshot wounds simply don’t heal that fast, especially if you try to press yourself too hard too fast.”

“So I’m supposed to keep him in line?” Jala nodded repeatedly and quickly. “Somehow I thought you’d say that,” Guillaume commented wryly.

“Well, *mademoiselle le docteur* can I at least get up and about and do a little walking and bathe and things like that?” Jean-Pierre made an effort not to sulk.

The lean, dark-haired woman set her fist to her chin and a strand of dark ebony hair, which had grown noticeably since she’d arrived months earlier, fell forward. “Well . . . sure. Not a problem. As long as you give me your word that that’s all you do and that you’ll promise to put that balm on after any small activities that stretch the skin around the impact point.”

“Ah Jala, that stuff smells awful.” Noticeably her expression changed, and Jean-Pierre abruptly ceased his whining. Some activity was far better than nothing. Plus, with she and Laurel both being so adamant, he’d never stand a chance anyway. Two lady doctors tending to him! Should have been heavenly since they were both beautiful. But zeeks, they were so stubborn and could be so pushy. “I promise I will,” he finally conceded and gave her a contrite look.

“Good,” she concluded and decided to send the man off to Laurel.

“Laurel?” he asked, a pitiful look crossing his features.

“Yes,” the woman spoke with exaggerated slowness. “You did say that you wanted to talk to her about what exactly she did and why and how, so that we could escape that little siege that had us pinned down.”

Without needing to be asked, Guillaume helped his friend up in such a manner that it did not jostle the injured shoulder. Both Jala and Athos’ son watched as Jean-Pierre’s long purposeful strides took him to Laurel’s side.

A finger extended upward in the air, Jean-Pierre said, “Let me get this straight. You have a partial latency seal put on you, and you were able to conjure up that nasty little dust storm that I was half aware of?”

“They did tell me I had talent for covization. Talent to direct energy. And wind is a type of energy.” That definition was, of course, very rough as Laurel well knew.

“I know that, but what I’m trying to figure out is . . .” the time traveler’s voice trailed off. “Did Keith tell you what kind of partial latency seal he put on you? Before you go saying no, think very carefully. A word he mentioned in passing that may not have seemed all that important perhaps,” Jean-Pierre suggested.

“I—wait. Let me think a moment. I believe there was something.” Jean-Pierre leaned forward. Laurel snapped her fingers. That’s what it was. “Plytha, plythin, no plyatharn. *Oui*. It was definitely plyatharn.”

“You’re sure?” The younger man probed. How could it be possible for her to have a plyatharn level seal in place and still operate at the level of power she had obviously expended to conjure up, maintain, and use wind energy? Vaguely he heard Laurel insist that was indeed the term Keith had mentioned and what she had agreed to, so she assumed that’s what he’d done.

“Why do you find that so hard to believe?” was Laurel’s pointed question.

“It’s . . . Well you really shouldn’t be able to use your skills at the power level you did with a seal like that in place, Laurel.” He cleared his throat. “In fact that is the strongest partial seal there is. Only a step and a half down from a full fledged latency block.” Laurel’s mouth dropped to form a little ‘O’ and then the woman pursed her lips, deep in contemplation. Jean-Pierre reached forward and stalled himself just as his forearm brushed by the length of Laurel’s long braided blond hair. “Would you be willing to lower your shields a little for me so I can take a look at what

Keith did? I have a minor talent at telepathy, that's all. All I would be doing is looking at that partial latency seal," Jean-Pierre reassured.

Hmm. The *duchesse* shrugged her shoulders. Porthos' son had integrity. Not that she was really surprised by that discovery. For that matter, his mother had had a lot of integrity too, although any reasonably good-looking man had to be careful around her. "Sure. I can't promise anything though. This is not something I have really ever done much of."

"That's all right. All I ask is that you try." No sooner were these words said than Laurel's eyes drooped shut and her muscles went slack. Jean-Pierre drew himself up so that he was sitting straight and then reached a hand forward to touch her. It was now or never. Mentally he gasped as he encountered the strength of her shields even at their lower level. Zeeks! The woman had shielding.

Jean-Pierre stopped himself from gawking and set himself back on task. To find that seal and see what Keith had done. Gently he extended a tendril of himself, then pressed deeper into Laurel's subconscious. Stopped again.

There was the layer he had to penetrate; he knew on mental sighting. Dang, this was tiring work. He found himself tempted by a stray thought and then brought himself up short. He was not here to find out about Laurel's private thoughts. Quickly, like a pinprick he pierced the haze and glanced into the seal. At first glance it appeared that she was right. Plyatharn. Still it was better to check things out. Take a closer look. Jean-Pierre extended another mental tendril and touched the encasing of the knot . . .

Suddenly his neurons backfired and a psychological whiplash tore through him. The mental energy pulse threw him backward, breaking his physical contact abruptly, and the young man hit the ground writhing as blue lights leaped behind his eyelids. Just as suddenly everything stopped and Jean-Pierre dropped out of consciousness, a different aura humming about him—a type of energy and tension Laurel could literally sense. She wasted no further time. Raced to the man's side. Let him not have hurt his shoulder more. Don't let him have seriously injured himself.

Laurel had just completed this internal litany when Jala dropped down by her side. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," the other woman responded as she peeled away the bandage and looked down at the wound. The bandage dropped from her nerveless fingers. "Jay," she croaked. "Look."

Jala did so. Where the wound had been only moments before, there was nothing. As far as she could tell it appeared the young man had never been shot. Reaching out she touched, massaged the entire area where there had been impact or bruising, knowing that she'd find nothing other than completely healthy skin and muscle fiber. That was all she did find.

A lengthy moment Jala closed her eyes and concentrated with a singleness of mind that the *duchesse* found almost supernatural. Just as Laurel was caught up in that flight of fancy, the time traveler's eyes flipped open and she looked directly into Laurel's troubled gaze. "Laurel, he's got the healing skill. Oh Zeeks, he's a fully operant and untrained healer!"

* * * * *

Italian State of Venice heading north

Thomas d'Anlass, one time *marquis de Langeac*—before he had faked his own death with Mazin's help, winced as the horse scabbled for the best footing on the awkward ground. Roughly, he was thrust forward by the motion of the animal and was scarcely able to stabilize himself with the hands that were tied to the saddle horn. Moments passed before his fuzzy mind remembered to use his legs for limited stability and power to direct his mount.

After several attempts he managed to seat himself straight in the saddle again and look forward to where Antonio's horse led. Antonio was a sharp one. Had left Thomas' horse completely without supplies other than a saddle and a blanket. He'd kept all the water and food and weapons on his horse. Then he'd added the precaution of putting a rear guard. So they were a party of three heading northward, into Frederick William's territory.

Briefly France, thanks to the *duc de Rouen*, had been allied in a trade and mercantile agreement to Prussia. Then some five years later, just before Louis XIII's death, Louis XIII had bungled the agreement, and the alliance had fallen apart. Shame too for Frederick William had been a strong ally and one who would have kept the peace, if not out of respect for the King of France, out of respect for his "ministers." More specifically: Laurel and Aramis and even Porthos.

The French man tested the bonds on his hands again. It was not his imagination. The constant rubbing he had been engaged in had loosened them, started wearing them through. He stopped his

efforts to wear away more of the ropes. His shoulder ached. Abominably. Shoulder did that fairly often though. Not that it was surprising the shoulder was awkward, for it had been badly scarred when he had been shot in Belgium. When he had hovered near death for months. All things considered, a hunch and aching was a small price to pay since he had made a basically complete recovery from wounds that should have been mortal.

The horse took another jolting step, and Thomas gritted his teeth together, holding back his cry of pain. True, his back was healing. No longer was it on fire, but it was very tender, and Thomas was well aware he would always bear the puckered scars from the lashings he'd received. If he lived, or for as long as he lived, that is.

Thomas blinked his eyes, blinking away the tears of pain and clearing his vision as much as his age allowed. Blearily his eyes focused on the passing terrain. Surprisingly enough he knew where he was—more specifically he knew it was two days north of Florence. They were headed up to the northeastern Italian states. In order to bypass the fighting would be Thomas' suspicion. At a guess they would make it to those Italian states within the week and then pass into the Germanic territory and onward to Prussia itself. Unless Antonio was planning something sooner.

Blood chilled in Thomas' veins at that thought. It was all too likely that Antonio was not headed all the way to Prussia. Moreover, he was probably going to meet Konrad at some prearranged location that Thomas was not aware of. That meant that any day now they might stop, and then he would be handed over to the *Herzog, a man* with a grudge of enormous proportions against his daughter and his daughter's husband.

Once again he surveyed the terrain as best as he could considering his eyesight. There had to be a place where he could make his bid for freedom, and someplace soon. Into his bleary vision crept a copse of trees along a river. Well, he assumed it was a river since he could hear the noise of the way it flowed from a distance of what he guessed to be a few leagues.

Probably would camp out there. Then the next dawn when they were most unaware, Thomas could make his bid to escape. Head for those foothills and lose his pursuers with any luck . . .

Italian State of Piedmont not far from Milan

Thwack. Another drop of rain hit the ground. Followed by another. Aramis and D'Artagnan ducked back under the cover of the impromptu lean-to they had constructed. Figures that it would rain in Northwestern Italy during the dry season just to spite them. The two men looked down toward the figure that was curled up on the ground under the shelter and peacefully sleeping. How Louis could sleep through the barrage of rain, Aramis and his companion could not really grasp, but sleep he did.

“So what are we going to do, Aramis?”

“I do not know. I thought that you were supposed to be the one who was good with children. You do, after all, have seven of them and another on the way.” Aramis only had three, so D'Artagnan was still the resident expert on children to the *duc*'s way of thinking. Aramis dropped silent and watched the rain for a while. Watched as the little droplets cascaded toward the ground and were slurped up or ran further down the hill. “I do not think that we should take him back though. Think for a moment.”

“If he is possibly right and someone who isn't human with these sort of powers is after him, we can't possibly take him right back to where they can easily find him,” D'Artagnan finished for his friend who was some two years older than him. He'd seen too much fantastic stuff in his years to automatically discount Louis' claim about something that wasn't quite human going after him.

“Precisely. That's exactly the problem. We don't know if he's right or if what he says is true—only that he believes it to be true.” Aramis watched another droplet hit the ground and make its way down the hill end over end.

“There has to be some way to find out if what Louis is saying is true. Some place safe where we could take him until then. Perhaps someone who knows . . . ” The *capitaine*'s voice fell quiet, and his gaze met Aramis'. Together they reached the same conclusion, “Jean-Pierre.”

“The direction Louis was already going—after my wife's party,” Aramis mused. Actually the young monarch would probably follow Guillaume to the peaks of hell and then battle Satan if Athos' son asked him to.

“It’s not safe to take him with us as we trail them. Then again, taking him back might not be any safer. Nor do we have any idea where the party even is,” D’Artagnan added.

A little voice popped in, a voice that sounded like it came from a boy who had just woken up within the past few minutes. “They’re in Venice, not far from the border between the Italian States and Austria.” Louis stretched his arms and rolled up to his knees. “Don’t look at me that way. I know I’m not crazy. They are there. I tell you they are.”

“I suppose you saw it in a dream?” D’Artagnan queried, already knowing the answer before the young king nodded. The *capitaine* of the musketeers cast a glance at the *duc*. “What do you think? Is there a better option or should we go ahead and try to head for the northeastern states?”

Aramis’ mouth remained firmly closed in a line, and he ran his tongue along the insides of his teeth, deep in contemplation. Still, he heard the little boy claim that he didn’t quite know how to get there, but once he got closer he knew that he should be able to direct them to the exact location of Laurel and her band. “As soon as the rain stops, we find ourselves a tavern. Then hire a messenger to send to Anne and let her know that her son is fine and that we are taking him elsewhere to try to protect him from those plotting against him. After.” His voice raised just enough to signal Louis to say nothing, and the young king fortunately heeded the cue. “After we make sure we have adequate supplies, and then we will head toward the northeast Italian states.”

Wisely Louis chose to say nothing more . . . for the moment.

* * * * *

Italian State of Milan

“Don’t make a sound. Pull that hat down low, and whatever you do don’t look so disgusted with those clothes. We have to assume other people have been looking for you,” D’Artagnan warned the young Louis who he and Aramis had spent the better part of an hour transforming into a young noble boy from a family that was down on its luck. Of course he and his friend had attired themselves accordingly as well so they could pass themselves off as the boy’s uncle and older brother. “Now, are you ready?” D’Artagnan asked the lad as they were poised on the entrance of the Italian tavern. Louis nodded with great dignity.

“*Après vous.*” Aramis opened the door for his two companions, and they stepped through the opening. Seconds later Aramis followed them, on the lookout for trouble at the slightest notice. As he stepped through the door he made one last adjustment, putting his sword more clearly in view. Heaven willing, these people still held true to the notion that a gentleman who wore a sword knew how to use it.

Furthermore, he wanted no ruffian to get the idea that nobles, even down on their luck nobles, were easy targets. The *duc de Rouen* was well aware that even down on their luck nobles often had more money or at least valuable items than commoners. They were no exception, and this was obviously a place that catered to rough crowds.

Talking stopped as the threesome entered the taproom. Several seconds went by before the patrons went back to their conversations and other less than savory activities like harassing the barmaids or high stakes games of cards. Some even openly polished their weapons. In front of him, Aramis saw Louis tense. Well, this was one thing that would expand the king’s education, unfortunately, Aramis remarked to himself. Shifted his attention to D’Artagnan briefly, long enough to ascertain that his friend was alert and ready to take on anything.

D’Artagnan swallowed and prepared himself to speak the Italian he had acquired over the years. He grasped a gold piece in his hand, between his thumb and forefinger. Deftly he shielded the coin as well as possible from all those except the barkeep and owner. “I need to send a message to France. I need a reliable messenger. Where can I find one?” The *capitaine’s* gaze was suggestive that he should be able to make a nice little profit were he to aid him. Provided the messenger was a trustworthy one.

“I would not were I you,” Aramis informed the broad shouldered behemoth who had stood and was about to relieve D’Artagnan of some of his valuables. The behemoth glared down at Aramis. The musketeer was not intimidated, not after all his years around Porthos, and he had taken on many a man who had thought they might best him because he was leanly muscular rather than big. That, and for some odd reason, men seemed to forget that Aramis was tall. Very. Maybe because he was too beautiful for his own good.

The man smiled. His teeth were rotting and punctuated by gaps. Aramis did not react or recoil from the stench of the rotten

breath against his cheek. “What are you going to do about it?” The man yanked Aramis off the floor by his collar.

At that moment D’Artagnan turned around and saw the large man lift his friend from the ground. *Saperlipopette!* “You should not have done that,” D’Artagnan told the hulking Italian.

“Really, little man?” The behemoth directed the spiteful words at the smaller man. D’Artagnan shook his head and took a step back, preparing to draw his sword. He pushed Louis back behind him and ordered the boy to take cover.

“I warned you not to insult my friend,” Aramis stated in his rough Italian. With those words he launched an unexpected and wicked right hook at the behemoth’s off shoulder. The Italian staggered just enough that he lost his grip on the *duc*. Aramis followed up the blow with a fierce elbow to the ribs. Then he whirled on his foot, pirouetted out of the way and drew his sword.

The Italian smiled again and drew his own sword. “Let’s do it then.”

“Indeed,” Aramis coolly replied and deftly parried the man’s slash. Pirouetted and stepped to the right, avoiding another blow. With unbelievable swiftness, he counter attacked, pushing his opponent back several steps.

D’Artagnan’s sword leapt to his hand as if by magic. He parried the attack that would have struck his unsuspecting friend’s back. “That isn’t very nice,” he told the man and pushed him back with several swift strokes. “Don’t interfere in a matter of honor. Or didn’t your father ever teach you that?” he countered. The man attacked again, and nimbly the musketeer danced out of the way. His opponent charged him, backing the sandy haired French man close to the wall. The bar room erupted in a loud cheer. Now this was entertainment.

D’Artagnan gauged his distance and then stepped to the left, jumped up on the bar. Tucked and flipped over his opponent, ending up behind the man. The man whirled to face the French man who stood with his sword grasped in his right hand. A flicker of fear crossed his face for the first time. Now the Italian realized he was up against no average sword fighter. He was up against a talented, experienced master. Two more men got up from their seats, drawing their swords. One headed toward Aramis, the other toward D’Artagnan.

Louis shouted several words of warning at his musketeers over the jeers and cheers of the patrons. Just in time, Aramis

ducked the blow of the second man and sent a left elbow into the man's unguarded rib cage. His second attacker dropped back, staggered to catch his breath. The *duc* sidestepped another blow from the large man and then twisted as his second attacker tried anew. Then the second attacked again.

This time Aramis was ready. With his left hand he yanked the man's arm and pulled him forward, placing him side by side with the large Italian rather than behind Aramis.

Aramis smiled, then followed the maneuver with an upward slash that cut through the smaller man's sword arm. Yelling as blood spurted from the deep gash, the Italian dropped his sword and backed off leaving Aramis to attend only to his first opponent.

D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders at the man's look of fear. Heard Louis' cry and promptly tucked his sword and rolled out of the second attacker's reach. Came up to his feet and secured his blade in time to brush away a sword stroke. Danced out of the way of another, and then he lunged forward, spearing his first attacker through the gut. D'Artagnan lunged more of his weight against the sword and drew upward, then pulled out. Groaning, the Italian fell to the ground, and D'Artagnan made quick work of his second opponent, disarming him with a single slash to the forearm. "Run," D'Artagnan told him, and the man ran. Huffing for breath, the *capitaine* turned to see if Aramis needed any assistance.

Aramis blew a tendril of hair from his eyes and ignored the droplet of sweat that crept down his face until it was absorbed by his goatee. The large man was tiring quickly Aramis noted as he sidestepped another sloppy blow, looking for just the right opening. His sword locked with that of the large man, and stroke strained against stroke. Aramis slid back a fraction.

Enough, he decided and hit the man's collarbone with a powerful blow of his left hand. The man staggered back, and Aramis followed up the blow with a slash to the Italian's midriff, opening up a gash there. One final blow the musketeer launched, bringing the basket hilt of his sword down on the man's neck, sending him to the ground. His weapon skittered away. Blood from the somewhat minor wound to his midriff ran out.

With his gloved left hand, Aramis dabbed at the trickle of blood from his lip, and with his other hand he lowered his sword tip to the man's neck. "I would not attempt it. I do not think God or I would look favorably on it." The large man became motionless, breathing hard through his hodgepodge of rotting

teeth. Fear dilated his eyes. Aramis pulled back just a fraction. “I suggest you get out,” he said with frigid politeness. The Italian scrambled to his feet, clutched a hand to his belly and dashed out the door as fast as his feet could take him.

D’Artagnan, at that moment, came to his friend’s side and placed his left hand up on his shoulder in acknowledgement of a good fight and readiness for another if needs be. “Anyone else?” Aramis inquired, and the patrons all backed off and returned to their previous interests. No one would be accosting the foreigners again. Both friends wiped their blades clean and then sheathed them. Louis appeared at their side and the threesome took themselves a seat at a hastily vacated table.

No sooner had they sat down than another man emerged from the shadows and asked if he could join them for a moment. In lyrical Italian he said, “I understand you are looking for a reliable messenger to go to France. I think I can help you out.”

* * * * *

Italian State of Venice

“*Non.*” Jala cried, halting Porthos. Better not to move Jean-Pierre. Better to avoid touching him for the moment. “Leave him, please, Porthos. It’s safer for all of us, and it gives us a little time to prepare ourselves.”

Athos’ eyes rolled back in his head. He was always getting himself into these situations. You think he would have learned better after the first dozen or so times. Trouble somehow had a way of following him. “Just what do we have to prepare ourselves for?” Athos took the words out of Laurel and Guillaume’s mouths.

“A fully operant healer can cause just about anything that he or she can heal. For example, if he can heal a broken bone completely by innate mental thought and energy, then he can cause that bone to break in the same way. Most healers are not able to do that. Most can only heal.” Jala gnawed her lip for an instant, almost wanting to be interrupted. No one acceded to that desire. “Only fully operant healers can cause injuries by thought or cure completely by thought. Healers in general come in different strengths. Some can heal more serious things than others. It is the same with operant healers except that in general they have more natural ability.”

At this point Laurel broke in. “How do you know that I didn’t heal him?”

“Ah that.” Jala drew her finger across her chin. “You have a partial seal on you do you not?” Laurel confirmed that. “Once healers are no longer latent they must either be trained or be sealed to latency. They cannot be sealed into any type of partial latency.”

“I see. Then it goes back to your earlier worry. He’s untrained. What are our options, Jay?” Laurel asked, taking charge as usual.

“Only the two. Put him into complete latency or train him.”

“Which?” Athos interjected at this point. “Which can you do, and which is better?”

Jean-Pierre stirred and flinched, trying to bring himself under control as he came to a seated position. He glanced at Jala and from her face and his own ragged energy-frayed noncontrol, he easily gathered what had happened. He hadn’t heard Athos’ question, but he answered it anyway. “I don’t think that you can make me go latent, Jala. The native ability is too high unless I miss my guess. Too much power to contain except for a strong telepath.”

“But are you under control enough to function? Else I could try something with Laurel’s help that might work.”

A strange expression flitted across the young man’s face and then vanished. “I’ve had considerable training in minor telepathy and nilpar. It’s helping enough for the moment to keep the rest of the untrained fluxes at bay.”

“Let me guess, Jay, you don’t know much about training healers do you?” The ever-optimistic Athos knew that he and his friends could not possibly have been so fortunate.

In one motion, Jala swiveled. Weariness showed in the slight downturn of her lips. “I wish I could honestly tell you I did.”

Porthos cursed in several languages in an act that Aramis would have reprovved were he there. “So I take it that our friend at arms here might need a good bash in the head every now and then. Rendered unconscious perhaps so he doesn’t hurt any of us.”

Jala took him a bit more seriously than he had intended. “I certainly hope it doesn’t come to that. I’ve trained people with psionic talents before. Not healers, true, but I’ve trained a nila or two, coercives, and people with enhanced—my brand of talent. I know enough to train him so that he can learn the rest safely.” Hopefully. The dark-haired woman turned and addressed Jean-

Pierre again. “And the first thing we are going to do is exercises that keep you from accidentally causing people sickness or injury.”

“Can’t just go having him give people a heart attack eh,” Porthos joked and Laurel cuffed him into silence.

“I wanted to do that, Laurel,” Jala and Athos said together, and Guillaume’s deep laugh echoed unrestrained through the air, followed thereafter by everyone else’s laughs except for Porthos’.

“Fine,” the big lummo said, deciding he might as well make the best of his role. He hammed it up. Threw his arms across his chest. “Everyone laugh at poor old Porthos’ expense.” He grabbed at the arm Laurel had socked. Rubbed it. “Never mind that I’m the one who has been wounded here.”

“Oh *pauvre* Porthos,” Laurel shot back at him, teasing. “Put out of commission by a little woman like me.”

Jala suddenly became somber again. “Unfortunately that is one of the things we have to make sure he doesn’t do, accidentally cause someone a stroke or heart attack with a mere stray thought. Jean-Pierre, come with me. We’d better start this right away before that power eats away at the restraints you’ve forced into place.” Obediently, Jean-Pierre trailed after his mother’s friend. Arguing would have been pointless anyhow.

Laurel clucked her tongue as she watched the two time travelers go off. She feared, couldn’t help but fear, that they would not be able to train Jean-Pierre well enough or fast enough to keep him from seriously harming people. All too well she remembered the damage she had done with her own power when it had mastered her. Even now she had so little training at its use and so little practice using it she could be more than simply dangerous. Maybe she would be able to control all her powers if the partial seal was removed. Then again tempting fate was not always wise. She’d done it often enough to learn that.

The *duchesse* came out of her introspection, and her gaze rested on Athos’ son. Without conscious volition her face softened. *Pauvre garçon*. Poor lad. He was trying so hard to grow into his own person, to become a responsible man, and his father kept endeavoring to protect him. It was hard to let children grow up, but young Guillaume was definitely a man. He had a lot to learn, true, but he was more mature at ten and eight than D’Artagnan had been at two and twenty. Shame his father didn’t

realize that. Then again she forgot often enough herself that he was no longer a boy. Laurel strode easily over to Vent, only slightly hampered by the skirt she wore. From the horse she claimed her sword.

“Guillaume.” The young man looked up. “Leave the old men to their games.” She gestured toward where Porthos and Athos stood deep in conversation. “Just make sure you have your sword and come with me. Please,” she added as an afterthought. “Athos, your son and I are off to scout the perimeter. We should be back in no more than two or three hours, by dusk.”

With obvious skill, Guillaume fell into step behind the *duchesse*, in a perfect position to protect her flank if it should prove necessary. She had no need to remind him of the need to remain quiet and attentive. He’d been that way the entire hour or two since they’d left their companions. If anything, he observed at least as much as Laurel herself. If between the two of them someone snuck up on them they were indeed masters of stealth. Or, beyond that, a skill level of stealth would be more accurate.

Tired of carrying the sword and scabbard, she buckled the item around her waist. It looked oddly out of place with the dress. Not that that fazed her. Now both hands were free, and she’d be able to draw the weapon faster. Maybe. Skirts just weren’t made for this sort of thing.

Guillaume stopped an instant after the woman. Leaned forward and whispered. “You see something?” The woman shook her head and told him it was clear.

“Your father will learn eventually, Guillaume.” Startled, the young man looked toward the *duchesse*. “I do notice some things, Guillaume.” It was not just part of her job but an innate part of herself. “I know you don’t like that your father and mother and so many others still see and treat you like a child. Hang in there. Give your father time to adjust. He’s never had a son grow up before.” Laurel seemed on the verge of saying something else, then thought better of it. Still wasn’t her place to speak of other things yet.

“What?” He prompted her to complete her thought. She told him it was nothing.

Somehow he did not believe her. Moreover, he refrained from mentioning to Laurel that she had never had a son grow up before either, and she wasn’t doing half bad at letting him come into his own. Then again she had her own challenges dealing with his father’s efforts to be protective of her when she least wanted it.

“Let’s circle back before the others begin to wonder what happened to us,” she said in the same hushed tone she had been using the entire time. Guillaume knew it was useless to argue with her, but still she had been about to say something else. Something that was fairly important; he felt sure of it.

“Laurel,” he whispered and the woman halted. Guillaume knelt and dusted off a little object. Slowly he picked up the silver chain and pendant of a *fleur de lys* like one that used to belong to Laurel’s mother. “Take a look at this. It hasn’t been here long.” He handed the broken chain up to the woman he called his aunt.

Wordlessly she accepted the trinket with her left hand. Then, her heart thundering, she picked it up with her right hand and gently inspected it. Her fingers began to shake as she turned the pendant over. One word was inscribed on it: *honneur*. The other two words had long since faded. Abruptly, she forced the necklace into the pocket of her underskirt as she tried to control the emotions flooding her senses and bring some semblance of calm. A voice intruded on her jumbled thoughts. “Laurel, what is it?”

With contrived calm, she replied. “It is my father’s chain and pendant Guillaume. He’s been this way within the past day. In fact, judging by those tracks I’d say a small group has been this way in the past day and that he was one of them.” Either that, or someone had stolen the necklace, but somehow she did not think that was the case. Instinct told her she had just missed her father by a hairsbreadth. Oh Papa.

Guillaume did not reveal that he noticed the sudden change in her demeanor. “Three horses and probably three riders have been by here,” he told the woman as he returned to his investigation of the tracks. She asked him if he was sure. “Positive, *madame*. I am a very good tracker. There were three through here sometime before midday give or take a little. Pray one was your father. I think we should get back and tell the others what we’ve learned.” Laurel, after a pause, agreed and they moved very quickly back toward the camp. Far quicker than they had come, and in a much more somber mood.

* * * * *

Italian States elsewhere in Venice

Antonio narrowed his eyes and stared into the darkness of the early morning. Couldn’t see much. Still he was convinced that

there was someone or something out there. Nor was he talking about the horses, Thomas, and his guard. Something else. From the holster at his waistband the man withdrew a well-crafted flintlock with a polished handle. In movements that were mechanically precise he distributed the powder and the ball inside the gun. Re-corked the powder flacon and then took several mincing steps forward. Loaded and primed gun held at ready in his right hand.

His brow furrowed. He didn't like it by half. Better investigate. He glanced back to see that his guard was indeed newly awake and keeping an eye on the prisoner, and then he moved forward into the dusky dawn of the morning.

Thomas listened as the steps dwindled away. Then expelled a silent breath of air. One-to-one odds at the moment. His chances would not get any better than that. Plus he had no idea when Antonio would return. *Carpe diem*. The French man opened his eyes and rolled up to his knees, intensely aware of the guard's eyes on him the entire time. A finger tapped against his thigh. How to get rid of the guard? Fast.

Stupid idea. Couldn't possibly work; he tried to veto his thought, then took himself to task. Well, anything was worth a try he mused. His eyes noted the location of the horses and supplies. The nearest horse would be easy to free in a matter of seconds.

He just might be able to pull it off he thought as he primed all his muscles to stand and move quickly. Yet, for the instant he remained crouched. Time to act. The man hunched his back and affixed a mask of pain on his face. Not that that particular mask was a difficult one to assume the way he felt. *Oui!* It could work Thomas noted as he saw a flash of unexpected human pity cross the guard's face upon seeing his prisoner's discomfort.

"Son," he called in a deliberately weak voice. "Could you possibly be so kind as to fetch this old man that balm? I'm afraid my back is acting up something terrible and don't think I'll be able to get over there to get it."

For a moment the man's face was hard, and then he asked where. In near-flawless Italian Thomas told him. As soon as the guard's back was turned Thomas was on his feet.

With a speed and stealth that belied age and injury, he dashed across the short space to the horse. Quickly he unhobbled the horse. Set a foot in the stirrup and threw his leg over the side. With his somewhat awkward hands he maneuvered the horse around

and sent her leaping forward at top speed. At that moment the guard looked up from his search for the balm. The Italian dropped the balm and ran for a remaining horse, shouting. The guard's shouts brought Antonio running in time to see Thomas retreating into the distance and to see the guard wrestling to undo another tethered horse and give pursuit.

Wasting no further time Antonio drew his knife and slashed through the knotted leather that held the final horse in place. Tucking the gun in his holster he hopped on and wheeled the animal off in pursuit, his guard seconds behind him.

The hooves of Thomas' horse pounded against the ground, jolting him at every step. He didn't care. Distance as fast as possible was the important part. That, and finding any other people. He leaned forward and secured himself as much as his damaged back would allow and then asked more speed of the mare. At the pressure of her rider's legs she poured on another burst of speed. As the wind whipped through his greying hair Thomas knew that this could not last forever. The horse would tire. He would tire, and far quicker than his pursuers.

* * * * *

Italian State of Venice

Porthos jerked his head to the side. Cocked his head again. No, he was not mistaken. Those were the sound of hooves hitting the ground, extremely fast. The musketeer spurred his horse forward, drawing even with Guillaume and Laurel who led their little procession as they tracked the group that Thomas was presumed to be with. "Laurel, Guillaume, north by east at two o'clock. There's a horse coming. I don't think we're going to need to be doing that tracking."

"Are you sure?" Laurel began to ask, only to be cut off by the proof of Porthos' claims. The pounding of hooves was now loud enough that even the untrained listeners could hear the approach of the animal. Of course, the rider was obviously making no effort to conceal his approach either.

From behind Laurel and Guillaume, Athos commanded, "Guillaume, take Laurel and fall back. We have no idea what's coming our way."

"Athos," they protested at the same time. With a single glare he overrode their protests. No one messed with Athos when he

was in one of those moods unless they wanted to pay much more for it than they were willing to pay. Reluctantly, both his son and the *duchesse* dropped back, allowing Athos and Porthos to take the lead and leaving Jean-Pierre and Jala to bring up the rear.

Even at this moment Athos was still not giving his son a chance to prove himself, and now he was treating Laurel as if she were less capable than she had proven herself over the years. All in the name of protecting them. As if Athos were better able to combat something than his son. To the contrary, Guillaume had the advantage of being younger and bigger, and most likely stronger. Quicker too, in all likelihood, just not as experienced. *Parbleu*, Laurel exclaimed inwardly. He could be so infernally bullheaded and over-protective sometimes.

Hunched low over his horse, a rider bore down on them at break-neck speed. As he rode he glanced up and caught sight of the group and slightly altered his path so that he would join the group rather than bypass them. Laurel's breath caught in her throat. She could scarcely dare hope, but maybe just maybe. She squelched those thoughts as she saw two more riders emerge from beyond the slope quickly gaining on the first rider.

"Guillaume," Laurel yelled. "Veer left. Circle around and see if you can distract those two pursuers. I'm going right." Athos would simply have to deal with it. He had made her angry, her and Guillaume. Besides what she was doing was not that dangerous she rationalized.

Almost at the same moment, Guillaume and Laurel's horses launched on their respective courses in bursts of speed and grace bred down from *Rebelle's* bloodline. Both headed on a course to break the two pursuers off from the object of their pursuit. Athos yelled ineffectually after them, and then he and his remaining companions rode toward the first man who had crossed the rise.

At their rate of speed with their fresh horses, Laurel and Guillaume gained swiftly on their target. The ground between the four horses decreased ever more quickly and with a squeal, the approaching horses were drawn up and redirected. Guillaume and Laurel reacted quickly, countering the move and placing themselves once again in the path of the pursuers. One of the pursuers slowed, drew a gun, and fired it.

Athos' son barely jerked out of the way in time to avoid being hit. As it was *Diable* shied and sidestepped, and the young

man had to spend precious seconds bringing the spirited horse back under control.

Responding with haste, Laurel spurred Vent forward, to come around behind the pursuers. She brought the horse to a quick stop and then drew her sword. The Italian guard wheeled around to face her. “Don’t try it,” she warned him in flawless Italian as she watched him pivot to a stop and reach for his own sword.

Not heeding her warning, he drew the blade anyway. Laurel whispered to Vent and neatly deflected the guard’s awkward stroke. Man did not have experience fighting from horseback. This was her game. Vent jumped forward a step at his mistress’s command, and Laurel let her sword dip and then come back up, striking the hilt of the man’s sword. Startled at the sudden impact the man lost his grip, and the sword flew from his hand, skittering across the uneven ground.

In a swift follow up maneuver, Vent turned and Laurel brought her sword to the man’s neck. Both horses stopped, and with her unoccupied right hand Laurel grabbed the reins of the other man’s horse.

“Step down. Try anything and I make no guarantees as to your continued health.” And Aramis had claimed she was often lacking in polish and politeness. This time her style wasn’t far different than his.

Seeing that the pursuers had been sidetracked and that his other two companions could use more help than Athos, Porthos sent his horse pounding toward Guillaume and Laurel. Guillaume glanced up in time to find that Antonio had re-primed the gun and was preparing to wield it against Laurel.

Guillaume sent Diable spurting forward, placing himself in the path of the man’s aim. Okay not exactly in the path of Antonio’s aim. Instead, Diable brought him within touch of the slowly moving horse. Guillaume dropped the reins of his horse, came to his feet and leapt from his horse to Antonio’s, barely making it onto Antonio’s horse before Antonio yanked the reins, pulling his horse away.

The young man brought both his arms down on the hand that held the gun. Antonio’s arm fell at the impact and the gun discharged toward the ground. That was when the wrestling match for control of the horse began. Antonio’s elbow impacted with Guillaume’s rib cage, and the man winced and struggled to restrain Antonio’s arms as the horse took off of its own volition.

Antonio yanked one arm from the younger man's grasp and reached for the reins. Pulled hard.

The horse whinnied and stopped abruptly. Guillaume struggled to maintain his seat. Antonio took advantage of Guillaume's distraction and yanked his dagger out of its sheath.

At that moment another voice intruded. "Drop the dagger," it commanded in very rough Italian. Antonio turned his head enough to catch sight of a grim faced, large man. A man who had a primed pistol aimed directly at him. Thinking better of his previous plan, Antonio let his dagger fall to the ground, and when Guillaume told him to get down, he did so very carefully, Porthos' gun trained on him the entire time. Immediately Guillaume dismounted, rubbing his battered and bruised ribs. Tomorrow he was going to be sore. Together he and Porthos escorted their prisoner toward where Laurel stood, her sword threatening the guard.

Thus, the threesome slowly led their horses and their prisoners toward the rest of their party. And closer to the fugitive who had been riding neck or nothing in the first place. Athos looked up from the ground as his son and companions approached. His gaze rested with some disapproval on his son, chiding him silently for foolishness. Guillaume looked away, painfully embarrassed. Then Athos did the same to Laurel, except she did not take it. Rather, she stared back belligerently, and her eyes clearly said that they, she and Guillaume, had done nothing wrong. Athos wisely gave up on the silent attempt to chastise the *duchesse*.

Porthos threw his hands up in the air. This was patently ridiculous. He took matters into his own hands, strode forward in several of his long swaggering strides as Jala and Jean-Pierre began to see to it that Antonio and the guard were secured. Porthos stopped. Extended his hand toward the old man who stood on the ground nursing a hunched shoulder. "I am known as Porthos the pirate and sometime *comte* too," he said. "My friends, however, may call me Porthos. Welcome." He cocked his eyebrow in a provocative manner and continued on. "And might I possibly have the pleasure of meeting Thomas d'Anlass back from the dead?"

Thomas' lips twitched despite himself. "*Non*. I am not back from the dead. I never died. But you are correct in assuming that I am Thomas d'Anlass."

At that moment Laurel broke away from Guillaume and rushed to stand next to Porthos. Her eyes made a long, thorough

perusal of the man standing before her. Then she shot several questions at the man in Japanese, which the man deftly answered. A gigantic smile exploded over Laurel's face, and she threw her arms unashamed around the man as she launched herself at his chest. "Papa. Oh papa. It really is you." He nodded and blinked away the tears that stung his eyes. Never had he dared hope he'd ever have a chance to hold his daughter again.

"I believe we have much to talk about, *n'est-ce pas?*" Thomas slowly released his hold on his daughter. "You have many questions I'm sure." He stopped and addressed the others in Laurel's party. "Could you please excuse me and my daughter for a little while? My thanks." Without further ado the two withdrew from the rest of the group to conduct a private reunion.

The sun rose higher as the group mulled around, and Laurel talked with her father. Laurel's father dropped silent for a moment and glanced over at the musketeers and her other companions. "Athos and Porthos, I know. Who are the others though?" One by one, starting with Guillaume, Laurel pointed out each of her companions to her father. On the last her father tensed. "Jean-Pierre you say?"

"*Oui.*" Laurel didn't quite know how to respond to Thomas' cryptic shift in voice and stance at the name. Okay, not cryptic, strange.

Thomas hit his bent finger against his chin. Now what was it he was supposed to remember? Something someone had said a long time ago. Something he felt sure was fairly important. "There's something I'm supposed to tell you . . ." He never got any further. For at that instant, a half dozen riders appeared over the rise, coming from the north. Barely in sight. In fact, the one in the lead eerily reminded Laurel of someone. *Non*. It wasn't possible. Not Konrad. The whole resting site became a mass of confusion, erupting into a flurry of action.

Jala's face twisted into an expression that could only have been described as shock and sheer, unadulterated terror. "Forget about them. Forget about the prisoners," she yelled. "Just run. Run as hard as you can and as far as you can before they get any closer. Your lives could depend on it." She followed up this warning by jumping on a horse and wheeling off in the direction of Russia.

Some of her terror transmitted itself to the others, for they did not stop to question her, but followed her lead, taking off after the

woman. All except Laurel and Thomas who were much farther from their horses, on the outskirts.

Stunned, both looked up and then ran toward Vent and the horse Thomas had claimed as his own. Despite her skirts Laurel still outdistanced her father fairly quickly. Her breathing heavy in her own ears, she wrestled with the tie that secured Vent. Glanced up and saw the riders bearing down on her. Closer and closer. Her face paled as the riders came close enough for her to make a positive identification.

It was indeed Konrad and someone else who looked human but who gave her cold shivers. Anew, she frantically wrestled with the tie. Finally it gave way. At that moment she glanced back and saw her father struggling to reach his own mount. She scrambled on top of her horse and turned Vent toward Thomas. Papa!

He straightened as much as his crippled back would allow him and then clambered upon the horse, signaling Laurel to go. Laurel started to go. Yet out of the corner of her eyes she saw her father overtaken by the riders. Automatically she slowed her horse only to hear Thomas' voice yelling in a mixture of Japanese and French. "*Dis donc*, Laurel, this is no time for heroics. Get out of here! Go! Heaven help me if you don't go. I shall kill myself this instant," and so saying he drew a dagger that Guillaume had handed him earlier.

Her nostrils flared and her mouth worked. Papa! How could he? Defeated, she wheeled Vent back around and sent him off in whatever direction the stallion wished to follow. Laurel did not even notice the stinging tears on her cheeks. Did not even notice anything beyond staying on Vent as the horse poured on all his speed without even being asked to do so.

A long time horse and rider labored, Vent refusing to be overtaken by his pursuers. Then, as if cued that he'd lost his pursuers, the stallion dropped to a slow walk. It was fortunate Vent did so. For the moment he slowed his walk and stopped, his mistress lost her grip and tumbled to the ground. Conscious for only a brief moment of the searing pain in her right shoulder where a bullet had wedged itself as she fled, Laurel hit the ground. There was a sickening crack. Then nothing.

There are 437 pages in the book, *Out of Phase*. You can order books at big discounts from www.forhonor.com



Out of Phase

Important People in
the *By Honor Bound* series

Partial list of the d'Anlass family:

- Thomas d'Anlass: Marquis de Langeac. Laurel's father and master spy for France. Born about 1595.
- Cathérine d'Anlass: Thomas' first wife. Died in 1617 due to complications during a miscarriage.
- Thérèse d'Anlass: Thomas' second wife. Laurel's mother. Died when Laurel was a child. Had a son who died shortly after birth.
- Laurel d'Anlass: Thomas d'Anlass' headstrong daughter. Born in 1619 in Langeac.
- Adrienne d'Anlass: Thomas' third wife. Two sons and a daughter from previous marriages. Laurel's stepmother.
- Jala Brenhaven: A great-great etc. granddaughter of Laurel d'Anlass.

Partial list of Athos' family:

- Pierre: Athos' father, comte d'Avignon. Died February 1632.
- Athos: Born about 1608-09. Two older sisters. Married to the Baron of Chartres' daughter in 1632.
- Guillaume: Athos' and Sabine's son, born about 1634.
- Yvette: Athos' second wife. Porthos' younger sister.
- Juliette d'Avignon: Daughter of Athos and Yvette. Born about 1643.

Partial list of Porthos' family:

- Bernard: Porthos' father. Comte de Vendôme.
- Marie: Porthos' mother. Comtesse de Vendôme.
- Porthos: Born Jean-Paul. Eldest child of the comte de Vendôme. Born about 1611-1612.
- Yvette: Eldest daughter of the comte de Vendôme. Born about 1620.
- Jean-Pierre: Porthos' son by Cynthia.

Juliette de Vendôme: Twin daughter of the comte de Vendôme.
Born about 1623.
Genviève: Twin daughter of the comte de Vendôme.
Born about 1623.

Partial list of Aramis' family:

Jean: Duc de Rouen.
Richard: Eldest son of the duc de Rouen.
Aramis: Younger son of the duc de Rouen. Born
about 1614-15. Husband of Laurel d'Anlass.
Great-great, etc. grandfather of Jala
Brenhaven.

Partial list of D'Artagnan's family:

D'Artagnan: Comte de Garonne.
Constance: D'Artagnan's wife and friend and confidant
of Anne d'Autriche, Queen of France.

Prussian characters:

Friedrich Wilhelm Hohenzollern: German version of name.
Frederick and Fredrick: Other spellings of
the name.
Elector of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia.
Son of George William. Also known as the
Great Elector.
Erik: Prussian duke.
Friedrich: Prussian noble. Konrad's older brother.
Konrad: Prussian noble. Friedrich's younger brother.
Frederick: Konrad also assumes this name in
Righting Time.
Eva: Friedrich and Konrad's mother.

Year 2060 characters:

Angela Davers:	Presidential contender and woman who should be president elect.
Robert Davers:	Angela's half brother and campaign manager.
Jennifer Granble:	World-class American reporter of Hispanic descent. Paul's wife.
Paul Kurshing:	World-class American reporter. Jennifer's husband.
Tonie:	Leader of the Washington, D.C., Syndicate.
Greg:	One of Tonie's agents.
Murielle:	One of Tonie's agents.
Dimitri:	President of Russia.
Kenji Tanaka:	Japan's statesman and leader.

Far-future characters:

Keith:	Jala's stepfather. Time operative and telepath.
Jala Brenhaven:	A great-great etc. granddaughter of Laurel d'Anlass. San Antonio, Texas.
Cynthia:	Tamree's twin sister. Coercive and time operative. Mother of Jean-Pierre by Porthos.
Jean-Pierre:	Son of Cynthia and Porthos. Age 23.
Tamree:	Cynthia's conservative twin sister. Coercive and member of the guild.
Daryl:	Young member of the guild. Catholic and Japanese.
Garrett:	Movarid member of the guild and psionic superior adept.
The Great One:	The Mov'arith leader.
Kylaborian'par:	One of the Mov'arith's top agents and psionic adept, female.
Parlianth'par:	One of the Mov'arith's top agents and psionic adept, male.
G'mr:	Member of Zelmarik race and Cynthia's helper.
Ly'resha:	Queen of the Cat'yan race. Minor power of coerciveness.

For Honor selected by Green Valley High School in Henderson, Nevada as the featured book of the year for the Reading Incentive Program

Excerpt From *For Honor*

The spy looked Laurel up and down. Dressed in a court gown and her hair done up, she was far from presenting a threatening picture, and the sword in her hand looked distinctly out of place. Not to mention that her shoulder was wounded. “You don’t really think you can stop me, *mademoiselle*,” he informed her in his most condescending tones and moved to pass her.

She raised her weapon, barring his way. “You don’t seriously think that I’m going to let you walk away after the crimes you’ve committed against me and mine.” They stood staring at each other.

Neither gave and Laurel moved to disarm the man. Automatically, Georges parried. Swiftly, trying not to stumble, she retreated at his attack, cursing the skirts that hampered her movements, hampering her quickness and giving the half-starved and tired man a significant advantage.

She whirled backward, narrowly avoiding his stroke. Disengage, and she backed up several steps, allowing herself just enough time to slit her skirts to reveal the pantalets underneath. The skirts fell at her feet and she jumped away from another lunge. Better, though by no means as good as breeches, a good tunic, and sturdy pair of boots. Men didn’t realize how lucky they had it. Of course they got the better end of the deal in everything.

Her arm wavered as his sword thrust upward, and she linked her blade with his to block the blow. The blow sent little shock waves tingling up her arm. Her right arm simply wasn’t as strong as her left, and she was out of practice in fighting right-handed.

If she ever got out of this and was able to heal, she swore to herself that she’d not neglect her fencing skills for either hand. The balls of her feet ached as she felt every stone and pebble through the thin slippers. Blast fashion for its absurdities! Blast men for dictating not only their own fashion but the fashions of women as well. She lunged, swiping upward, and her stroke was easily knocked aside, almost dislodging her sword in the process.

Her grip failing, she still managed to block the next blow and dance around behind him. Okay, enough was enough. She threw her sword in the air and caught it in her left hand, and Georges looked at her like she was a complete fool. His sword at ready, he circled her. “You really think you still have a chance. *Mademoiselle*? It seems you are doubly foolish now.”

“Then a fool I will be,” she huffed, attacking him and driving him back, to his surprise.

Nom de nom! The woman was better at fighting with her left hand than with her right; Georges chastised himself for being completely unprepared for a left handed fighter, for forgetting that that boy on the ship was one and the same as his current enemy.

She pushed him back another step, negating his longer reach and almost slicing his arm from elbow to wrist. Capitalizing on his superior strength, he pushed her away. With a cry she fell back, blood seeping from the reopened wound to her sword arm. He followed up immediately, hoping to catch her off guard due to her pain, but she neatly parried and danced out of reach.

*Kat is really good at creating characters
you care about almost instantly.
Hillary Campbell, professional editor*

Excerpt From *Gambit for Love of a Queen*

The woman shook her head. “I will slow you down too much. You’ve got to find Laurel, Athos, and Porthos. Go on ahead. Bring them back here. Please. Please,” she pleaded.

“And how will you defend yourself?” Aramis pressed.

The woman shifted and pulled the pistol from her waistband. She cocked and primed it.

“I am still well enough to shoot,” she replied.

Aramis grabbed his sword and stood. Porthos’ sister was far more courageous and self-sufficient than he ever would have suspected. “I’ll be back as quickly as I can. Try to stay out of sight.”

The musketeer dashed off down the corridor, Yvette watching, holding tight to the gun as if it were her lifeline. “God, please, let Aramis come back soon.” She was not brave enough for

this. Already shock was setting in, and she felt ready to burst into tears. She would have called Aramis back, but he was already gone. . . .

. . . Aramis pushed the door open with his shoulder and entered the threshold. “Greetings, *Mademoiselle* Laurel,” he said and unsheathed her sword, tossing it to her without ceremony. She caught it deftly in her left hand and raced for the open door. “Just a suggestion. Try the right-handed approach first, then switch to your left hand. It will give you a greater element of surprise.” The *marquise* nodded, switched hands, and stepped over the bodies and into the hallway.

Maybe there was a merciful, just God as Aramis contended, and she wouldn’t be forced into marriage with Konrad after all.

“So this is the thanks I get,” Aramis commented, close on her heels.

She turned her head over her shoulder, and fixed her gaze on him. Angry or grateful—she couldn’t quite figure out which emotion was taking preeminence in her. Strange. “*Merci, monsieur*. As much as I would love to talk with you, I’d rather get out of here. *Hein?* What do you say? Shall we go?”

Aramis said nothing. She gave him no chance to. The woman was very unhappy with him like he had guessed she would be, but at least she was being relatively civil. Would he forever be obliged to be making amends with this woman? And why was it she seemed to hold on to grudges against him as tightly as she could?

You are transported immediately to another time and place, and you feel like you are there. The author is highly skilled at instantly bringing the characters to life and making you feel like you know them. Meet your new friends in this modern swashbuckling story.
Brian Jud, Book-marketing consultant

Excerpt from *Righting Time*

“We are not from your time. We are from very far in your future—more than eight hundred, closer to nine hundred years to be more precise.”

Already the musketeers were trading looks that plainly told them they thought Keith was lying through his teeth or fit for the madhouse. “There has been a big disturbance in the time continuum that sent a man we know as *Herzog* Konrad into the twenty-first century, where he wreaked so much havoc that the entire timeline was drastically changed. We came back here to obtain your help to find the man and stop him from destroying the future of this entire world.” Keith ran out of words to say.

“Of course, and I’ve walked on the moon numerous times.” Porthos’ voice was plainly deriding, and it was only a warning look from Laurel that stopped him from forcibly ejecting the three lunatics.

“Actually, men do walk on the moon in the midtwentieth,” Daryl piped up and then abruptly fell silent, not wanting to get into an argument with the large man. No telling what damage a man that strong could do to him, and the medical facilities around here left a great deal to be desired.

D’Artagnan slid his gaze to Laurel. She was far too serious and still. Was the *marquise* actually considering this delusion of madness as truth? “Do you actually believe them?” the youngest musketeer asked.

“Can I take the chance that they aren’t lying to me and turn my back on them only to find out that Konrad really does do what they claim he does?” Laurel sank onto the sofa next to her friend. “Put it this way. I don’t disbelieve them.” She couldn’t afford to, and her gut instinct was to trust Jala. More often than not her instincts were accurate. That was one trait she and her stepsister, Sabine, had often shared. The lingering memory of loss and betrayal still gave her a pang of anguish, and she pushed it away quickly.

“Laurel,” Jala handed the woman the pack and urged her to open it, “I’d like you to take a look at this. Just be careful. Some of that stuff is quite sensitive, and I wouldn’t want anyone here to get hurt.”

Laurel pulled the strange veston from the pack and held it up so she could get a better look at it. Never before had she seen anything remotely like it. The material itself was nothing like any cloth anywhere in the known world, as far as she could ascertain, and she had traveled extensively with her father on his spy missions. The *marquise* reached into one of the pockets and withdrew a handheld link, the comstat.

Though, she had no idea what it was, still, it mesmerized her. The unit was well beyond any technology of her age. Jala was telling the truth. She was convinced of it even though her friends were not. She could tell by the skeptical looks on their faces. Laurel replaced the items in the pack and handed it back to the other woman.

The *marquise* got to her feet. At that moment Athos halted her. “You mean to go with them?”

“*Oui*, Athos. Even though you do not believe, I do. And I must go.”

“Laurel, you have no idea who these people are. It could well be an elaborately contrived hoax.” Aramis gently grasped her arms as he spoke.

“Now look who doesn’t want to see the truth,” she murmured and then lifted her head, challenging. “If you are so worried about me, then come with me.” She offered them the challenge.

“To the future?” D’Artagnan queried, skeptical and curious at the same time.

“That would be my assumption,” Laurel quipped more to hide her own nervousness than anything else. . . .

“I won’t let you go alone.” D’Artagnan’s voice was firm. Still found himself trying to play the knight errant for Laurel and protect her. This time was little different. “I’m coming with you.”

Laurel crossed her arms. “Anyone else?” She could use the company, friends she could trust, although she was not about to admit it to the musketeers, lest they try to prevent her from doing as she felt she must once again.

“Laurel.” Aramis looked at her with that gaze that went right through her. “You should know us better than that. You are one of us in all but name. And it is always all for one and one for all. If you go, we go too.” He turned to the three people who claimed they were from the future. “Lead on.”

Out of Phase



Kat Jaske has a master's of education, speaks fluent French, is a French and English teacher in the Las Vegas area, and is also a national award-winning poet. Green Valley High School in Henderson, Nevada selected her novel, *For Honor*, as the featured book for the Reading Incentive Program.

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