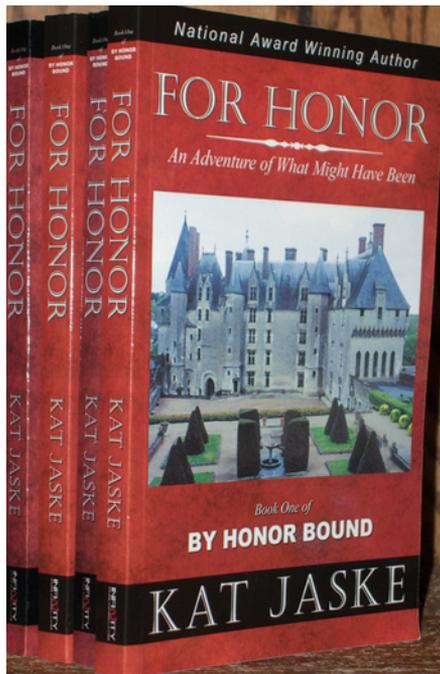


FOR HONOR

An Adventure of What Might Have Been
Book One of BY HONOR BOUND



Kat Jaske

Coming new books by Kat Jaske

Gambit for Love of a Queen

Righting Time

Out of Phase

FOR HONOR

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ISBN 0-7414-2057-0

Published by:

INFINITY

PUBLISHING.COM

1094 New Dehaven Street, Suite 100
West Conshohocken, PA 19428-2713
Info@buybooksontheweb.com
Toll-free (877) BUY BOOK
Local Phone (610) 941-9999
Fax (610) 941-9959

Printed in the United States of America

Printed on Recycled Paper

Published June 2004

SECTION ONE

1638 A.D.

He was an uncommonly attractive, intriguing man. And, yes, even beautiful, though the first person to tell him so would probably find a sword thrust through his or her gut. Well maybe not her gut. He was a gentleman. Perhaps one could best describe him as a stranger of unknown origin, virtually impossible to keep in one place.

Some claimed he was a first-class rake, completely lacking moral scruples, a consummate lady's man devoted to charming each pretty woman he met. Others swore he was a saint—God's gift—an ideal protector who was loyal, honorable, and virtuous to a fault. Regardless of his perceived character, the man was not lazy and indolent, although his current posture—his body propped against the wall—almost supported that erroneous conclusion.

Then again, the man was considered an enigma by even those who knew him well. Did anyone truly know the man who was a complex mishmash of the flirtatious seducer, an all-around lady's man and a compelling, sensitive, honorable and loyal soul devoted, above all, to God and country? Often enough even he doubted that he really knew himself. Could explain why he always seemed to be searching for something that defied definition and could never seem to tolerate staying in one place for long. In that way he supposed he was just like his best friends: duty and honor bound and always ready for the next adventure.

But duty was so often a poor—no, a paltry comfort. And wine, women, and good food were only invigorating for so long before they lost their novelty and appeal. He sighed and shifted upon the balls of his feet. His recently polished and sharpened sword tapped rhythmically against his right leg.

Bored, that's what he was, completely bored. No mission to occupy his time, no scandal, no plots to foil. Made one almost wish for a great deal of excitement or another plot to kill the king or queen, or simply to get out of Paris. At least then he could have something useful to do instead of whiling away his days feeling

utterly lazy and useless. Maybe he was just getting old, finally. It could have waited longer to catch him, he groused internally as he absently kicked a pebble.

“Aramis,” someone called, and the man turned to face the direction of the hail, temporarily setting his brooding aside. If he weren’t careful, he was bound to start following in Athos’ tracks, and the musketeers hardly needed another brooding and lonely and guilt-ridden man. Come to think of it, Aramis couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Athos truly happy since—must have been around the time he’d first become a musketeer. No, he had no desire to fall into that type of melancholy.

“What can I do for you?”

“Aramis.” The big man descended upon his fellow musketeer with a mock scowl of disapproval. “What would the lovely Queen of America say? You know, you’re going to ruin that handsome face of yours if you continue this brooding. Then what would I do with all the ladies who would have to turn to me? I couldn’t let them down, but to be in such demand . . .”

“I think you can handle it, *mon ami*,” Aramis informed Porthos, grasping the large man’s shoulder for a brief moment. “That is hardly a problem you would have to deal with, *mon cher* Porthos, even if I did lose my looks or decide to enter the priesthood. Now young D’Artagnan, well, that is another matter.”

Porthos took a step back and placed his hand on the hilt of his cutlass. “That cocky young pup,” he replied. “Do I sense an insult to my powers of attraction? I just may have to call you out.”

“Very well,” Aramis agreed. “Just please be so kind as to leave my face unblemished. I would like the ladies to remember me as I am now.”

The large man nodded his head ever so slightly, and the two opponents drew their swords, saluted, then engaged.

“*Sacrebleu*,” D’Artagnan cursed under his breath; that had to be broken up immediately before it became bloody. Quickly, he endeavored to sheathe his longsword, so quickly he nearly missed the scabbard in the process.

No sooner had the young man finally succeeded in sheathing his sword than a hand on his shoulder stayed his effort to interfere in the battle between his two companions. “Athos,” the young man protested. “We can’t just stand by and let those two try to kill one another. They’re fellow musketeers and our friends.”

Athos, however, obviously felt no compulsion to try to peaceably end that fight. He didn't even display the slightest unease. "They won't kill each other," the blond-haired man said with an eerie lack of emotion. "D'Artagnan, you're an excellent swordsman and as honorable as your father, but you have much to learn about the musketeers. About our friends in particular."

"What's to learn?" The youth insisted and tried ineffectually to pull away from his fellow musketeer. "They're going to kill each other unless we do something."

The young man finally shook off Athos' restraining hand and moved to head towards his dueling companions. "D'Artagnan," Athos' voice halted him for a moment. "Just remember that Porthos and Aramis take their bouts very seriously. Almost as seriously as Aramis takes death. Wait and see."

Right as the youth came upon the fighters, they bowed and re-sheathed their swords and then turned their attention to young D'Artagnan. "And what can we do for you, *mon beau jeune ami*?" Still slightly out of breath, Aramis inquired of his handsome young friend

At D'Artagnan's look of baffled confusion, Porthos nudged Aramis with his elbow. "I believe the young pup is quite confused. We just may have to set him straight."

Aramis nodded and straightened the crucifix that hung from the chain around his neck. "Shall I do the honors, or shall you?"

"Look." D'Artagnan interrupted their exchange, not in the mood to listen to Porthos and Aramis banter back and forth indefinitely, as they were obviously capable of. "I don't care who tells me what's going on, but someone better tell me and *soon*."

"Impatient and cocky," Porthos commented to no one in particular and then decided to take his version of pity on the young lad. He slung a brotherly arm around the youth and began a long narrative about when he had joined the musketeers and first met up with Athos and Aramis.

Aramis watched his companions silently, simply listening to the tale that the large man was weaving. The intense look he fixed on his companions might have led one to conclude he was at least somewhat amused by the way his older companion was embellishing the original tale.

Porthos hadn't even gotten to where Aramis had joined the musketeers when D'Artagnan held up his hand for a moment, and

Porthos' hand dropped from his shoulder. "Wait," he began. "Just what does this have to do with anything?"

"Very little. Porthos has always been long-winded, as you have probably observed already by now," another voice intruded, and D'Artagnan glanced aside and caught sight of Athos.

"And he has a habit of taking liberties with the original tale, shall we say?" Aramis interjected smoothly in his oddly expressive deadpan voice.

Porthos was on the verge of protesting when the blond-haired Athos absently ran fingers through his beard very quickly in what could be construed as a gesture of annoyance. Three pairs of eyes focused on the man who carried himself with almost unconscious regal bearing. Athos fixed his steady blue-eyed gaze, which unnerved many or made them squirm, on the large man, ignoring Porthos' tortured expression. "May I do the honors of completing the tale?" he asked, knowing he'd be allowed to do so before even Porthos signaled him to complete the story.

"About a year after Porthos and I met one another," Athos began, "a young man who had been training under the cardinal as his student and a member of his guard appeared at *Monsieur de Treville's* door." The older man halted and looked over at Aramis for a long moment before the would-be-priest shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

"*Monsieur de Treville* was informed that this young man was being sent to him temporarily because in a duel he'd inadvertently killed a man whose brother had a great deal of influence and who had demanded that Aramis be expelled from the order," Athos explained. "So young Aramis was sent to train with the musketeers until the scandal blew over and he could return to his studies under the cardinal and eventually become a priest. However, Porthos and I became attached to the young man and had no desire to see him return to the cardinal and take the orders.

"One day Aramis announced his withdrawal from the musketeers and his intention to return to the Church in the cardinal's service. Porthos took it badly, and he and Aramis had a horrific argument that ended in a duel. I stopped the duel in time to inform them about a plot by the cardinal to discredit the queen. Ever since foiling his eminence's plot, Aramis has hated the cardinal. Still, as Porthos would say, 'Aramis has an unnatural desire to join the priesthood.' Thus, anytime Aramis gets to brooding and contemplating taking the orders, he and Porthos

engage in a mock duel. Now I can't say that it actually prevents Aramis from leaving us, but it does break up his boredom a bit."

Aramis, who'd been silent the entire time, chose that moment to speak. "I will become a priest someday—probably within the next year or two, before I reach thirty," which was still a good ways off, but this particular time his friends refrained from telling him that he had more than six years before he reached that age. "I never did intend to become a fighter for the better part of my life."

"Pay him no mind," Porthos whispered loudly to D'Artagnan. "He's always saying he'll become a priest soon, but he'd never leave me and Athos until Athos retires from the service or I quit or some combination like that."

"Gentlemen." A fifth man interrupted, and they all turned to see the commander of the musketeers, *Monsieur de Treville*. "I hate to break up your little party, but I need all of you to join me in my office. I've got a task for the four of you."

"He can't be serious," D'Artagnan griped as he checked the supplies he had in his saddle pack to be sure he had everything including lots of ink and paper so that he could write Constance; dear sweet Constance, whom he had to leave for weeks to do some stupid mission anyone could do.

The giant, brawny, older man glanced at the youngest of the four men as he cinched his saddle and prepared to mount. "Ah, but you must remember, *mon jeune ami*," Porthos began, emphasizing 'young,' "that *Monsieur de Treville* gets his orders from the King of France, and if *Cher Louis* wants the best musketeers to guard a shipment of precious spices, he gets the best. Of course that only changes if a more pressing duty comes up. . ."

"Such as protecting the queen from being disgraced or framed," Aramis added.

"Or," Athos added, "protecting the king from a plot to overthrow him."

"Or some such combination as that which puts our beloved sovereigns in mortal danger," Porthos concluded, flourishing his hat with gusto.

"So basically what you're saying is that we are stuck escorting this caravan to Marseille, and there is no way out?" D'Artagnan was sorely tempted to sulk. For this duty he'd be away from Constance for at least a fortnight! Most likely longer.

“Didn’t I tell you he was a bright lad?” Porthos commented cheerfully in his usually loud and forceful manner, and Athos and Aramis smiled into their carefully clipped beards as they made their final preparations for the journey.

“*Mince*, thanks,” D’Artagnan thanked him sarcastically as he tugged briefly at the buff jerkin before slipping on his gauntlet gloves. His clothes adjusted, he mounted his horse and guided the animal towards the waiting caravan. He paused to glance back and say, “Well, come on you three. Let’s get this over with as quickly as we can.”

“*Oui, monseigneur*,” Aramis replied courteously to the young *comte*, unable to keep the smile from playing about his lips, and the four men made their way through the streets and towards the merchants they were responsible for escorting safely to the coast.

* * * * *

The blond-haired woman struggled to push herself to her feet. *Parbleu*, she was weaker than a newborn babe even after all these months. Of course she supposed that she was incredibly lucky, to say the least, to have survived her plunge from the cliffs into frigid, rock peppered waters.

Soon, though, very soon she would be well enough again to resume activities. Only how she was going to pay for her lifestyle was something she cared not to contemplate—could be tricky. Well, maybe not. She sighed and immediately winced at the darts of pain shooting from her bruised but mending ribs. Apparently she would be going back into the service of the cardinal or whoever else would be requiring her unique and deadly skills of subterfuge.

Except, Athos could prove a very prickly problem. He and his three friends had foiled her mission and nearly ended her life. Athos. Definitely a problem. On so many levels. He was supposed to have died, but obviously those reports had been premature. Turns out he’d only turned his lands over to the king and lost himself in near anonymity. Now he had to be dealt with. Yet how? The woman chose not to examine that thought too closely.

She scowled, wrinkling her lovely brow. Blast his overdeveloped sense of honor and duty. They had brought her to this end and nearly killed her several times over. Nor was it at all unlikely that that same sense would get him killed before he

reached his fortieth year. Actually, she amended her conclusion: it could well get him killed by his thirtieth year, and he wasn't far off that mark.

A door opened and a kindly faced woman in her early thirties, by all appearances a peasant, hesitantly entered the bedchamber carrying a basin of water. While humming, the lower-class woman set the cracked basin on the nightstand and dropped a cloth beside. A moment later she said, "Milady, you shouldn't be outta bed. You look as if you're 'bout to fall over if you try to move a step."

With a posture that would have done a queen proud, the injured woman leveled a supercilious gaze on the commoner but said nothing. A slight waver caught the peasant's eye. Her patient looked none too steady on her feet. A moment she paused, frozen by uncertainty. The patient wavered again, and that stumble made the peasant's decision for her. The kindly faced woman reached towards the injured woman and looped her strong arms underneath the other woman's shoulders in order to support her weight.

Slowly she led the patient back to the bed and asked, "Can I be getting you a glass of water?"

"*Oui, s'il te plaît,*" the aristocratic woman replied condescendingly, not bothering to formally use *vous* to address the woman who was so obviously not of her exalted rank. For several seconds she labored to catch the breath her modest exertions had sapped from her.

The peasant carefully filled a glass with fresh water from the basin and handed it to the blond-haired woman, who gulped it down and set the empty glass on the nightstand before dropping back against the pillows. Sleep quickly claimed her, and the older woman whispered, "Sleep well, milady," as she quietly crept from the room. Some things about the aristocracy never changed no matter how bad off they were.

* * * * *

The rhythm of horse hooves plitting on the road and wagon wheels rattling against the rugged ground grated steadily on D'Artagnan's nerves. Someone should have warned him that caravans moved with excruciating slowness and were trying on what little patience to which one could lay claim. Of course, it was his duty, and he really shouldn't complain. But what a lousy duty, especially since it was his first real duty since becoming a

musketeer and a very tame task at that. Still, he refused to disgrace his uniform and his new friends by complaining.

If they could endure, so could he. Was definitely going to be a very long trip. Nothing but delays and petty quarrels. Already five days had passed, and they were scarcely more than halfway to Marseille. And that estimate could well be no more than wishful thinking on his part.

The young man glanced up as grey and black clouds rolled across the sky obscuring, the sun. Just what he needed, what they all needed, a nasty storm to make their travels even slower, more uncomfortable, and more dangerous. As if responding to his negative thoughts, the wind kicked up, and rain burst from the clouds, tumbling down in sheets and transforming the roads into mud-churned slop.

Each step became progressively harder than the last, and D'Artagnan's horse labored to lift its hooves and continue forward. A vicious gust of wind swept stinging rain into his eyes and face, and he struggled to see through the downpour, but could discern the path no more than a few arm lengths in front of him.

If he and his horse were having such difficulty, the wagons must be having even more; they had to find a place to shelter until the storm passed over and before late afternoon soon became night. The brim of his hat drooped under the weight of the cascading water, and the youth bowed his head in an effort to shield his face from the biting pellets of rain.

D'Artagnan glanced up as a rider pulled up alongside him. Both riders slowed their horses further, and Athos leaned closer to the younger man. "To the southeast," the older musketeer said loudly and pointed, "there is a road that leads to a country estate. We should be able to appeal to the local lord for shelter and stay there for the night." The younger man nodded in acknowledgment as Athos pulled away and took the lead. Taking a deep breath, he began urging his charges to follow his fellow musketeer.

The tall, lanky lad looked up from the horse he had secured just before the full fury of the storm had let loose and saw a small procession approaching the estate. "*Ce n'est pas possible*," he muttered softly in tamer language than was his wont. "Not possible." he repeated again to himself. Time and circumstance always did seem to conspire against him.

“This storm would have to bring travelers needing shelter.” Apparently even backwater country estates couldn’t avoid all visitors, particularly during a nasty storm. He rushed from the stable and ducked in through the servants’ entrance. His wet body very nearly collided with the butler, who fixed the youth with a frown of disapproval. The lad hushed the servant before he could say a word. “No time now to lecture me on appropriate deportment. We’ve got guests, or will have guests, seeking shelter from the storm. They’ll be here very shortly, and I can’t receive them in this state.”

The butler asked stiffly, “What exactly would you have me do, ma—”

“Gerard,” the young master interrupted, “you must pretend to be my father and extend them assistance and hospitality.”

“I will not masquerade as your father,” the servant protested. Well he knew the penalties for one who tried to usurp a higher station than he had a right to claim, even if this headstrong child had forgotten.

“But I can’t just turn them away. They have nowhere else to go, and you know what would happen if I were the only one on hand as the proprietor of this estate.” The young aristocrat turned pleading blue eyes on the butler, all the while trying to ignore the feel of the wet tunic and doublet squeezing tighter to his frame. “Even I don’t want to dare flout conventions to that extent, and it could be dangerous for them to know I am the only one here. . . . I beg of you.”

The butler sighed in reluctant agreement. “I’ll pretend to be your father for the duration of their stay, but in return you must endeavor to take up your proper role when this is over. You will do that. It is what your father would want.” The youth regarded him silently and then nodded even as he hurried the butler to get prepared for the charade before rushing off to change into dry clothes. Perhaps that loose-fitting leather jerkin he used to wear when he had hunted with his father.

A temporary butler answered the rap at the door and ushered the musketeer into the hall. “What can I do for you?” he inquired in a tone that implied the man had best have a good reason for being here or he’d regret his stopping here for days to come.

In an automatic gesture, the musketeer removed his formerly high crowned hat and asked pardon for his disgraceful appearance.

“My party and myself have been caught in the storm and are desperately in need of any shelter you might be able to offer us,” the blond-haired man said. “Is your master at home that I could appeal to him?”

The butler eyed him suspiciously and was about to speak when a young, aristocratic lad appeared, a lad that apparently did not care overly much for convention. He sported a cavalier hat indoors, a hat that looked as if it would be more at home on an older man. “Claude,” he said, “I’ll handle this. Have Stephanie prepare for guests.”

The lad turned his attention to the wet and disheveled musketeer. Thank God for small favors, and God’s small unexpected favors were welcome, this time. The man’s waterladen mantle proclaimed him a musketeer, and he possessed the demeanor of a true gentleman. Moreover, there was something about him that inspired more trust and more confidence than Christophe usually accorded anyone. “You need shelter for the night?” the lad inquired and Athos nodded. “And you are?”

“Athos,” the musketeer replied and sketched a bow. “In the service of his *majesté, les mousquetaires de Louis XIII.*”

The boy’s intelligent eyes surveyed the bedraggled man. If what little he had heard of this man’s reputation was true, he was indeed a man who was unfalteringly loyal to the king and country to which he had pledged his service and honor. Very rare. “*S’il vous plaît, please, monsieur, follow me. I can’t have you standing there and catching a chill,*” the boy said as he guided Athos to a fire. The musketeer took his first opportunity to survey the lad as they stood by the fire. Tall and thin and unmistakably genteel. Though, with that hat and the lad’s stance, Athos couldn’t really get a good look at him.

“I cannot presume to stay here without your father’s permission.”

“My father should not begrudge that to you. He should be along shortly. I’m sure Claude went to fetch him. I do not honestly think he would turn travelers out in a storm; nor would he turn musketeers away without very good reason.”

At that moment Gerard entered the room, decked in finery he was scarcely accustomed to: a fine waistcoat set off by lace, long-legged breeches tied off with ribbon, and soft leather boots. The lad turned his attention to his would-be father. “Papa.”

“Christophe,” the older man acknowledged brusquely, turning his attention to the musketeer.

“Papa, may I present to you *Monsieur* Athos of the king’s Musketeers. He and his party are seeking shelter from the storm.”

Gerard extended his hand “Thomas, Marquis de Langeac.” Athos shook the marquis’ hand firmly and introduced himself again. “You may consider my home at your disposal for the next day or so. Christophe will assist you while my servants help your men get settled.” Athos murmured his profound thanks, and with Christophe’s assistance went to get himself settled for what could prove to be a long, cold summer night.

“I must protest,” said Gerard to his noble master. “It is one thing for me to masquerade as your father, but for you to continue this masquerade is unpermissible, *Maîtresse* Laurel!”

“Gerard, I’ve been over this before. It’s not a wise idea for these gentlemen to be aware that I’m the mistress of this house. The fewer people who know Lady Laurel Christophe d’Anlass is here and that her father is not, the better. I don’t wish to attract attention to the fact that I’ve returned. It could well bring the men who have been searching for my father here, and I’d rather not bring that danger to my doorstep any sooner than necessary.” Not to mention, if the wrong people knew her father had been gone so long, the estate could wind up in her unsavory cousin’s hands all too quickly.

“But to pretend to be a young boy, Laurel. That’s not wise.” And wouldn’t be possible for much longer. Already her body was becoming too feminine for the masquerade. If only she hadn’t been such a late developer. If only her father had raised her in a more mundane manner.

“What other choice do I have?” asked the young woman who was still dressed as a lad. Similar conversations had transpired numerous times over the last fourteen months, but this time she had more ammunition. “*Monsieur* Athos and his companions already believe that the only child of Thomas is a lad by the name of Christophe. I cannot suddenly reveal that there is no Christophe, but rather a lady of some nine and ten years. It quite simply cannot be done, Gerard,” Laurel concluded, and the butler departed with a scowl of disapproval etched upon the planes of his face.

Laurel pulled off the large-brimmed hat and set it on the dressing table. Unwound her hair from the tight bun, and the long

blond braid fell just short of her mid-back. Her scalp ached. At least no one questioned why she, as a lad, had such short tightly pulled back hair. Rather they assumed she had her hair tied in a tight queue at the base of her neck. Plus, with the hat, her hair didn't look too unusual to pass for a boy's. The young woman pulled off the jerkin, so that she was wearing only her linen tunic.

She frowned as the mirror showed her that the linen shirt was definitely not enough protection to cover the fact that she had bound her small breasts tightly. No, the bindings could be seen through it. But at least her hips and waist were still narrow, boyishly so, although she wondered how much longer such luck as she'd had would hold out. Seeing as her breasts were becoming more full, she knew it was only a matter of time before the rest of her body became more feminine. Apparently even she couldn't elude fate indefinitely, no matter how she might try.

She sighed and rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands as she recalled her rather unwise promise to Gerard. She was used to playing a lad; she'd been playing at being a lad for the greater part of her life since her father could not really carry out his duties with a daughter tagging along, and he had refused to leave his child at home since he felt he was the only one who could really protect her from the enemies he had gained in his line of work.

Papa. If only she knew where he was now. She hadn't seen him in more than a year, closer to two, and she herself had barely escaped her pursuers with her life intact. She shivered at the thought. He couldn't be dead; she simply refused to believe that she would never see him alive again. The marquis was inordinately good at his chosen profession and always had been. Besides, Erik had promised that her father would be safe, and she refused to contemplate any other alternative.

Swiftly she got up from her seated position on the bed and accidentally knocked a basin to the floor. It fell with a loud clatter, and Laurel unsuccessfully stifled an exclamation of pain as she jammed her stocking-clad foot against the bedpost. The young woman bounced back on the bed grabbing her tender foot and praying to God she had not foolishly broken anything.

"Are you all right?" D'Artagnan rushed into the room and stopped short at seeing the blond-haired woman dressed, or rather half undressed, in male attire.

“*Mince* and blast! Don’t just stand there. Close the door, quick. Before anyone else comes to see what happened.” The young musketeer complied and then promptly froze facing Laurel, a look of bafflement in his light blue eyes.

“I, I, I . . .” he stuttered.

Laurel completed the examination of her foot and concluded nothing was broken despite the soreness. “It’s not broken.” At the young man’s continued look of confusion she explained. “My foot, I didn’t break it. I was afraid I might have, but it’s only bruised.” Laurel put her clenched hand to her pursed lips. What was she going to do? “I see you’ve discovered my little secret.”

“Why?” D’Artagnan finally managed to get out, struggling to come to terms with the unorthodox situation. It was definitely improper for a musketeer to remain alone in the chamber of a young, single woman. He shouldn’t even be here in the first place.

“My father’s out of the country,” she began in a measured tone, “and a lone woman could hardly welcome a group of strange men to her home. Nor could I allow you to remain out in this weather. So I did the only thing I could think of: had a servant play my father and became a lad for my own protection.” Her deep blue eyes met his, and she carefully looked him over. No more than one and twenty and probably not even that old, but strong, beardless, boyishly handsome with a bearing that indicated breeding. “Your word, *monsieur*.”

“What?”

“*Votre parole monsieur*.” She searched for the name that would fit his description and stumbled upon it. “D’Artagnan, please, promise by your sacred word as a gentleman that you will not betray my secret. I’m putting my reputation completely in your hands.” And my life, she added silently. No telling what fiasco she might have accidentally embroiled this young man in.

A musketeer and a gentleman didn’t destroy a lady’s reputation, but to allow his friends to remain in the dark about who was really their host, and unaware of the truth of the situation . . . She waited silently, and finally he responded. “You have my word as a gentleman that your secret is safe with me.”

True to his word the young musketeer revealed nothing, and the following afternoon he and his party left while Laurel and Gerard looked on. As she watched the procession depart she wrapped her arms around her body. She had a very bad feeling not

unlike the one she'd had when she and Peter abandoned Thomas to his fate some year and a half earlier.

Exhausted, Laurel wearily crawled under the sheets and pulled the blanket to her shoulders. Swiftly she blew out the candle by her bedside and settled back to her pillows in preparation for much-needed sleep when she felt an ominous presence in the room.

Her still open eyes registered shock as they perceived a shadow looming over her bed. Her first coherent thought was that she should have listened to that bad feeling she'd had days earlier.

The young woman attempted to reach for her dagger. Not soon enough. A strong hand clamped over her mouth, "*Non, ma petite*. Don't scream."

"Papa," she whispered, limp with relief, when the hand had been removed. "What are you doing here?" She shot up and heard her father's grunt of pain. "You're hurt."

He waived her hands away. "No time for that, *chérie*. I'll be all right. Of that you can be sure," Thomas reassured. "But you're not safe here. The Prussian agents aren't just looking for me anymore. They are also looking for you."

"It's those papers you gave me before I fled Belgium, isn't it?" Sudden enlightenment struck her. How could she have been oblivious for so long? Didn't say much for the intelligence she was so proud she had cultivated.

Her father didn't respond, but she knew it was the truth. "Then we both must flee as quickly as we can to the Netherlands." The Netherlands had frequently taken in political refugees, and they'd be unlikely to turn two wealthy French aristocrats away.

"*Non*. You must give me the papers, and I can get the rest from the agents in Brussels, Marseille, and Luz. Then I can take them to the king and warn him. Quick, Laurel, get the papers, and you must prepare to leave for Uncle Joseph's estate immediately." There was still his old nemesis to capture, and that was not a depraved character he wanted his daughter to have to tangle with.

"*Non*." She would not go to the estate of her father's deceased sister. Joseph, her uncle by marriage, and his wastrel, profligate son were not to her liking. Nor did she have a desire to be pressured into marriage with her cousin. Disgusting, filthy man.

"Look, you must—"

“*Non*, papa. You’re in no condition to be relaying secret papers back and forth, and I won’t permit it. Don’t you argue with me,” she said, shooting to her feet. “I may only be your daughter, but you raised me on campaigns such as this. You taught me the tricks of your trade, how to take care of myself. I’m taking those papers to Compton in Marseille.” Also, she quickly reminded him that her fluency in several other languages was quite beneficial and would aid her in completing the task.

“Laurel, you mustn’t get involved. They’ll kill you too, even though you’re a woman. They may even do worse than kill you.”

“I am aware of the dangers,” she countered solemnly. Her temper fled quickly, though her stubbornness remained implacable. “Besides, that is immaterial. I’m already involved. You said so yourself. And . . . they won’t be able to recognize me if I go as Christophe.” Seeing by his expression that Thomas was not going to allow her to have her way, she defiantly leveled her best argument. “Need I remind you that only I know where the papers are now? If you don’t give me your permission, I’ll go anyway, and you won’t have those documents, so I implore you to tell me everything I need to know.”

Thomas shook his head gravely. “Laurel, you have no idea what you are asking of me. *Oui*, I know you’ll do as you say. Very well, *ma fille*, contact Compton in Marseille and tell him ‘*les trois coronets*.’ He’ll give you further instructions. In the meantime, I still will head for Luz and Brussels. I expect you to post me a letter addressed to the estate of the merchant Jacques Devré in Brussels. Also, I will try to meet you somewhere near Boussac, if possible. Understood?”

Laurel nodded and pressed her father no further. They both knew better than to belabor the issue; there was no time, and it would serve no purpose.

Two stubborn souls were not likely to change their ways anytime soon; had there ever been such a case of like father like daughter previously? And they had more urgent matters, like figuring out exactly how they could orchestrate the passing of messages between the two of them so that Thomas could relay his daughter important information not yet in his possession and she him. Pray God his old nemesis would not catch on to their game or give Thomas the slip this time.

* * * * *

The pungent smell of well-roasted food mingled with alcohol and tobacco swirled in the air. Lights flickered and serving wenches wandered from table to table, delivering ale and meals. Sometimes more than that.

As he was known to do, Porthos was giving D'Artagnan another lesson on how to woo women while Aramis looked on in what some might construe to be mild amusement. Still, one could hardly ever be sure what the man who wanted to be a priest was truly thinking. Not that the youngster needed much instruction as far as Aramis was concerned. With that pretty face and body of his and those eyes, not to mention the alluring recklessness, he already had captured much female attention. It seemed to matter little that he was more brash than charming, more bold than subtle. Ah, well, not to worry; D'Artagnan could take care of himself more often than not. Plus, the boy was already basically bested with Constance Bonacieux, so the lad was in no danger of becoming enamored of an unsuitable woman.

No, D'Artagnan could handle himself well enough. It was Athos Aramis was worried about. Man had been drinking hard. True, he took his drinking very seriously, but he was drinking more than usual, and the man was like the devil under the influence. In that condition he could well strangle or shoot or break the neck of anyone who wasn't a good friend and might accidentally set off his ire. Not to mention, he ended up saying things he would later regret.

Still, Aramis couldn't much blame Athos. Highly unlikely, Aramis admitted to himself, that he would be in any better shape had he run into a wife he thought was long dead and then discovered she was an agent of one's own worst enemy. Nor could it be easy to watch her jump to her death. Very hard. And very hard was assuredly an understatement.

Of course Aramis was not married—never had been—so he couldn't quite understand the depth of grief Athos must be feeling. Aramis gently shook off a serving wench's arm and excused himself from the table. Wenching could wait for another night. There were plenty of beautiful and willing women he could choose from. More often than not they threw themselves at him. Methodically, he made his way to the far corner of the darkened room and halted the server.

The would-be-priest shook his head firmly. “No more drinks for him. I’ll take care of him. You just see to it that everyone else stays clear of him.” The girl backed away, and Aramis sat himself across from his old friend.

“Ah, Aramis, come to drink a toast with me,” Athos said, filling a glass with a shaking hand. Already starting to show signs of intoxication—in short not holding his liquor very well. Not a good indication for it took a lot of drinking before Athos usually revealed his intoxication. After a brief pause the inebriated musketeer pushed the filled glass towards the man with raven-black hair and then took another healthy swig from his tankard. He wiped a dribble of ale from his lip with his sleeve and then took yet another drink.

Aramis’ deep brown eyes flecked with gold regarded the older man. He hated to see the usually fastidious Athos reduced to this state. It was like watching his older brother drink himself to death all over again. “*Non. Merci*, thanks, Athos. I have had enough to drink.”

“Ah, *oui*, I forgot,” Athos said in a condescending tone, “no more than one cup of ale a day for the would-be-priest. Wouldn’t want to offend God by drinking more than in moderation. Could be damned for it.”

“That’s enough, Athos,” Aramis said in a soft but firm voice while grabbing the other man’s hand and preventing him from lifting the tankard to his lips again. The younger man’s eyes were cold and unreadable. “We should be turning in for the night.”

“Listen, Aramis, you may not want a drink for some damned, blasted and mistakenly noble or moralistic reasons, but that’s no reason to stop others from taking their pleasures as they please. I’ll drink when I choose. Now let go of my hand, and go get yourself stinking drunk for once or better yet go find yourself some new bitch like you’re always doing.”

Aramis slammed Athos’ hand onto the table, shattering the tankard and cracking the table. Athos moved to throw a punch at the other man. However, his reactions were slowed by drink, and Aramis easily blocked the punch. “*Ca suffit*, that *is* enough, Athos,” he said struggling to control his temper with moderate success. “You have had too much to drink, and I am not *saying* that just because I choose not to drink much. Do you not see what it does to you, man?” He leaned closer to Athos. “I do not like seeing you this way, and I do not want to watch you drink yourself

to death. I have already watched my brother do that, and I have no desire to lose one of my best friends the same way.”

By this time all eyes were focused on the two men. Tension gathered more tautly in the air, waiting and shivering to see blood spilled. Or spoiling for a fight. D’Artagnan followed Porthos’ lead and bought drinks for the rest of the guests and focused his efforts on distracting everyone’s attention from Athos and Aramis.

The blond-haired man swallowed tightly, almost as if it were hard for him to do so, as if something were lodged in his throat. “I’m sorry, Aramis,” he finally said very quietly. “I didn’t know.” Athos pushed away from the table and rose to his unsteady feet. “If you’d be so kind as to help me to my room, I think I should sleep this off.” Aramis nodded and went to assist his friend. As the pair passed the proprietor, Athos and Aramis both flipped him several pistoles and said, “Sorry about the mess.”

Porthos halted Aramis. “Is he going to be all right?” Porthos asked, his tone uncharacteristically sober.

“He is still asleep,” Aramis informed both his fellow musketeers. “I told the caravan leader that since our duty was discharged, he was welcome to leave us, and we’d find our way around Marseille and back to Paris. My guess is Athos will not be getting up until at least midday at any rate. Even then he is probably going to be suffering from a nasty headache. I daresay we will not be leaving any sooner than tomorrow.” Aramis glossed over the hangover with his customary aplomb.

The other musketeers nodded. D’Artagnan addressed the would-be-priest. “What’d you say to him?” Concern was evident in every inflection of his voice.

“That is a private matter between Athos and myself. I cannot tell you that sort of thing. I am sorry.” His tongue traced his even white teeth. “I know you are worried about him, D’Artagnan. We all are. Just be careful what you ask Athos. The man does not like dwelling on any part of his past, and I especially doubt he will want to talk about milady.”

“Well, if it isn’t the pot calling the kettle black,” Porthos commented. For, if anything, Aramis was just as reserved as Athos about revealing his past. In fact, they knew less about Aramis than about Athos. Seemed even the best of friends kept secrets from one another. Maybe even the apparently completely open D’Artagnan was more secretive than he appeared to be.

* * * * *

“Where’s the Marquis de Langeac?” the man with a hawk-like nose asked the two men standing before him. “You were charged with finding the marquis and those papers that he gave to his daughter. Well?”

“We done our best, *monsieur*,” one man said. “It was hard enough to find out his identity, and then discover that he’d given the documents to his daughter.” For a prominent, old, and established family, remarkably little was known about the marquis or his family.

“I don’t pay you to devise excuses, Joseph. You would do well to remember that fact. Now what about the good marquis and his daughter?”

“As far as we can tell,” the other man, Guillaume, said, “Thomas d’Anlass contacted his daughter and warned her to flee. So when we arrived at the estate, only the servants remained.”

“Really,” his superior observed. “I see I have a great deal of incompetence to deal with. A situation which must be rectified.”

“*Monsieur*,” Guillaume said. “It was not a total loss. Thomas was injured, and we know he and his daughter did not leave together. In fact, we have reason to believe he enlisted her help and that she is seeking to complete his contacts and deliver the documents in his stead. Nor does Thomas even have all the papers. We know that. So we have an idea where he might be going so he can get the complete information.”

All of which did very little good unless they knew where the woman might be heading. The hawk-nosed man turned his back on Joseph and Guillaume and stared out the window into the peaceful, moonlit night.

Thomas d’Anlass. He pondered the name and what he knew of the man several moments and then turned his thoughts to the marquis’ daughter. If he was recalling correctly, she must be between eight and ten and twenty years, and single. Laurel—that was her name. A blond-haired blue-eyed girl who was raised more as a son than a daughter, he suspected. “I’ll take care of finding Laurel d’Anlass. I have enough contacts in the places she might go for aid. You two will see to it that no messages find their way to Paris or the king, and alert my agents in Belgium and Austria. I want the marquis found.”

“*Oui monsieur.*” They replied in French rather than their native German and scurried from his presence to carry out his bidding. The marquis would be found. Now they knew how to track him.

* * * * *

“Milord.” The servant entered the well-appointed study.

“Valent.” His lordship acknowledged the servant and then looked up from his morning paper. He took a brief pinch of snuff and set his morning papers aside. “What can I do for you?”

“Milord, there is someone here insisting to see you.”

“And this person is?”

“That’s just it. The lad won’t give his name. He says he won’t talk with anyone except for you, and he refuses to go until you’ve seen him. He’s gone so far as to threaten to create a nasty scene.”

“I assume he won’t say what he wants to see me about either.” Valent nodded in confirmation. “What *did* he tell you?”

“Well, *monseigneur*, I don’t know if it’s important.” When the servant paused, his lordship gestured for him to continue, and that he’d be the judge of how important the information might or might not be. “He kept mumbling something about *les trois coronets*.”

“Did you say ‘*les trois coronets*?’” his lordship repeated and Valent nodded. “Send the boy in here immediately, and see to it that no one disturbs us. Absolutely no one.”

Valent bowed and exited. Moments later he entered the room with a lad who was sporting a full cape and hat pulled low, hiding his face. “Please be seated and make yourself comfortable. We should not be disturbed. What news is it that you bring?”

“You are Milord Compton,” the contralto voice inquired and he confirmed he was the half English, half French lord. The lad still hadn’t taken off his hat and cape. Did he have no manners, or was he something he wasn’t supposed to be? He reached under his desk for the flintlock pistol he had recently procured and loaded it as he surveyed the visitor. Better to be prepared in his line of work. He’d learned that much over his decades in control of France’s spy network. One reason for his longevity.

The lad set his cape aside and removed his hat to reveal he wasn’t a he at all, but rather a she. The poorly fixed blond hair tumbled down her back, and she fixed a steady gaze on Compton.

Compton put the gun back into the compartment without making a sound. "Please excuse my appearance and the deception, Milord Compton, but there was no other way I could reach you without the charade. My father, Thomas d'Anlass, sent me to you. He told me that you would give me further instructions."

"*Mademoiselle* Laurel," his lordship half asked. Clearly the woman was Thomas' daughter, and equally as obvious was her expectation that she would be able to simply step into a role very similar to the marquis'. Never had his long-time friend done or permitted anything so asinine before. "*Parbleu*, why did your father get you involved in this international tangle? He should not have subjected you to such danger."

"Milord, with all due respect, I have always been in danger, whether I stayed at home or accompanied my father on his missions as a spy for King Louis XIII. I do not think that the danger to me now is significantly greater than it has been in the past." From inside her doublet she withdrew a portfolio of papers and presented them to the man. "These are the documents my father and I obtained upon our last visit to Brussels more than a year ago. I put them in your safekeeping until such time that they can be safely delivered to his *majesté*."

"So now you'll have me turning a marriageable, single lady into a spy. You are what . . . scarcely nine and ten?" He didn't wait for an answer. He knew Laurel had just reached that age a fortnight earlier, though she'd obviously played at being a young lad on the verge of manhood for years. "I'm sorry, *mademoiselle*. I cannot permit it. I'll have to send someone else." It'd be hard to find someone else, particularly someone who worked well with Thomas, but it had to be done. How dare his old friend and the best spy in his network put him in this untenable position!

"I'm not so young, milord. I am already nearly an old maid, or have you forgotten that I am no longer a girl and no longer a very desirable catch on the marriage market?" Save for the impressive dowry that came with her, but she chose to overlook that fact. "I may only be a woman, but especially in this I am more capable than most any man you will find. No, you'll send no one else, Compton," she stated and stood, leaning her hands against his desk. "No one else knows where my father is or how to reach him. I do. Unless you send me, you'll never get in touch with Thomas d'Anlass again. Nor will you ever get your hands on the last of the information he has gone to acquire."

A vein throbbed in Compton's temple as he stared at the defiant woman before him. He didn't doubt she would follow through on her ultimatum. In that respect she was very like her father. "Very well. Be seated," Compton said as he laid a map of Europe upon the table and began imparting instructions to her. Laurel's willfulness would be taken care of later. Thomas' too.

"Then I go to Calais?" she concluded with a question.

"*Oui*," said Compton. "We've gotten wind of Prussian, Austrian, and Spanish agents passing very damaging information to an agent here in France who will be taking the information to England. Needless to say, this information jeopardizes the kingdom and sabotages our war effort; if it were to reach England, the effects would be devastating. Their plans must be brought from Calais and returned to his *majesté*. We cannot afford to have traitors at the very heart of France."

"Have you no further information about who the traitor, and spy, is?"

"I'm afraid we haven't much more. Your father's the one who has been tracking him for eight and a half years." Compton expelled a breath. "The most I can tell you is that he's a man with a great deal of power, influence, and access. Obviously, we can't afford to waste any time when tracking this man." He handed the marquis' daughter a packet with some further instructions. "Get going." Before he changed his mind regardless of the potential consequences. Did Thomas ever have a lot to answer for! Especially if Laurel was anywhere near as good as Thomas at losing men sent to tail him. For some reason he suspected she was.

* * * * *

Laurel secreted the instructions in her doublet underneath the jerkin and the cloth that tightly bound her breasts. Her soft leather boots, very similar to those musketeers wore, echoed off the cobblestones and blended in with the sounds of the busy port city. She darted around the corner and searched for her horse.

Stopping short, she pressed herself to the wall, flat. How had they found her so soon? Well, the horse was lost. Poor Rebelle, but there was nothing she could do for the faithful animal now. Those men obviously knew Rebelle was from the Marquis de Langeac's estate. She took a fortifying breath and dashed back in the direction from which she had come.

At least she still had a hefty sum of money and one of her father's basket hilts. Hopefully she wasn't too out of practice with the sword, for she had a sinking feeling that she would have to be using it all too soon.

And her other numerous skills too.

Laurel quickly checked her hair and was satisfied to note that the tight braid had stayed pinned underneath her hat. As long as no one looked too closely, no one would ever suspect she was not the lad she pretended to be. The woman stopped short as she caught sight of a merchant talking to several armed swordsmen; hired blades. The merchant looked up and pointed at her, indicating that was the boy who had come in on the horse in question. At first she thought herself paranoid, but then she saw the four fighters weaving their way through the crowd and towards her.

Diantre! The devil!

Her ladyship wasted not so much as an iota more of time. Abruptly, she backpedaled and sprinted away from the men, turning and twisting through the streets in an effort to lose her pursuers. Unfortunately, she didn't know her way around Marseille very well, and these men most obviously did.

"*Saperlipopette,*" she exclaimed, and added "drat" for good measure, as she found herself faced with a dead end and saw her pursuers closing in on her inexorably. This couldn't be happening. She wouldn't let this happen.

"Come now, be a good young lad. You wouldn't want us to have to hurt you now would you?" one of them taunted.

Laurel felt the urge to break into hysterical laughter, but squelched it. They'd not take her alive. What a time and way to put her rusty fencing skills to the test. She put her hand to the hilt of her sword, and one of the men scoffed, "Looky here, the boy's got a fancy sword. Best put that away before you hurt yerself."

Her newly drawn blade only wavered an instant at her side before she raised it. As she charged towards them she yelled "en garde" at the top of her lungs. Her sudden attack and the fact she went after them in the left-handed style caught them off guard for a moment, and they stepped back and then drew their swords and approached their prey, circling her.

"You know it seems rather unfair?" someone commented from the sidelines.

"You're right, my young friend, it does hardly seem fair that four big strong men are attacking one young boy."

“Perhaps we should even up the odds a bit,” his younger companion suggested.

“One moment,” said the older man as he turned to address the nearest of the youth’s assailants. “Sir, this young lad is hardly worth your time. Why don’t we all leave this place and have a nice drink on me—”

“Why don’t you bugger off and mind your own business?” the assailant replied and lunged at the youth, who deflected the blade with a graceful parry riposte.

“No need to be rude and vulgar now.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Do not say I did not warn you, sir,” he countered calmly, and he and his younger companion entered the fray, deflecting sword strokes from Laurel and allowing her precious moments to regroup her defenses and parry the next few slashes that came her way, nearly penetrating her guard.

Laurel twirled away from her assailant and then took a tiny step forward and, dipping the tip of her blade, nicked the man’s arm with the tip of her sword. Her own breath came in gasps grating harshly in her ears.

Well, this was what she got for being out of practice, she scolded herself as she jumped away from the slash to her side, but not quite quickly enough. For her attacker’s blade drew a very fine line of blood along her rib cage. Laurel stifled her gasp at the stinging pain and backed up a step or two, bumping into one of her rescuers who was driving his sword through the man’s gut for the third time and then withdrew it quickly, saying, “Go with God,” as the man ceased breathing.

Even as she backed into one of her rescuers she caught sight of another of her rescuers and nearly lost her concentration completely as she recognized D’Artagnan. “Huh, *comment?*” She gasped, jumping away from another of her opponent’s lunges.

D’Artagnan parried his own opponent’s slash and looked up to see Aramis maim another opponent by encouraging the assailant to rush him and at the last moment side-stepping to reveal the wall. The attacker had no time to alter his course or slow his forward momentum, so he rammed his head into the wall, knocking himself senseless. D’Artagnan smiled. Aramis the tactical genius. D’Artagnan focused his mind on fighting again and taunted his own opponent. “Sloppy, sloppy,” he criticized as he made a reckless lunge of his own and speared his enemy up through the ribs piercing his heart.

Half out of breath, D'Artagnan came to Aramis' side and pointed his sword towards the two remaining fighters, Laurel and her attacker. "What do you say? Shall we help him out?"

Right at that moment the youngster in question fainted and lunged upward, and her sword tore through flesh and sinew from gut to neck with more force than she thought she had.

"Actually," Aramis responded, "I think he's got the situation well under control now."

"*Mon Dieu.*" Laurel panted after sheathing her sword and leaning over to clutch her knees.

"*Mon Dieu*, indeed," a voice interrupted her chaotic thoughts, calling her politely to account for her irreverence. "There is most certainly a God, and He seems to have looked favorably upon you today. However, I suggest that we do not linger here longer than necessary." Seeing that the boy was bleeding, Aramis reached out to help support him, but he jerked away like he was being stung.

"No," Laurel said, her dark blue eyes flashing. "I'm quite all right. It's not very deep. I can walk without assistance."

Startled, D'Artagnan took a closer look at the boy, unable to stop staring at his face. He could have sworn he knew that face and that voice. By all that was holy! It couldn't be, but he had little doubt of it. It was the lady who had given his party shelter from the storm—the lady who called herself Christophe. "You will at least come with us and have that wound tended?" D'Artagnan addressed Laurel with mounting concern.

For a moment he thought the youth was going to refuse to join them for any reason, refuse to have anyone look at the slash. "How could I turn down such a skilled escort?" Laurel replied as she indicated she would accompany them. Matters could, after all, have been worse. If she weren't doubly careful, those agents sent by her father's enemies would again be upon her.

The mismatched trio entered the inn and mounted the stairs to D'Artagnan's room. "I'll go find a doctor," D'Artagnan said, but before he could, Laurel stubbornly insisted, "No doctors. I don't like them, and I don't trust them. At any rate, it's nothing. Just give me a little privacy, and I can take care of the wound myself."

The young musketeer appeared ready to argue when Aramis broke in. "This is not really an appropriate place to debate the issue." As usual, he was right. Already the trio that had stopped on

the stairs was attracting the eyes of other patrons. D'Artagnan continued on the path to his room, and the three entered.

"Well, what do we have here?" Porthos inquired as his friends entered with the stranger in tow, a stranger who did not appear at all pleased to be there. Athos winced at the sound of Porthos' voice as he glanced up to see what Porthos was asking about.

"We found this young lad being set upon by a rather unsavory group, so D'Artagnan and I decided to lend our assistance," Aramis smoothly and succinctly explained.

"A rescue operation I see," Porthos commented as he stood. "Always a musketeer's duty to defend those less fortunate or able than himself. Well done."

"You'll have to excuse our lack of manners, but we were not expecting visitors," Aramis told the boy and then took over Athos' role by performing introductions. He nodded towards the blond-haired man in the corner. "Allow me to present Athos, D'Artagnan, and Porthos. And I am Aramis."

She acknowledged the greetings formally. Athos glanced at the lad and recognition finally dawned in his pounding brain. From Langeac. "I didn't expect to run into you in Marseille," he commented. "Does your father know you're here?" Laurel didn't respond, just blinked her eyes dumbly and remained mute. Blinked again as if trying to clear suddenly befuddled senses.

It was unusually hot in here, and an incessant buzzing started pounding ever more loudly behind her eyeballs. Why was the room spinning? She swayed uneasily on her feet, staggered half sideways. At that moment Athos noticed the crimson streak spreading along her side.

In one lightning-quick motion he leapt to his feet to help.

"I'll be quite all right," Laurel insisted stubbornly. But her body betrayed her, and she lost the last vestiges of her balance. Her last coherent thought was that her wound would have to be more serious than she thought it was.

Athos caught her as she pitched forward, and with Porthos' assistance carefully moved her to the bed. The oldest musketeer stood over the youth and focused his gaze on Porthos for a moment. "Bring me that basin of water and some rags. I'll see what I can do for the boy." Porthos retrieved the items and gave them to his companion. Typical of Athos to take charge even when he was not feeling well.

D'Artagnan stood frozen, indecision racking him. He had to say something before the situation spiraled completely out of control. "Athos," he finally said, and the musketeer stopped his preparations to look at D'Artagnan. "I really don't think it is wise for such a crowd to be here. I could take care of him."

"D'Artagnan, I have no time to argue with you. This boy needs attention, and you don't know anything about treating sword wounds. Not enough, at any rate," Athos responded curtly and returned his attention to Laurel.

D'Artagnan took a step towards the bed and the still form upon it. His brow wrinkled in an outer reflection of inner turmoil. "Athos, you don't understand."

"I understand that this boy needs help now and not five minutes from now," Athos stated as he began to tear fabric away from the wound.

"That's just it," D'Artagnan replied, despite himself. "That's no boy you're dealing with. Christophe is a woman. A lady."

"What?" Athos shot a stunned look at the young man and saw that he was completely serious. "Porthos, Aramis, perhaps you should leave. D'Artagnan and I will take care of this." Porthos and Aramis wasted no time debating the issue but simply left their companions to tend the wounded person.

"Grab some more rags, and get over here and lend me a hand. I've got to stop the bleeding," Athos instructed as he tore the last of the fabric away from the wound. Woman better not have a fit of modesty when she woke. By her very masquerade the lady wasn't much for conventions, so she had no right to go into hysterics over a strange man seeing her unclothed body when he was tending a wound. And Athos really wasn't in the mood for it.

"Water, please," the patient croaked as she awoke. Promptly a glass was placed in her hand, and she drank it down, and her eyes met Athos'. "I suppose I owe you all an explanation."

"That could be very helpful," Athos replied. No fit of modesty at least. No mention of who had tended her even. "Whenever you feel up to it, we're all waiting to hear."

Laurel tried to sit up and her head swirled. "Easy," Athos said as he helped her prop herself up against the bedpost.

"How long have I been here?" she asked suddenly and was informed that it had been two days. "I've got to get going."

“*Madame*,” Athos told her using the most formal form of address at his disposal. “You’re not going anywhere for at least several days. In any case, you’re not leaving until you explain what brings you to Marseille and why the deception.” They both looked up as the door opened, and Porthos, Aramis, and D’Artagnan entered. “Perhaps,” Athos suggested, “you could start by telling us who you really are.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes in resignation. She opened them again and looked from one man to the next. “My name is Laurel Christophe d’Anlass, daughter and heir, more or less, to the Marquis de Langeac. As to why I’m in Marseille, well suffice it to say that my home was no longer safe for me.”

“I guess you’ll have to pardon me then,” Porthos informed Laurel. “But it doesn’t seem that you are any safer in Marseille than at Langeac.”

“That was just unlucky chance,” she countered with surprising energy. “Those men just happened to stumble upon my horse and identified it as the property of the Marquis de Langeac when a merchant pointed me out as the youth who he had last seen riding the animal. And, well, you know the rest.” Hopefully, Rebelle was still secure where the assailants had left him. Another thing to check on when she was able to get out and about.

“With all due respect, *madame*, how do we know that you’re telling us the truth now?” D’Artagnan asked, doing his best not to insult the lady, though she was making that goal rather difficult.

“You don’t,” Laurel admitted, adding absently that *madame* was not her proper title as she was not married. “There’s no possible way I could convince you that I am who I claim to be. I do assure you that falsely claiming to be Laurel d’Anlass would be suicidal. So I put my life in your hands; you’ve already saved my life twice by my reckoning, so I would hope that you would not get me killed now by trying to confirm my identity,” she told the musketeers, particularly D’Artagnan.

Athos waved his three companions back and sat down beside the woman whose injury he had recently treated. “How would trying to confirm your identity get you killed?”

She lowered her eyes and winced as she almost pulled her wound open again. Silence encompassed the room, and no one moved for moments that seemed to drag on to infinity.

“Promise me what I tell you will go no further than you four. It’s not just my life that depends on secrecy, but also many others,

including the king's." Somehow their instincts favored believing her claim. One by one they gave her their words, and she proceeded to tell them about her past. Told them how her mother had died in childbirth and how her baby brother had died a week later, and then she explained that her father decided the best way to protect his only living child was to take her with him on his missions for the king.

Laurel went on to further explain that it was her father who'd first had her pretend to be a boy named Christophe in order to protect her and to make it easier to take her with him on his spy missions. Then she told of her father's recent return and the agents that were after them both. "And now," she paused, imprisoned within her own thoughts, "I must get to Calais and intercept the transmission of war plans and stolen government documents to England. Which means I also have to expose a traitor to France. So, obviously, the traitor will have his own agents looking for me as well as my father."

The room was so silent that even the whispers of the kitchen wenches from below-stairs could be heard in the room. Athos stood and surveyed his companions, his decision clear. "How do you feel about going to Calais?"

"Better than going back to Paris and being bored. Could use a good adventure," Porthos spoke, and D'Artagnan seconded him heartily, pushing his concerns for Constance aside in favor of the lure of a good adventure.

They all looked at Aramis. With complete calm he said, "You'll hear no objection from me. I say we go to Calais."

"*Madame*," Athos addressed Laurel with careful politeness despite her claims to the title of *mademoiselle*, "allow us to fulfill your mission in Calais and then see to it that all the information gets back to the king. We will get you to Paris and put you under the protection of *Monsieur de Treville*."

"No." She stopped him before he went any further. "I will not be left behind. I know this job, and you do not. I've grown up with the danger and the intrigue, and I'm the only one who can contact my father." Athos' face remained implacable, and Laurel wanted to howl in frustration, but she didn't have the energy left to spare. Why did every man want to lock her away and try to protect her? Did they really think she was so delicate that she would break any easier than a man? "If you leave without me," she warned, "I will follow you." When she had recovered adequately.

However, the musketeers did not know her, nor did they take her warning seriously. When they left for Calais three days later, they left her behind with an escort standing ready to take her to Paris. It was an escort she'd make sure she avoided.

* * * * *

The hot, wet wax pooled on the letter and the man pressed his ring to it, sealing the letter tightly. He set the missive aside and turned his attention to more pressing matters such as who he could find to replace Rochefort.

Pursing his lips, he stopped staring at the ceiling and looked back to the reports laid upon his desk. One, an old one, regarding the death of Milady de Winter, another the relatively recent escape of Thomas d'Anlass from a Prussian prison, and another regarding the war effort against England. Another yet informing him that four musketeers had executed their mission to Marseille, but instead of returning to Paris they had headed in a direction too far west to reach Paris. He did not like unknown factors, especially when it concerned those meddling musketeers—Athos, Porthos, and Aramis and that new musketeer: D'Artagnan. That one especially. He had been a major reason the cardinal's plans had been foiled and had made Richelieu look the fool.

"Your eminence." A guard entered the study, and Cardinal Richelieu acknowledged him, requesting what his business was. "There is a lady here who requests to be admitted into your presence. She would not leave her name." As if greatly fatigued by the endless drudgery, he instructed his personal guard to send her in, and he would take care of the situation. He always had to take care of everything eventually.

The lady sketched a perfect curtsy to the cardinal, and he ever so gently kissed the tips of her fingers. "And what can I do for you?" Richelieu inquired.

"It's what I can do for you," she said, pushing back her cloak.

"Milady de Winter."

"I can see you must have been informed of my demise. However, that information was a bit premature. I survived my plunge off the cliffs, and those musketeers never bothered to check and find my body to make sure that I was dead." She paused as if reconsidering for the briefest of moments. "I believe I could be quite an assistance to you."

“What makes you think that I require your unique talents, Milady? You failed in your last mission. One would not like to see you suffer the consequences of another failure.”

So considerate of the man to be thinking of her well-being. As if he ever truly cared. Milady made a careful circuit around the room, wary of reagravating her newly healed injuries. “So you deny that you’re searching for information on the Marquis d’Anlass or on Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and D’Artagnan?”

“What can you offer me that my other agents cannot?” His eminence challenged the lady, his mind already at work considering and discarding the possibilities.

“I can deliver to you the only daughter of the marquis, and I can find the musketeers in question. They will not expect a dead woman to be pursuing them and will not be watching for a lady. Plus, when I find them I can very easily disrupt any task which may not, shall we say, be beneficial to your best interests.”

“Ah,” said Richelieu as he reseated himself and indicated that the blond-haired aristocrat be seated. “Perhaps we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

* * * * *

“Did we lose them?”

D’Artagnan gasped as Athos pulled his mount even with the young man’s. “Hard to tell,” D’Artagnan responded as he wiped away the streams of rain that continued to fall, trying to obscure his vision. Ridiculous, really. He couldn’t remember a rainier summer. “Aramis thinks we’ve lost the contingent of the Cardinal’s guard that was following us.”

The four mounted men guided their horses through the sludge of the road towards an inn and tavern. The horses wheezed and shook their tails as if trying to dash off the cold of the falling water. With each step closer to shelter, the steeds snorted and phlegm blew from their noses. Nor were their riders in much better shape than the animals after their long haul and their near-frantic attempt to elude the guards who’d been attempting to follow them.

As the musketeers dismounted, a young lad came rushing forward from the stable to help them settle their mounts, unsaddle them, and brush them down before the men took shelter themselves from the harsh elements.

The drenched men entered the warmth of the main hall, and it enclosed them, making their wet clothes cling more closely to their bodies. Aramis, with his customary aplomb, procured chambers where they changed from their wet clothes into fresh breeches, tunics, and doublets. They hid away their musketeer mantles deeply in their packs. The decision had been unanimous: keep their true identities concealed as well as they possibly could. No further advertising that they were musketeers.

“Looks like our good mutual friend has been spotted,” Porthos commented as he downed a swig of his drink, and both Athos and D’Artagnan glanced up to see the tall, well-groomed, dark-haired man enter the room. Aramis’ dark, gold-flecked eyes surveyed his surroundings as if searching. One of the barmaids approached Aramis even as Porthos commented upon Aramis’ arrival. She offered the man a wink and a smile as she came alongside him and sized him up appreciatively for a long moment.

“Can I get you something?” she inquired with a cute little pout. “Perhaps a tumbler of our best ale for starters.”

“*Non. Merci, mams’elle.* I was looking for someone,” he replied with charming politeness that was unique to him.

The wench leaned closer to him, permitting him a perfect view of creamy bosom exposed by a low-cut bodice. Momentarily he lost his train of thought as the tantalizing sight of a well-formed woman caught his attention. With one of her slender hands she fingered the crucifix that dangled from his neck. With another practiced pout she asked, “Are you a priest?”

“Ah, no,” he finally responded. “I’ve not yet gone back to the seminary to complete my vows.” He grasped her small hand and gently extracted the crucifix from it. Still her hand remained enclosed in his as he struggled to find a graceful way out of the situation. Wenching was rapidly losing its allure; there was no thrill in it anymore. No sense of accomplishment or purpose. Nor was he in the mood for it now. Hunger and fatigue weighed too heavily upon him this night.

“Well, that’s Aramis for you. Always attracting the beautiful women without even trying,” Porthos commented dryly before setting aside his drink and jumping to his feet at the sound of the fast-paced music drifting through the air. Lustily, he grabbed one of the barmaids around the waist and set off dancing with her.

Kissing her soundly, he twirled her around the room, enjoying being the center of much attention.

“It looks like you and I are to be left out of the festivities tonight. Or perhaps you’d like to follow their example.” Athos made an encompassing gesture as he addressed D’Artagnan.

D’Artagnan cast a wary look upon his remaining companion. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Another nursemaid for me, huh. I suppose someone must take up after Aramis since he has been detained.” Athos halted his friend’s further words with a firm shake of his head. “Not to worry, *mon ami*, I’ve limited myself to one small bottle of wine tonight. I’m in no danger of drinking myself senseless or even getting drunk.”

“That’s nice to know,” a strange voice intruded on the conversation, and both men turned their attention to the youth who was perched on a nearby chair. “For I do believe your friend might need your assistance,” the youth told them, pointing towards Aramis. “I think maybe he needs some help extracting himself from that pretty little wench who has become rather clingy.”

“We would not really want to interrupt our friend without his consent,” Athos commented in a voice carefully calculated to turn the intruder away. Nearly rude, though none would have dared tell Athos to his face, except maybe Porthos or Aramis, and D’Artagnan, given some time.

“Well, I think it would be to your benefit to gather your friends before I make a nasty little scene that I’m sure we’d all rather avoid.” The youngster was not at all put off by Athos’ hint.

“*Mince alors*, good grief, Christophe,” D’Artagnan said in a low voice, barely stopping himself from addressing the disguised woman as Laurel. “What are you doing here?”

“I cannot think that’s a conversation we want to be having in this room. It would be kind of hard to explain things to the satisfaction of all onlookers, now, wouldn’t it?”

Athos turned his attention to D’Artagnan and told him to go extract Porthos. After D’Artagnan had escaped from his chair and braved the crowd surrounding the large musketeer, Athos permitted himself a moment to take stock of the woman who called herself Laurel.

He’d be—she’d actually tracked them, and they never even noticed. Which could well mean they hadn’t eluded the cardinal’s Guard. Then again the cardinal’s guards were rather inept. Laurel

forestalled further action on Athos' part by jumping to her feet and proceeding to inform him that since he was so reluctant, she would have to go retrieve Aramis herself. "Not to worry. I'll be back for you," she decreed and danced off to "rescue" Aramis.

Before he could stop her, she had inserted her body in the small space between the couple and forced Aramis' attention to her. "Your friends have sent me to fetch you. It's important, and I'm afraid it is a matter that must be discussed now and in private," Laurel said, fending off the barmaid with ease, and unbeknownst to her, saving Aramis the problem of figuring out how to get rid of the girl.

"You are supposed to be in Paris under the protection of *Monsieur de Treville*," Athos scolded Laurel almost as if she were a recalcitrant child, and his three companions looked on, disapproval plain in their stiff stances.

"I told you before that I am the only one who has the ability to contact my father, and that is a vital part of this mission. And," she said raising her voice so that the men could not shut her out, patronizing sons of . . . "I did tell you that I had a great deal of experience in the field of espionage and that I would not be left behind. Nor will I be left behind again."

"Please, Lady Laurel," D'Artagnan broke in, "we would not have you destroy your life and reputation. We would not see you killed on a dangerous mission. Can you not go where it is safer?"

With those words Laurel lost her composure and ripped into the young man and his friends. "Perhaps all of you should let me be the judge of what is and what is not safe and proper for me. Who are you three to tell me that I am safer in Paris, near the cardinal whom both my father and I not only despise but also mistrust? Knowing that, you still have the gall to tell me what's safe for me." She paused to catch her breath, her eyes flashing in challenge. "I can quite well take care of myself, as well as any one of you. I am a very good rider and an excellent fencer, not to mention that you were able to lose the cardinal's guard, but were unable to lose me."

Porthos leaned over towards the man closest to his height and commented, "Nasty little temper there." Aramis nodded. Almost as an afterthought the big man added, "Is she really any good at fencing?"

“She held her own in Marseille when D’Artagnan and I were fighting alongside her,” the would-be-priest admitted, a bit grudgingly.

Laurel pivoted on her heel and turned to glare at Porthos and Aramis. “By all means, if you gentlemen have something to say, please allow us all to hear.” In frustration she expelled a breath of pent-up air and sank into the nearby chair. “Why do I even bother?” she mumbled, her words unclear to the musketeers. Why did she always seem to lose her cool at the worst times? Uneasy silence settled on the awkward situation.

“*Madame*, you have a lousy temper,” Aramis said, but in his own singular way which conveyed no insult, and Laurel shrugged her shoulders, saying that men weren’t exclusively entitled to the right to lose their tempers.

“Is it really so hard for you four big strong men to listen to a woman’s point of view on anything, or would that be some affront to your masculinity?” she asked, softly massaging her temples in an effort to ward off an impending headache. She’d been suffering from many of those recently.

Ooh. Porthos flinched inwardly at the lady’s words. Barbs more like it. Independent, feisty thing, and stubborn. The lady knew how to fence verbally; that was definitely not debatable. Of course involvement in international intrigue had a way of making people perfect the skill. “I’m sorry, *madame*. We cannot take the risk or put you in further danger,” Athos responded, and he truly did seem to regret turning her away.

Her jaw worked in consternation and she closed her eyes, taking deep breaths to steady and calm herself. So Athos was the leader, and it was him she would have to convince. A losing proposition—or so it appeared. “If I were a man . . .”

“If you were a man, we’d still be reluctant to take along someone who’s fighting ability and loyalty we were unsure of.” Athos anticipated the course of her question.

“But you would not turn him away out of hand, would you?” Athos’ steady look confirmed the truth of her assessment. “Yet you’ll turn me away without even giving me a chance to prove myself. Are men really so afraid of a woman who could be their equal in intelligence, ability, ambition, and fighting skills?”

“A musketeer fears nothing,” D’Artagnan insisted.

“Really, is that so? I thought only fools feared nothing,” Laurel riposted, as she made her exit from the room.

For a moment there was confused silence in the room and then D'Artagnan approached Athos. "We can't just let her walk out there. This is a very dangerous place for a lone woman."

Athos forbore telling the young man that Laurel had already likely survived many such unsavory places in her pursuit of them. "What do you propose I do? Do you think I can stop her without making the very scene we would like to avoid at all costs? No. I'm afraid in this we can do nothing but leave her to follow her own path right now," Athos concluded and then changed the subject. "Porthos, Aramis, are either of you acquainted with Thomas d'Anlass or do you know anyone who is acquainted with him?"

"Ah, the great and noble Marquis de Langeac and our erstwhile lady's father," Porthos said loudly, leaning back in a chair and propping his feet on a nearby table. "Can't say as we've ever met. Man's a little beyond my age. Must be in his mid to late forties by now." His friends directed him disgusted looks for wasting valuable time with a brief run down on the man's age. "No sense of humor and always in a hurry," he mumbled and then looked to his companions. "Well then, best I can do for you is that I'm a distant cousin to the man on my mother's side and the family is very old and well established." Aramis lifted his palms upward in a silent gesture that told Athos he had even less connection to the marquis. "I don't suppose you know much about the marquis." Porthos shot a look at D'Artagnan.

"Sorry. Never even really heard of him until recently." D'Artagnan stifled a humorless chuckle. "So it looks as if we're going to have a very hard time finding a man who's not been seen or heard from in almost two years. And Lady Laurel d'Anlass really is the only one who might know how to contact her father."

* * * * *

"No, behind the hovel," Guillaume ordered in a harsh whisper, and Joseph quickly complied.

Joseph began to speak, and Guillaume waved his hand, stopping him in mid word as he listened at the wall of the small dwelling. Low voices caught his attention, and he strained his ears to hear each word.

Guillaume pulled away from the hovel, and Joseph signaled that all was clear as far as he could see. Cautiously the two men

retreated from the building into the sheltering copse of trees. “What’d you learn?” Joseph asked impatiently.

“A man answering to the name of Antoine Françoise passed through here about a day and a half ago. He was headed towards the Pyrénées.”

“Did they mention anything about what Antoine looked like?” Joseph questioned, and Guillaume sketched the brief description that he had overheard. The brush rustled, and both men ceased conversation, straining to be sure that no one had stumbled upon them.

When they had assured themselves that they were alone, Joseph continued, “Sounds like one of the identities the marquis appropriated on a mission to Corsica. I think splitting up and coming into the Luz area by two different directions might be the best plan.” Guillaume nodded his head, and the agents went over the last details of the plan before disappearing into descending dusk.

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Kat Jaske is an English and French teacher in Las Vegas, where her high school selected her novel, *For Honor*, as the featured book for the 2006 Reading Incentive Program.



Jaske is a national award-winning poet, and won the Upper Arlington High School top-five senior thesis award for her book.

She earned certificates from Jean Paul Valéry University in France, has a M Ed degree in education, and speaks fluent French.

She enjoys fencing, singing, and playing piano and is an avid runner who helped her high school team win the Ohio cross-country state championship.

She is currently active in sport fencing, especially with the saber. Visit www.forhonor.com.