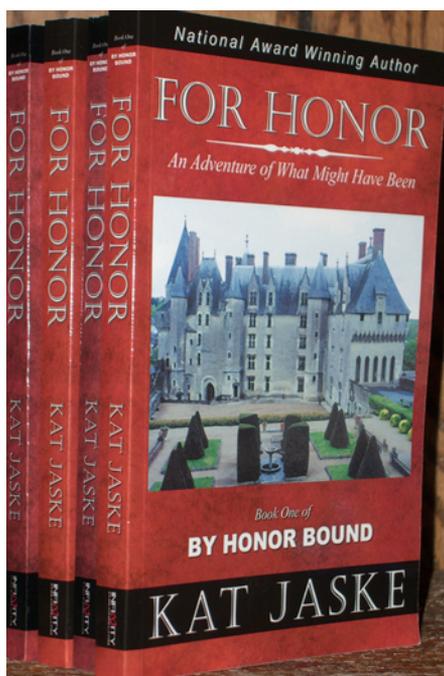


FOR HONOR

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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Prologue

1636 A.D.

Chilling cold settled itself more fully upon the barren landscape. A bone-chilling type of cold that seemed to fuse itself into the marrow of one's being with an almost human bitterness. Not even the solace of falling snow pierced the stillness of the frigid panorama. No, it was quite simply too cold to snow, if such a thing were possible.

Rather than descending as fluffy white flakes, snow lay packed and trampled so heavily on the ground that it had been polished to a thick, rough slab of ice. And all this in early November. 1636 was turning truly vicious.

Through this bleak and barren terrain, two figures trudged as fast as their legs could carry them—fast enough so that the exertion might bring some needed warmth to their numbed bodies. Perhaps it would bring enough heat to withstand the biting cold—to ward against the icy fingers of air seeping through their breeches and leggings and multiple layers of clothes and deep into every muscle fiber and into their very bones.

The smaller of the two figures reached up to steady the taller man—actually the very tall man—as he stumbled over a stone frozen in the icy snow.

“Papa.” The boy’s eyes searched his father’s face as if seeking signs to assure himself that his father was all right, considering their most recent travails in the duplicitous world of espionage. That they had managed to escape the insidious designs of the powers that be—with their lives and the documents—was nothing short of a marvel.

Especially after such stratagems as they’d been obliged to adopt in their flight, he had no intention of letting his father freeze to death, even if he had to rely on sheer stubborn willpower to ward off the chilling hand of death. Christophe’s mouth drew into an even tighter line as he addressed his father. Splotches of healthy tinted skin stood out on the older man’s face—a hollow consolation that attested to the life that still animated him.

The older man, with grey-streaked brown hair, stopped short every so often and leaned with his hands on his knees as his son’s steadying hands left him. “Christophe, you must go on without me. I slow us down too much, and I will not be the cause of both our deaths.” He paused as the frigid air stung his throat, and then his eyes shifted back to the tall, proud boy with shoulder-length blond hair. “I thought I told you to get going.”

Christophe d’Anlass rolled his blue eyes and opted to ignore his father’s last few words. Instead, he urged his father to stand straight. Reluctantly, through an immense effort of will that had often served him in good stead, Thomas d’Anlass stood taller.

“*Bon,*” Christophe concluded with an expression of determined satisfaction. “I don’t wish to and won’t abandon what’s left of my family. Now come, we must hurry. There’s no telling how close to us those Prussians have gotten, and I refuse to be captured.”

Christophe crossed his thin arms across his chest and tapped a foot on the ice. That he had a cousin by his father’s deceased sister, he conveniently decided to forget since the young man was well on his way to squandering everything he had ever had and becoming a drunken, gambling wastrel—and that perhaps was an overly positive evaluation of his cousin’s flawed character.

Of course his intense dislike of the useless specimen of humanity could have something to do with the fact that Thomas was doing and had done all within his not inconsiderable power to

cut Christophe's cousin out of his will and completely out of the line of inheritance. *No wastrel bastard is going to stand a chance to inherit my lands and my title, even if I must cash in all my favors with the king*—as Christophe's father had once stated. Christophe uncrossed his arms and gestured impatiently. "Well, come on already. We've got to get out of the Germanic territories, into Belgium, and meet with this Mazin you mentioned."

Thomas endeavored to conceal his abrupt start and shivered, trying futilely to ward off the intense cold. He should have known that after these years of dragging his child around with him on his various spy missions for the king of France the boy would latch onto any names very quickly and remember them, even if they had only been mentioned once in passing.

Thomas was on the verge of arguing again when he caught that defiant look in the eyes of his only living child—the one that bespoke of imminent and stubborn rebellion. *So much of his mother in him*, Thomas thought, as he often did. Then he quickly dismissed the thought. Thérèse may have been years dead, but the pain was still too fresh. "I know you won't let me freeze. Well, give me your hand. Let's move quickly. *Vite*." Thomas repeated the injunction to be quick in his native French rather than the German they had been speaking on this latest mission for king and country. He didn't need to mention that those Prussian agents were still tracking them and that very soon those same agents would likely be upon them; nor was he in any shape to deal with them. And then . . . well, freezing might easily be a more merciful end.

Without further conversation, the pair proceeded on their course towards Belgium, the smaller figure helping to pull the larger on with the gentle, persistent pressure of his hand. The blond-haired boy, who appeared to be anywhere between eleven and three and ten, ducked his head as the wind suddenly kicked up and flung random loose particles of snow and ice into his partially covered his face. Just as quickly, his free gloved left hand went up to shield his face from the missiles.

Thomas made no sound. It was challenge enough for him to continue to put one foot in front of the other—forward little by little. *Nom de nom!* It felt good to allow himself to think in French again. He was old of a sudden. Or at least he felt abominably old. Too old to have buried four children and three wives and to have gotten himself into scrapes many a younger man would have fled from. At any rate, he felt far too old to perform covert services for

his *majesté*, the king and Compton; maybe he should have retired from the spy service years ago.

Stubbornly the aging spy forced any emotion or thought from his mind. His eyes rested ever so briefly on the hand that grasped his and through persistent tugs encouraged him to continue. A sigh escaped his chapped, weather-cracked lips. Hard to believe there had been a time when he had once been as determined as his son, a time when he had thought he could conquer the world and set all injustices right, not to mention live through it all. Life was even more fickle than society if one could believe that fine irony.

How long the odd pair trudged along in that wasteland neither had a clue. They simply walked in a rough quick shamble, though there was probably nothing simple about it.

After the interminably long period of wind gusts the boy looked up and squinted his eyes. "*Mon Dieu*," he whispered, not bothering this time to try to hold back the statement the Church might call using God's name in vain.

Could it be? Could it possibly be what he thought it was? His labored steps took him closer, and the snowcovered wooden structure persisted to register to his senses. At that instant Christophe tugged his father's hand and yelled at him to hurry, for there was shelter close ahead.

Thomas, Marquis de Langeac's head snapped up as his child's words finally registered.

A surge of adrenaline rushed through his limbs, limbs suddenly awash with sensation after being deadened for so long. He dropped his son's hand, and both advanced more quickly than they had thought possible towards the only dwelling in the ice-covered expanse. A mere few steps ahead of his son, Thomas made it to the solid wooden door, and scarcely a second later he was knocking upon the portal.

Time ticked by, and no one arrived. Christophe's father turned from the door, and his shoulders sagged; that door was too strong for him to break down in his present pitiful condition. Nor could his clumsy hands pick any lock until the warmth had been restored to them.

However, Christophe was not so complacent. Muscles worked at his jaw. One way or another he would find a way in. Christophe was not his father's child for nothing. And with his temper simmering to the surface, that way in could well be

anything. The boy slammed his fists against the door, yelling in German as he did so, spewing a long stream of virulent language that sounded out of place coming from such a young citizen of France. Nor was it marred by any trace of a French accent.

So absorbed in his tirade was the boy that he did not hear the bolt slipping from its place, and he was therefore caught off guard when the door creaked open. He tumbled forward a step before catching his balance and then found himself looking up into a pair of piercing eyes set in the face of a dark-haired man who was somewhere in his early thirties.

Had he been in a more temperate or less desperate state of mind, the boy would have cowered upon facing the imposing, evidently bad-tempered man. Instead Christophe plowed on in flawless German, apologizing briefly and then pleading for his father and explaining how sick Thomas was.

The dark-haired man glanced at the man the boy was speaking of, coldly assessing him. The older man did appear to be quite unwell and could die without immediate help. In all likelihood he would pass on anyhow. But Peter trusted no one during this turbulent time of war. Christophe saw the hardening in the Germanic man's face and knew that he was going to be condemned to be shut out in the cold unless he did something.

That was all it took. What was left of the boy's frazzled control on his temper snapped, and he threw several choice insults at the large man, insults that made even Peter cringe. Boys did not speak that way. Nor did many men. If this were his boy he'd—

Peter's hands snaked out to grab the wiry boy. Just before he could get a good grasp on the insolent upstart, strong hands stayed him. "Peter, *nein*," an attractive blond-haired man of some twenty years commanded. "I will handle this," the second Germanic man informed Peter with an authority that was unquestionable. The blond-haired young man surveyed Christophe and shook his head. "Qiara," he concluded so softly that only the boy heard.

Christophe froze as his eyes took in the young man's friendly face. "Péale," he mouthed without sound. It was Mickael. But the Prussian had left for England. Christophe had seen his ship leave. Yet here he was standing in front of the boy and obviously nowhere near England.

"Help the boy's father," Mickael, better known to most of his countrymen as Erik, told Peter. "I'll take care of the boy. I know them," he added by way of assurance to the dark-haired man.

Upon these words the marquis and his son were ushered into the warmth of the building and were attended by the two Prussians.

As soon as he could manage it, the man known as Mickael or Péale snatched away Christophe from his father. Wry amusement sparkled in Mickael's eyes. "You have always had quite a way with words. But you had best watch that colorful vocabulary of yours or you'll never survive to see the coming of the next decade. Not to mention that politeness is next to godliness as well."

"Where are we?" A single stern look of warning Thomas shot from across the room prevented his son from saying anything more than those three stilted words.

Mickael propped his elbow against the wall, still looking every inch a gentleman. "Technically you're in Belgium, but in the area of land which many Germanic princes have laid claim to."

"In short . . ."

"Disputed territory," the handsome young Prussian concluded for Christophe.

"Figures," the boy grumbled and then dropped to a mulish silence. "*Danka.*" Christophe belatedly remembered his manners, this time in German, and a moment later asked to be excused so that he could rest as the weight of exhaustion suddenly crushed down on him. The young man nodded and watched as the youth curled up and quickly dropped into a deep sleep. Whatever had possessed Thomas to continually take his only child around with him on such dangerous missions? Of course they were Mickael's friends, and he owed them his life, but . . .

* * * * *

Thomas raised his hand and gestured for his son to approach. Their pursuers had to be dangerously close was the thought he left unvoiced. This time Thomas was well prepared for a battle. No child of his was going to delay any longer than the day he'd already spent here.

Christophe came to stand by the bed where his father was propped up. Already the marquis looked greatly improved, but it would still be a few days before he was back up to adequate strength. Thomas gestured again for his son and heir to come closer still so as to provide a measure of privacy. Reluctantly the boy complied.

“You will go with Peter,” said Thomas firmly. Christophe looked nothing short of mutinous. Thomas snapped, “*Non, mon petit*, you will go with Peter, immediately, to the heart of Belgium and then you will make your way back to France. Enough. You will listen! I will not be responsible for your death, and I will not have your uncle or cousin ruling over my lands as your guardian or in any other capacity. Do not bring that fate upon our family, especially not after all my efforts to avoid that outcome.”

Another protest was clipped short by Thomas’ resolute look. “I repeat, if nothing else youngster, do not stoop to dishonoring your family name and heritage. Now you were saying?”

“Papa,” Christophe insisted in a hushed tone. “I intend no dishonor, and I have grown up on this lifestyle. I will not die if I stay to help you. And I can help you get out of here. I beg of you.”

“A lifestyle I should never have brought you into,” barked Thomas. “Silence! I’ve done you no favor in raising you this way. You’ll always be too wild and too headstrong for proper society. I should have had you trained properly, but since I can’t change that, at least I will ensure that you survive this mission and that my holdings have a proper heir. Plus, they search for a man of my description fleeing with a boy. If we split up, we can better disguise ourselves and will increase the odds that we both escape. You *will* go or I will see to it that the marriage that was arranged for you years ago will go through.”

Christophe fell abruptly silent again. How could he, after he had promised that his son could choose his own spouse! But he had no doubt as to the earnestness of the marquis’ words. Check and mate. He would go, and heaven forbid anything happen to his father. Mechanically Christophe rose to his feet and was on the verge of going to Peter when his father touched the boy’s hand.

In Thomas’ hands was a collection of papers. “Take them,” Thomas told his son. “Anything at all that is found on me will condemn me, and I have every intention of coming back to you alive and well. Watch my estate until I return.” Langeac, Christophe knew his father meant, as it always had been the most precious of his father’s holdings, at least to Thomas, regardless of its humble size compared to his other numerous holdings.

Without a word the boy snagged the papers so deftly that neither the man better known as Erik nor Peter saw the exchange. Rapidly, his anger at having his hand forced still simmering, Christophe gathered his belongings and bundled himself tightly

against the cold before joining Peter. The pair was on the verge of departing when Christophe rushed to his father and hugged him fiercely before returning just as quickly to the door.

In dry-eyed silence Christophe followed Peter out the door, and as he passed, Erik said, “Do not fear, Qiara, I will do what I must, and your father will be safe. I give you my word.”

The young Prussian watched as Peter and his charge made their way towards the safety of Belgium. At least the boy would be out of harm’s way he concluded and turned back to Thomas.

Blasted intrigue! He wasn’t very good at it, but he had given his word that he would see to it that Christophe’s father would safely escape. Of course if Christophe knew the half of it. . . . Best to deal with that hurdle when he or Thomas ran into it. No doubt they’d never hear the end of it—if they managed to get out of this quagmire alive.

Read Section One in the next download.

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.

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