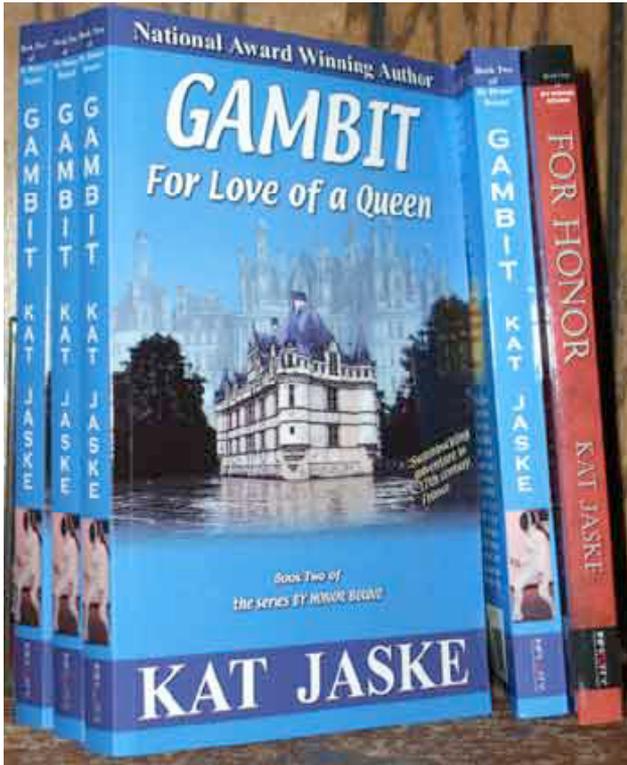


GAMBIT

FOR LOVE OF A QUEEN

Book Two of BY HONOR BOUND



Kat Jaske

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GAMBIT FOR LOVE OF A QUEEN



Carcassonne in France

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Prologue

April, 1639

*"It is not always the same thing to be a good man and a good citizen."
Aristotle*

The merest hint of spring rippled in the breeze as the sun struggled to emerge from behind the voluminous layers of white clouds, shining down on the bleak, sickly, green and brown landscape. Every here and there clumps of dirty snow and slowly melting ice clung tenaciously to withered vegetation, refusing to yield to the warmth of those feeble rays of sun.

In that self-same breeze clung a tang of sulfur fused with a dose of soot and the unmistakable stench of smoke. On the horizon hovered an ominous grey cloud, staining the blue of the sky, a color that resembled the desiccated skin of a porpoise.

Across the winter-scarred terrain a solitary horse galloped, its hooves tearing up chunks of sod and trampling fragile buds as it went. On the nut-brown animal's back a rider swathed in a wind-billowed, tan, long coat leaned forward, his chest almost touching his mount's head. From the laboring horse's nostrils the man almost thought he could see the misty puffs of breath in the chilly air.

A moment longer the man permitted his mount to have its head and then he reined in, and the beast came to a stop atop a hill that overlooked the environs.

His eyes surveyed his surroundings with deceptive equanimity and lingered on the grey film marring the sky. If he were feeling more superstitious this morning, he would have

accused the weather of having been tailored to fit his bleak mood, and spring of deliberately delaying its coming.

Of course, it seemed to be the same story every year—spring struggling to break winter’s icy grip. His nose crinkled as the gust of wind brought the reek of smoke and sulfur to his nostrils. Though the fighting was leagues away from his estate, the wind carried the dismal reminder of stark reality to his senses.

Had there ever been a time that war had not been ravaging his homeland? Apparently not in his lifetime. Even his earliest memories bore the brand of war that continually plagued Europe and cost so many good men their lives, limbs, or peace of mind.

As if sensing its master’s restiveness, the horse pawed at the ground and tossed its head. The blond-haired man of roughly twenty and four years spared a moment from his contemplations to try to soothe the beast.

A backward glance toward his home, he stole. Erik was in no particular hurry to return. The news was not likely to be favorable, and the doctor had not held out much hope that his wife and the newborn twins would last out the fortnight; that they had survived the past three weeks had already been hailed a miracle. The assurance that his elder son of two years was in good health, for the time being, brought little solace to the turbulence of his heart.

Nor did it help that his ducal responsibilities frequently drew him from home to Danzig or Königsberg or Berlin or whatever other places service to the crown demanded he travel. Oft enough he found himself fighting the ungrateful thought that he’d rather not wield such tremendous power when it constantly threw him into worlds of political intrigue and expediency that he had always preferred to avoid. Back his mind drifted to his ailing wife and children and refused to let go of the morbid picture. If only . . .

Vivid images from years earlier abruptly reappeared in his mind, in gruesome detail: a man and youth toiling in the battlefield to save the lives of wounded and dying men while guns and cannons clamored around them, while screams and curses ceaselessly rent the air. It had been a long time since he had thought of Thomas and the man’s son, who had in reality been a daughter he had drawn into a tableau of suffering and violence that Satan proudly would have called hell.

And regardless of the father and daughter’s allegiance to a rival country, he wished that they—either one of them—were

under his roof this very day. When it came down to it, he would trust his wife and children to their ministrations far more readily than to any other so-called doctor, even one of good repute. Even if Thomas' daughter were the only one present to tend to his family he'd feel more inclined to hope for an auspicious outcome.

A sigh burst from his lips as he caught sight of another horse and rider coming toward him. An instant he was tempted to turn and flee from what was all too likely a harbinger of bad or unwelcome news. Instead he silently watched the approach of the other man.

"*Herzog?*" The messenger glanced at the duke as he spoke, and tried not to let concern for his master creep into his voice. Few could have asked for a better master or better man to serve than this one, and all too often *Herzog* Erik's life had been riddled with anguish, horror, and brutally dashed dreams.

Reluctantly, the young nobleman, who was usually of a far cheerier disposition, signaled the messenger to speak. The other man cleared his throat. "I am sorry to disturb you, but I did not think you would wish to wait until later to hear."

There was a marked pause. "My wife?" Erik finally prompted as the muscles in his stomach clenched and a leaden feeling seized his roiling heart.

"Welcome news, *herzog*, your wife and the children have improved. The doctor believes there is a good chance they will pull through, though your wife should never bear children again." Unspoken was the warning that should such a fate be tempted it would kill her. Unspoken was the knowledge that even if she did pull through, her health would always be frail.

"Then what does this concern?"

"There seem to be strange goings-on. Many rumors are flying about possible all-out war with France, others about plots to kill the king, *kurfürst*," he amended, as technically there was no king of Prussia, "or the *prin*z. The latest missives seem to support the contention that someone is slowly poisoning the *kurfürst*."

"Someone has arrived with news from *Kurfürst* Georg Wilhem von Brandenburg himself then?" the *herzog* deduced.

The other man nodded. "He is worried about his son, and what the *prin*z Frederick William might be getting embroiled in."

What mischief could the boy be getting up to in such a retreat as Königsberg? Erik's brow furrowed. He found the thought

disturbing, especially considering the very serious and thoughtful nature of the young man. He was not one prone to getting himself into trouble. “Was anything sent to be given to me?”

The messenger reached into his doublet and withdrew a sealed letter and proffered it to the young nobleman. Without delay, Erik broke the seal and read through the contents of the message. Georg was dying? Unthinkable, and yet the verdict was no more than a year—not that such intelligence was commonly known or completely accurate.

Erik’s eyes darkened as he continued to read. Worse and worse; perhaps Georg had legitimate reasons to be concerned. He would have to investigate, Erik concluded morosely, wondering why he was never allowed to live a peaceable life of a father, friend, and family man but ever had to be embroiled in foreign affairs and intrigue.

“*Herzog?*”

“I believe I will be doing quite a bit of traveling in the near future. But for now, let us head back. There is much for us to do here.” And much for him to get in order before he had to thrust his nose into affairs he was sure were going to lead places he did not want to go.

Section One

August, 1639

“It is often merely for an excuse that we say things are impossible.”

François de La Rochefoucauld

The *marquise de Langeac* cursed in what could best be described as a most unladylike fashion as she dabbed the nib of the quill in the inkwell. Rapidly, she finished penning the letter to Milord Compton, complaining tactfully—she really had tried to use more tact this time—about the lack of trust he was placing in her ability as an agent of the crown.

He quite simply refused to send her on any but the most mundane of missions, which left her in a most restless state, stuck at the palace in Paris after numerous little innocuous missions. Hard to believe she'd only returned to Paris a fortnight earlier. Still, despite Anne and Constance's efforts, she was, quite frankly, lousy at playing the political-courtier game and hated being hunted as a marital mark, whether it be for her title, her lands, her wealth, or some combination of the aforementioned attributes.

Granted, she had been fortunate enough to avoid the fate of being gossiped into a bad reputation, or the undignified solecism of social ostracism. Polite society had, ironically enough, begun to accept her as a delightful eccentric. No doubt, that could be attributed in large part to her great inheritance, extensive estates, title, and her own father's widespread influence. And yet, all she was expected to do was marry well.

Zut. The blessed state of marriage. What tomfoolery. She had little genuine desire to marry, and she had long been resigned to being a spinster only to find herself thwarted when she became an heiress. Drat the conventions of society. Those very conventions and unwritten codes that sent Laurel chomping at the bit to do something more satisfying than looking pretty and breeding heirs.

Not to mention, she'd be uncommonly lucky if Compton responded to her letter with any semblance of swiftness.

Still, she supposed she had been very lucky in many respects. Truly lucky that she could keep up her fencing and could read and write and had more freedom than any other single woman or most married women. Come to think of it, more freedom than even most widows.

Then again, she was also very fortunate no one had figured out that it was she who had dressed up as a lad and kissed the *duc de Rouen* with a touch of abandonment in plain sight of half the King's Musketeers. Otherwise, she might truly have been condemned or forced to marry Aramis whether she wanted to or not. That had not been one of her wisest decisions. . . .

And he, *le petit coquin*, would have done the honorable thing and married her to save her name. To save her name and reputation! Without offense to the *duc*, she had no desire to be married yet and forced to give up what little hard-won independence she had. To be honest, she was still adjusting to the idea that she was attracted, and then some, to Aramis. Plus, the experience of having a true suitor was a novel one, to say the least, and that was difficult enough considering how independent and strong-willed both she and Aramis were. More often than not they were . . . well, at cross purposes, or even—what was that English expression?—at daggers drawn.

Her melancholy musings were interrupted as the door flew open, and a disheveled young woman with brown hair spilling about her staggered into the room. "Constance," Laurel exclaimed with discernible concern as she rushed unhampered by skirts—she was still in her fencing outfit, as she had been practicing her skills with one of the palace guards only a half hour earlier—to help the woman to a seat, kicking the door closed as she escorted the young woman. She lowered the younger woman into a chair and knelt in front, her blue eyes filling with concern.

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“Take a few deep breaths. *Du calme.*” She coached the other woman to be calm in a gentle voice. “Now, can you tell me what’s wrong?”

Spasms started to shake Constance’s frame, and in the moments it took the young woman to master herself, Laurel waited with what she would have called admirable patience, patience she was finally learning the hard way. Maybe. “It’s the queen, Laurel.”

“What about Anne?” Suddenly every muscle tensed into alertness.

“She’s been abducted,” Constance declared in a tremulous voice, and made a concerted effort to hold back tears.

Laurel’s hands dropped from Constance’s arms, and she closed her eyes. Anne. Anne, the queen of France, was kidnapped. How? Impossible. Unthinkable. Yet, Constance’s sincere distress convinced her, as no other argument could, that something dire had transpired.

Immediately, her agile mind turned to the consequences of this act. The ramifications were simply far reaching, especially considering Anne was nearly five months pregnant with the heir to the throne of France. “Does anyone other than us know what has happened?” Laurel finally asked, her words carefully controlled, and Constance swiftly shook her head.

Constance gnawed her lip, looking with worry upon the slender, rather tall noblewoman who was roughly two years her senior. That intense look in the blond woman’s eyes was one Constance recognized well—a combination of determination and thoughtfulness. Laurel swiftly seated herself cross-legged on the floor, glad at the freedom of movement her male attire was allowing her at the moment.

“What are we going to do, Laurel?” Constance inquired quickly, banishing the touch of hysteria that was creeping into her voice. “If only D’Artagnan were here. . . .”

“But he’s on a mission for the king and won’t be back until the day before your wedding,” Laurel completed the sentence. No other option presented itself. “We’ll just have to handle the situation for now. We certainly don’t dare dawdle.” The *marquise’s* thoughts raced, grasping for a workable solution. She jumped to her feet and made her way to a trunk that she flung open without ceremony. Quickly, she searched through the male attire

and tossed several things out to the floor, including two hats, a doublet, and some scuffed boots.

Laurel heaped the items into her arms and dropped them at Constance's feet. "I'm going to see *Monsieur de Treville* and Milord Compton and see if I can find out where Athos, Aramis, and Porthos have disappeared to. Do you want to come with me?"

"But we can't leave. Two women. It just won't work. The guards will stop us before we even try to set foot out of the palace." Constance wrung her hands, oblivious to the implication of the clothes lying at her feet—and Laurel's tendencies to take up challenges and champion "lost causes."

"Obviously, I'm not going as a woman, but as a young man. If you want to come with me, you'll have to dress yourself the same way. Are you prepared to take that risk?" Laurel fixed her blue eyes on Constance's hazel ones. Somehow, she already knew what the answer would be. Anne was Constance's friend, and she would sacrifice anything to save her except, perhaps, D'Artagnan or her own hard-won honor.

Her decision made, Constance clambered unsteadily to her feet and reached around backward and began unbuttoning the dress. "What do we need to do?" she asked the older woman. Laurel proceeded to help Constance undress and then transformed her into a male, in male clothing that was too big for her, considering they were Laurel's, and Laurel was taller than her.

After that task was achieved successfully, Laurel did her best to make herself look more like a male; she had not had to look male while she was fencing, but for this little excursion she'd have to take on the role of Christophe again, or try to, since her body was not being nearly so cooperative as it once had been.

Compton swirled the brandy in his glass before downing it in a single gulp and placing the empty glass on the table next to him. He glanced up at his old friend who had been in command of the musketeers for ten and five, bordering on ten and seven years, actually. He'd have to be retiring soon; he was, after all, nearing one and fifty and his health was deteriorating alarmingly quickly.

"So how much longer do you think you will stay with the service, Treville?" Compton asked his friend, knowing that his friend had been seriously mulling over retiring for the past year, ever since the fiasco with the *duc d'Amiens*.

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Treville shook his head and stretched his stiff legs. Aches and pains that in his younger days would not have persisted—and that was only the beginning. “I’m not sure, Compton. I keep looking for someone that I can trust with such a position of power, and someone my men would respect.”

“What about Athos, Aramis, or Porthos?”

Treville chuckled. “Porthos is a confirmed adventure seeker and self-confessed philanderer, and never has desired to lead anyone except to bed. Aramis has got the responsibilities of a large and influential *duché* already on his shoulders. As for Athos—well, he is a leader, and the men respect him, but he doesn’t seem to have the desire to be in command of such a huge responsibility as the entire musketeer corps. He’s more concerned with his friends and son and his estate responsibilities.” Very concerned with his son; Treville had rarely seen so much love and affection lavished on a child. Some swore Athos would spoil the boy beyond redemption, but Treville had seen no sign of that . . . yet.

“But Athos would be a good man to take your place,” Compton prodded, leaning forward toward his longtime friend. Sometimes, especially at moments like this, it was hard for him to believe that the third person of their long-established friendship, Thomas d’Anlass, had been killed in the line of duty. Mindful of his obligations, Compton pushed away the dull ache and concentrated on Treville’s response.

Treville sighed, heaving his broad shoulders. “*Oui*, Athos would be an ideal man to take my role, but I would not pass my position off to a man who does not want it enough to commit to it entirely, for that is what is demanded.”

The soft click of the door opening stopped the men in mid conversation, and they both stared as two strange-looking lads, hats pulled down to hide their faces in shadows, entered the room. Compton clenched his jaw and rolled his eyes skyward. One of these day he might well strangle the headstrong *marquise de Langeac*, despite her father, and despite Laurel’s apparent skills.

Treville reacted with more aplomb and rose to close the door behind them, wondering what brought Laurel and her unknown companion here.

The two visitors sat at Treville’s promptings and removed their hats. “We have dire news,” Laurel informed both men

promptly. “News that could trigger a messy international incident—to say the least.”

“What dire news?” Compton asked, wary. Something always had to go wrong, and Laurel would have to be somewhere near to the center of it, despite his meritorious efforts to keep her safely in the periphery.

“It would appear that the Prussians have abducted *sa majesté*, the queen, and have issued a set of demands,” Laurel told them quietly, and the room fell so silent that the sounds of men clearing out the barracks could be discerned with complete clarity.

Laurel turned to her companion and signaled Constance to hand over the letter and the Prussian insignia she had torn off an assailant earlier that day. Dutifully, Constance handed over the items, and Treville and Compton inspected them as Constance related the tale of the early morning attack on herself, and the subsequent abduction of Anne d’Autriche.

Constance concluded her tale, and Laurel quickly took to the offensive. “We did not think it would be wise to draw attention to the incident. Rather, Constance and I were thinking that a small group should infiltrate Brandenburg-Prussia and the surrounding German territory, and try to bring back the queen within a period of roughly five or six, seven weeks, maximum.” At least she hoped that would be a reasonable estimate.

Compton’s eyes narrowed, and he leveled his uncompromising gaze upon the meddlesome *marquise*. “And I assume that you wish to include yourself in this group.” It was not a question. He knew the woman well enough to know there was no doubt of that, but she nodded anyway and pointed out that there were some vital things that only women could have access to, especially in this particular situation.

Treville forestalled a potentially nasty and fruitless argument, asking, “What is the rest of this plan, *mademoiselle la marquise*?”

“No one, other than we four and those who are in this selected group, will be made aware that the queen has been abducted, not even the king,” Laurel said firmly.

“What do we tell the king when he remarks upon his wife’s absence?” Compton inquired.

This time, it was Constance who replied. “We will inform Louis, and all others, that Anne has retired to the country with her good friend, the *marquise de Langeac*, so that she can be away

from the stench of Paris to complete the term of her pregnancy in privacy and so that the heir can be safely delivered.” Constance paused, but no one interrupted her, so she continued on. “As the queen’s lady in waiting, I will personally go to Langeac to lend credence to the illusion.”

“It could work,” Treville commented to Compton, “and it would avoid another nasty outbreak of war and a scandal of incredible proportions. Plus, we wouldn’t have to pay off the Prussians to regain the queen and the heir.”

Compton grudgingly conceded that the plan was doable. “*C’est possible*. But we cannot keep the king in ignorance for an extended period of time, nor can we fob off and delay the Prussians indefinitely.”

Laurel presented a viable solution. “That’s why I suggest that you give me and my group about six weeks to successfully rescue the queen, and if we have not succeeded within that time period, then I suggest you notify the king and begin negotiating with the Prussians for the return of the queen.”

“And who all do you want in this group?” both Compton and Treville asked of the surprisingly competent and self-assured, not to mention single, young woman.

She leaned forward and glanced from man to man, not in the least bit off balance. “I want the best. That means Athos, Aramis, Porthos, and D’Artagnan. Of course,” Laurel d’Anlass looked at Treville, “that would require your covering for their absences. Do you think you can?”

The *capitaine* nodded slowly, confirming that he could and would do so, and musing silently that his retirement would have to wait. “I’ll recall D’Artagnan immediately. As for the others, they are on leave and are not expected back for another six or so days. No, make that until D’Artagnan’s marriage. Until then I have no idea where they are nor how to get in touch with them.”

Before Laurel could comment, Compton, somewhat put off by how much the woman was taking charge, but grudgingly respecting how competent she was, leveled another question at the *marquise*. “And what would you have me do?”

Constance answered for her friend so that Compton’s anger was deflected from Laurel. “We would be indebted to you if you could spare a few men to provide me with cover to maintain the illusion that the queen is rusticated. Can you possibly do so?” she

asked, her words soft and almost pleading. Compton hurried to assure D'Artagnan's fiancée that he would help her. She was not to fret on that point.

Laurel promptly turned the conversation back to the topic of the four musketeers she had traveled with close to a year earlier. Quickly, she tackled the problem of how the men would be located, even if she would have to rush in order to accomplish the task in an acceptable interval of time. "Give me three, maybe four days. I'll go locate them and be back here to meet D'Artagnan."

Both men nodded grimly, and Constance, Treville, and Compton set about executing the plan. In the meantime, Laurel grabbed supplies, a gun, and a sword and went in search of Rebelle.

She was off to find three musketeers in a tremendously short period of time. Oh, fate must be getting a fine laugh at her, she couldn't help thinking as she hurried about her task, but at least she finally had the opportunity to do something worthwhile, and Compton couldn't exclude her this time, no matter how he itched to do just that.

* * * * *

Anne said nothing, refusing to be baited by the Prussians. They may have her as a helpless captive, but she would not cooperate with them and would say nothing before she admitted to understanding the better part of this German dialect despite her Spanish upbringing. Better to pretend that she was frightened speechless and could not find the words to talk, or that she simply did not understand. And she *was* frightened, so the fear, the entire illusion wasn't too hard to feign, but she was by no means hysterical, and she was well capable of talking and acting calmly had she so desired.

Anne flinched as the wheel of the swift carriage rumbled over a rut in the road, jouncing her body. She braced one arm against the side of the conveyance and thrust the other across her abdomen that was already swelling with new life. Almost, she thought she could feel the movement of her child's foot kicking against her. Constance. The woman had better be all right. If they had hurt her she'd wreak vengeance on the men one way or another, and that

she swore to God she would achieve. She had too few friends to value any one of them lightly.

“*Pauvre bébé,*” a man with long lean fingers and jet-black hair commented in French as the queen was jostled, and she glanced around, startled. He took her chin in his hand and turned her face toward him. “I hope that we have not made you too uncomfortable.”

The queen refrained from reacting, though she dearly wished to throw the words back in his face. Instead, like a startled colt, she jerked her chin from his grasp and stared at the wall of the conveyance. Hopefully, Constance had kept a level head and had gone to someone trustworthy, like Laurel, which meant there was hope, no matter how slim. She would not have a war fought over her and her unborn child.

The man reclined back in his seat and opted to let the queen of France curl into the corner away from him. He was almost a bit disappointed that the woman had not proved more spirited. He had gotten the impression that Anne d’Autriche was a strong and capable woman, but then again, one couldn’t credit rumors too much, and women were not overly strong, no matter how much men might look for that attribute. Too meek and dependent.

* * * * *

“*Maman,*” Porthos protested as his mother threw another scarcely veiled comment at Aramis and Athos about marrying, and how wonderful her daughters were. Yet, Porthos could do frighteningly little to protect Athos now that his mother had discovered the *comte* had been a widower for about the past year. As for Aramis, well, the man would have to take care of himself.

Besides, they had brought the fate upon themselves by “reminding” him to come visit his mother again, as they had promised they would, he reasoned.

“*Oui, mon cher Jean-Paul,*” she replied as if nothing were remotely wrong with anything she had been doing or saying. “Is there something that I can do for you?”

“*Maman,*” he growled under his breath, still irked by her refusal to use his chosen name, “I do not find it appropriate to throw my sisters at my friends. They are quite powerful and unlikely to be meekly led into marriage or trapped into it.” The

stilted formality of the remarks sounded awkward on Porthos' tongue. Sometimes he was very tempted to completely lose the polite veneer of a gentleman and let his mother know exactly what he thought.

"*Fadaises.*" She waved her hand, dismissing his concerns, and went back to almost tactfully inquiring how Athos' poor son was faring without a mother. Of course, she managed to imply that Athos' young son was much in need of a mother and that one of her daughters would do very well.

"My son is doing very well, *madame la comtesse*," Athos replied after swallowing a bite of tender veal. "He is still adjusting to his mother's death, and I would not yet thrust a step-mother upon him until he is more prepared and better over the death." He handsomely parried her offensive remark without insulting the woman in the least. Hanging around Aramis had taught him a useful trick or two in this arena.

"And what of you, your grace?" The woman turned her attention to the very handsome dark-haired man. Too bad she wasn't a bit younger or she might well throw herself at the man. Ah, well, her daughters would do well enough. "Is it not a bit risky to be in your line of work without securing the succession to the *duché de Rouen*?"

Porthos groaned at the comment and fiddled with the sash at his waist, thankful for the minuscule comfort of the cloth that he claimed was given to him by the Queen of America. That there was no Queen of America didn't concern him. Aramis, however, was completely unperturbed. Rather, his eyes seemed to glow with silent amusement. The *comtesse* was quite a woman. Most other managing mothers did not dare to confront him so directly.

"There is, of course, always a risk, *madame*," he replied without stumbling over even one word. "Still, I am in prime health and have a good number of years to fulfill that obligation. Nevertheless, be assured that the consideration is not far from my mind." He placated the matron.

Besides, he knew the duty to his name and his father. As if he could forget that he needed to produce an heir within the next three or four years or that even those seemingly in good health could abruptly lose their lives.

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“*Madame la comtesse*,” the butler interrupted, apologizing handsomely as he did so, “there is a servant boy claiming to be a messenger with an urgent message for the *duc de Rouen*.”

Her brow furrowed, and her husband glanced at his wife, perfectly content to turn this sort of business over to his wife, as always. “Who is this message from?”

“He says he carries a message from the *marquise de Langeac* specifically for his grace,” the butler replied promptly. “He also insists that it is most important.”

“The *marquise de Langeac*,” Porthos’ mother repeated. “You are acquainted with the new *marquise*?” she directed the pointed query at Aramis.

Aramis was not permitted to answer as Porthos spoke, reveling for a moment in an unhealthy amount of satisfaction. “*Maman*. As I said earlier, Aramis is in no need of your matchmaking. The *marquise de Langeac* is Aramis’ *prétandante*. I’d not recommend crossing her if she wishes to get in touch with her suitor.”

At this point, Aramis decided to interfere before the situation could become openly hostile or before Porthos ended up committing him to something he was not yet ready to take on. “I am afraid that I must excuse myself. The *marquise* would never interrupt me while I am on leave unless the matter was of the utmost importance. If you will excuse me, I will rejoin you as quickly as possible,” he concluded, gracefully exiting the scene.

“Your grace,” a lad dressed in the livery of Langeac sketched a bow, and Aramis frowned at the lad. Laurel. He should have known that Laurel would never send a messenger, not if she really wanted to get in touch with him. Brusquely, he nodded and escorted her to a room where they would be out of sight of the servants so he could speak with her. “I understand there is a matter of some urgency that you needed to talk to me about,” he said, without a noticeable change of inflection.

“Don’t be so pompous and condescending, Aramis,” she retorted and stalled his rebuttal. There was no time for another argument between them. “The matter is of international importance. If it is not resolved, France could become embroiled in another devastating, drawn-out war, and it could prompt an

internal revolt. . . . The Prussians have kidnapped Anne d'Autriche.”

“I see,” Aramis said when he had regained a sense of equilibrium. “And we are being called back to rescue her?”

“Sort of,” she told him, and Aramis had a bad feeling that he wasn't going to like what the woman had in mind; of course, he rarely did, once she got a notion stuck in her head. Quickly, she summarized the plan that she and Constance had presented to Treville and Compton, and stood waiting for his reaction.

“So you're coming with us then?” It was not truly a question. He knew she was, and he was somewhat resigned to the eventuality. “Is that really a very wise idea?”

Laurel tapped her fingers on the desk, a scowl on her face. “Aramis, there is no other option. A woman can be very helpful at this sort of mission, seeing as she can gain access to certain circles of Prussian society that men have no hope of entering. Rest assured that I will be going as a woman, if it proves necessary.” Not to mention, this was her job and no one would force her to leave it—ever. Not until she was good and ready, at any rate.

He leveled a finger at her. “You had better be right about this, Laurel, and I'll want every detail you have later. In the meantime, I'll be back with the others. Be ready to leave,” he concluded, walking out the door, not permitting her the last word.

Well, she couldn't really have expected more from Aramis. He did have the habit of wanting to protect her from harm or anything that, as he claimed, might cause him to lose her. But why he had to be so devilishly attractive while he tried to put her in her place was too darn distracting and disturbing for her peace of mind. No man had the right to be so perfect and polished and smart. Annoying little prig. Unfortunately, this was what she'd have to deal with for at least the next few weeks. Unless . . . She refused to go there.

Aramis reentered the dining room and informed the *comtesse*, with the requisite amount of regret, that he and his friends were being immediately recalled to Paris on an urgent mission for king and country.

The *comtesse* nodded. She would not demand them over the king. Service to king and country was their first duty, even her

ramshackle son. Nor was even she so bold as to try to compete with that sort of calling. “When will you be leaving?”

“Within the next two or three hours,” Aramis replied, “if that is possible. We would not cause your stable hands an inconvenience in preparing our mounts.”

Porthos’ father rose to his feet, as did the rest of the guests and family, and he spoke for the first time that evening. “There will be no problem, *monseigneur*. My grooms will prepare your mounts, and whenever you are ready to go they will be waiting for you.” So saying, he excused everyone from the table and went out to his stables to ensure that his orders were being carried out to the letter.

Porthos’ eldest sister of nearly ten and nine trailed after Athos, following him out of the room. The woman, Yvette, bowed her eyes to the floor and then took a fortifying breath and hurried after the *comte d’Avignon*.

Finally, she touched his arm a moment and dropped her hand the instant he turned to face her. This was a time when she wished that she had the confidence and aplomb of her younger sisters, the twins—those classically pretty girls, who were six and ten. Instead, she was plain and shy and too tall, not at all petite like them, and she was without those curves, not to mention bookish.

“*Monseigneur*,” Yvette said softly, her eyes focused steadily on the ground. “I do apologize for my mother’s behavior. I am aware it is not quite the thing. I pray you do not think that I am dangling after you.” Suddenly, she came to a stop, not knowing what more to say and a bit surprised that she had said as much as she had.

“*Mademoiselle*,” he searched his memory for the woman’s name and came upon it, “Yvette, worry not. Aramis and I are well accustomed to dealing with mothers of all types. Nor are you to blame for your mother’s actions. We do realize that.” He offered her a smile, trying to set the woman more at ease. “*Mademoiselle*, I most assuredly do not hold you to blame nor am I in the habit of ravishing maidens. You may speak freely with me.”

Yvette glanced up at him, and her nearly black eyes met his ever so briefly as she offered him a shy smile of thanks. “Is his grace angry with me for some reason?” she finally got up the courage to ask.

Athos sighed inwardly, trying to figure out a reasonable way to explain Aramis' behavior, without revealing that it was Laurel d'Anlass' appearance and words that had put Aramis out of sorts. "Well," Athos stumbled, fumbling for words.

Yvette saved him from making a bigger fool of himself. "Does it have to do with his *prétendante* and the message she sent him?"

"It would not be at all surprising that her message would not sit well with him. They are both quite stubborn and tend to clash on a regular basis," Athos said by way of explanation.

Yvette dropped her eyes again. "I would not hold you up further," she said demurely and excused herself hastily. Athos watched the dark-haired woman make her way out of the hall to a side room. Not all of Porthos' family was so bad. Yvette, despite her painful shyness, was rather charming, and Porthos did seem to adore her.

Yvette came to a sudden stop as she glanced around the library and saw a lad dressed in livery, seated and reading a book by Machiavelli. Laurel fumbled with the book and laid it on the desk as she jumped to her feet. "You must be the messenger from the *marquise de Langeac*," Yvette said as curiosity overcame her, and she inspected the book that the servant had been reading.

Truth be told, she rather liked reading Machiavelli and Dante and all the others, though it was hardly a pastime a lady would be proud of. "I was not aware that servants were taught how to read, especially Latin."

Sacrebleu. Laurel had no idea how to cover up the slipup. Her usually quick imagination was failing her very sadly. "I am sorry. I did not think anyone would mind overly much if I looked through the library while I waited for the *duc de Rouen* to be prepared to leave." A brief tide of pink flooded her cheeks at the thought of Aramis and their earlier conversation. He really was a most frustrating and contrary man.

Yvette glanced up at the unusual lad with a strange look in her eyes. Why would a boy blush over the mention of his grace?

Seeing that she had made another gaffe, Laurel decided she could not play games with the dark-haired woman any longer; she'd have to trust Yvette. Laurel raised her hand and plucked the

hat from her head and set it atop the book. “You are right. Servants do not read Latin, but I do.”

Yvette goggled, eyes wide and flabbergasted, at the realization that there was a woman in livery standing before her, a woman who was even taller than she was. “Please forgive the deception, but it was imperative that I spoke to Aramis myself, and there was no other alternative, seeing as I had no desire to bring attention and suspicion to your home. Allow me to make myself known. I’m Laurel d’Anlass, *marquise de Langeac*. I beg of you to not reveal that I am here or what I have done,” Laurel appealed to the younger woman.

Now Yvette understood why Aramis was not happy and why Athos had been at a loss for words. The *marquise* here. How exciting the woman’s life must be; she was well known to be an eccentric, and society accepted her anyhow. Yvette sighed and sank onto the sofa, a whirl of skirts shifting as she did so. “I would never reveal your masquerade,” she replied, looking at her hands almost longingly.

A curious sparkle that Aramis and Athos would have recognized as auguring no good lit the *marquise’s* eyes. “You aren’t very happy here, are you?” Laurel asked the other woman, sitting herself next to Yvette as she did so.

“Why do you say that?”

“You just look so sad,” Laurel replied. The misery was almost more heartbreaking than Laurel could bear being a witness to. “It can’t be easy on you having sisters like yours or parents like yours that keep trying to fob you off on every gentleman in hopes they can get rid of you. Plus, you looked as if you wished, hopelessly albeit, you could be in my place.”

Yvette’s mouth dropped open, and her shyness fell away. “You’re the boy, Christophe, that was here a year ago with my brother.”

“Guilty as charged.” Laurel cocked her head and glanced at the other woman speculatively. There was only one idea that her mind seemed unable to dismiss. “Maybe I can help you, *Mademoiselle Yvette*.” They might even be able to help each other.

“I think not,” she said falling back into her habitual shyness. “I am bound here until I marry, and then I’m to help my sisters find matches after that. . . .”

“But is that what you really want?” Laurel interrupted, and refused to let Yvette get away with not answering the question. The dark-haired woman shook her head just a bit, and her eyes asked what Laurel could possibly do for her, while at the same time asking how Laurel seemed to act if she knew so much about Yvette’s family in such a short period of time.

Thoughtfully, Yvette regarded the outrageous woman. Somehow, it would not surprise her to discover that this audacious woman had been consorting with the servants and had won their confidence. A question better left to be explored at another time, if a better or another time came along.

In turn, Laurel surveyed the woman before her, and could read the confused thoughts reflected in her eyes and stance, and yet there was a flare of desperate hope and desire too. That alone clinched Laurel’s decision.

Aramis, Athos, and Porthos would want to skin her alive for this, but she simply couldn’t leave Yvette to her fate. No, the woman would come with her when they left. She resolved that. Of course, she could still think of only one feasible way to get Yvette away from this estate. . . .

Yvette was tall enough to dress as a boy and obviously had to be a good rider, considering she was a member of her father’s household, and he adored horses; of course she’d verify, but she had little doubt on that account. They’d have to leave a note behind explaining that Yvette ran away to a convent because she could not bring herself to marry, and that she did not wish to deny her sisters the opportunity. Perhaps equally important, she’d have to bring a newer horse that Porthos would not recognize.

Not a terrible plan, if she didn’t say so herself. At least that portion of it; she’d rather not dwell much on the other difficulties she had set herself up for. Decided in her course of action, the *marquise* set about convincing Porthos’ sister to come along with her. It took less time than she thought it would, and moments later the two young women were dashing up the stairs to Yvette’s room to prepare her a suitable cover.

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“Stand up straight, and don’t even think of touching those bindings. Walk with long strides,” Laurel hissed in Yvette’s ear,

reminding the young woman that she was playing a role of a boy named Jean-Paul. Jean-Paul because it would be easiest for her to remember, since it was her brother's given name.

Yvette moved to place a sidesaddle on the beautiful mare when Laurel's elbow jabbed her in the ribs, and she remembered to saddle the horse with a man's saddle. With Laurel's aid, Porthos' sister finished quickly and mounted her horse a bit awkwardly. Soon after, Laurel followed suit, mounting Rebelle.

"I guarantee you that you get used to riding this way," the *marquise* whispered in encouragement, though she suspected the younger woman already knew that. "It's much easier."

Now to find the musketeers and convince them that the sudden appearance of a second boy was not so odd. Perhaps the best story was simply to say she'd left the boy on the outskirts of the estate and asked him to wait for her while she delivered the message. It sounded halfway plausible and like something she might well do. Then again . . . just what had she plunged herself into this time?

Laurel pressed her heels into the sides of her mount and directed the gelding toward the agreed-upon meeting place. She was dearly thankful for the fact that the meeting place was beyond the estate, and that she would be able to avoid the scrutiny of Porthos' family and any questions they might have riddled her with concerning the addition of a fifth rider. Speaking of which, somewhere along the way, she'd make sure that Yvette became very competent with that pistol she had taken with her, if she wasn't already.

"Christophe, I never thought I'd be so glad to see your face," Porthos declared as Laurel rode up. He did not note the other rider that trailed behind her. "You've quite saved me, you know."

"Well, then you owe me a favor, *mon cher* Porthos, *n'est ce pas?*" Laurel replied lightly, with a teasing note, as she brought Rebelle to a stop with a mere touch on the reins.

Athos and Aramis, however, questioned the stranger immediately, and the strength of their gazes finally drew Porthos' gaze to the stranger. "What in—rather, who have you brought along with you?" Porthos asked, taking the question right out of Aramis' and Athos' mouths.

“This,” Laurel gestured back at the young mounted youth, who handled the horse with an expert and obviously loving touch, “is Jean-Paul. He’s shy, but he’s very good with horses. Very, very good. I left him on the outskirts of the estate; I promised he would accompany us, and I won’t break my word. So he’ll be coming with us. You have an objection?” She leveled her resolute gaze on Aramis.

“You want us to take along another boy,” Aramis returned, playing along with Laurel’s disguise for the time being; no telling what she had told this other lad. “I can hardly think that is wise.”

“He will cause us no difficulty. I guarantee it personally.”

“And if he does?” Athos finally spoke, a warning edge in his voice that signaled Laurel that she was pushing her luck about as far as she dared.

“I’ll take care of it, even if it means taking him back to Langeac myself; I’ve got enough connections to see to that, as you well know. And he *will* be no burden to this group. I give you my word on that,” Laurel contended, unswayed by their obvious disapproval. Reluctantly, Athos, followed by his fellow musketeers, accepted it. Causing a scene was what they were trying to avoid. Battles had to be picked and chosen with care, especially when Laurel was involved.

Without further exchange of words, the five companions set off at a brisk pace for Paris, and Laurel made sure that she was the only one who was riding side by side with Yvette. Already, the woman looked healthier. Riding horses in this fashion definitely suited her. Almost made her look very confident. Truly, a woman who was born in the saddle. What other talents did that demure exterior cover?

Still, they would have to spend the night at an inn. She’d have to figure out how to deal with the sleeping arrangements before that time arose. And then by tomorrow morning they should be back in Paris and ready to meet with D’Artagnan, that is, if *Monsieur de Treville* came through.

There was little doubt that he would. Of course, how long she could deceive Porthos regarding his favorite sister was, to put it mildly, questionable. Sometimes she could swear she was as reckless as D’Artagnan. No doubt, she should have planned this little undertaking far better. Not to mention, forcing something down Athos’ throat was never a wise idea.

Gambit for Love of a Queen

Now, though, there was nothing she could do other than deal with the situation and any problems that might arise. There was absolutely no way she would send *pauvre* Yvette back to a place that stifled her very mind and spirit. The woman was staying, no matter what she had to do to make sure that happened.

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“*Capitaine.*” D’Artagnan came smartly to attention in front of *Monsieur de Treville*. “You told me that there was an urgent matter which I needed to attend to?”

The older man nodded. “*Oui*. If you’ll follow me. We need to find a place where I can be sure we will not be overheard.” D’Artagnan followed his commanding officer, surprised at how old the man suddenly seemed to be, yet he made no comment. He’d learned tact and a great many other things after nearly dying because of a gun wound. Though, sometimes he did miss that carefree brashness that used to come so naturally to him. Perhaps he was not so fond of growing up after all. Perhaps that was also why Porthos acted like a kid whenever he had an opportunity.

The pair entered a secluded chamber and seated themselves. The musketeer seated himself across from both Compton and Treville and prepared himself as best he could for whatever reason they might have called him back from Gascogne, his home province. Whatever the reason, it was likely presaging nothing good.

“*Mademoiselle* Laurel should be back shortly,” Compton told his friend summarily. “I received a message by pigeon that informed me she had found your men and that they are on their way back to Paris. They should be back by tomorrow.”

“Hold on a second.” D’Artagnan uncrossed his ankles. “Just what does *Mademoiselle* Laurel d’Anlass have to do with this?”

“A very great deal, I’m afraid to say,” Compton replied grimly. At these words, Treville took his cue and briefed D’Artagnan about the queen’s abduction and the plan that Laurel, Constance, Compton, and himself had devised and begun to implement.

D’Artagnan swiftly pushed away the morbid thought that Constance could have been badly hurt by the Prussians who had attacked her and taken the queen. His betrothed was safe now,

relatively safe. Plus, she was a part of this plot and vital in maintaining the appearance that all was well with Anne and that the queen had simply desired to spend the rest of her pregnancy convalescing in the countryside.

Of course, this would delay their marriage. Now he understood Laurel's grumblings about time always playing cruel tricks on her—her claims that time was out to get her. Grumblings or not, he would not let down his queen nor his country. People were depending upon him, and if anything went wrong, there would be a potentially devastating outbreak of war. "So I'm to wait for *Mademoiselle* Laurel to return and then proceed along with her in pursuit of these criminals that seized her majesty?"

"Just about that," Compton confirmed. "However, I also have dispatched a couple of my more experienced agents to discreetly look for any information that would help you, your friends, and the *marquise* successfully track the men in question. They should report back tomorrow and provide you with information to begin your mission. Other than that . . ."

"We are on our own," D'Artagnan said, his voice pitched abnormally low. Less than six weeks to prevent a terrible war. Lord help them all. They were going to need it.

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The sound of footsteps reverberated off cold marble tiles and echoed through the halls. The woman looked up from her position where she had been crouching alongside the bed. It might as well have been called a prison. For that is what it was. She was a prisoner, or, more aptly put, a political hostage, and she was most definitely not feeling very well.

Anne clutched her stomach as she felt another wave of nausea sweep over her. Apparently, her stomach was violently disagreeing with that slop that they called food, which she had forced herself to partake of. Or, perhaps, she was not yet over the dreaded sickness that the midwife had told her comes over many expectant mothers.

Anne glanced up again, her hands still on her swelling stomach. Those steps were definitely coming toward her. Exactly what she did not need. More Prussians to try to interrogate her or taunt her or some combination to that effect. She was not in the

mood for that. Not at all. The door swung open, and the dark-haired man, Friedrich, who had taunted her during the coach ride, entered the chamber. Anne closed her eyes and pulled herself to her feet, consciously deciding to set her back to him. So what if she was being un-Christian. She wished the man to the devil. Let Satan deal with him.

“*Ma chère Anne,*” Friedrich said, his Prussian accent all but gone. “You have still not decided to speak to me. You seem to be lacking in manners, *votre majesté*. Did your husband and father not instruct you that it is very rude to turn your back on a visitor?”

That was it. Enough was enough. No more of this playing the simpering, scared captive. No more of this abuse without rebuttal. Still slightly shaky after her last bout of nausea, she turned to face the man, drawing herself up regally, despite her rather diminutive height. “Did not your school of gentlemanly manners teach you that one does not abduct a queen, or any lady? Nor does one treat a queen like she is a common village wench to be taunted. Does respect, perhaps, sound like a familiar concept to you? Or maybe you have never learned to respect your betters.” Laurel was right; it felt so good to be truthful and say exactly how you felt instead of playing along within the strictures of society and the polite world’s façade.

“*Touché,*” Friedrich said, bringing his left hand to his heart. So, the French queen was a spirited woman after all. A good portion of his earlier disappointment abated. “I am quite wounded that you could think that I have not treated you exactly as I would an honored guest.”

I’ll bet, Anne snapped to herself, not accepting a word the Prussian spoke. Suddenly the man strolled to the tray, which contained several servings of basically untouched food. He lifted the fruit and brought it to the queen. Taking her hand firmly in his, he forced the item into it. “You will eat. We cannot have you starving. Nor will we be accused of treating you as a common prisoner.”

Not to mention, he would not see her lose her child, for then he and his *kurfürst*, or *prinz*, would lose their leverage over Louis and France.

Finally, Anne turned her back on Friedrich and bit into the fruit, chewing the juicy mushy matter and forcing herself to swallow it, though her stomach was still upset. For several

moments he stood, and then he turned on his feet, exiting the room and leaving the woman to the relative peace and comfort of the room that served as her jail.

Never before had she realized how much it meant to be able to see the sun, to stroll in the gardens even if they were under observation, to have Guillaume and Constance and Laurel to love and be with. So this was what it meant to be alone. She had almost forgotten. It had, after all, been a good six years or more since she had been that naive girl of five and ten who had wedded the king of France and had come to a strange country to find herself looked down upon and whispered about at every turn.

It was an experience she would rather not be forced to repeat. She straightened her shoulders and stared at the door. They would not break her, not ever. Long ago she had learned she was strong, and she would never forget that lesson. There was always hope, if you allowed yourself to have it.

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Yvette hung back, obscuring herself behind Laurel, a virtual shadow, as the group made its way into the rowdy tavern. Her nose wrinkled at the stench of alcohol mingling with sweaty bodies and cooking food. Women in various stages of undress wandered from table to table serving the customers in more ways than one.

So, these were the dives that her brother frequented. Apparently, she had not been missing much by not being permitted entrance to these places. Men and their bawdy pursuits! A slight jab of Laurel's elbow knocked Yvette from her sudden preoccupation. Yvette forced herself to follow the *marquise* as she followed her companions to find the proprietor so they could acquire rooms for the night.

Rooms for the night. Oh, why hadn't she thought of that problem before? Yvette glanced at Laurel. Well, the *marquise* did not seem to be in the least concerned about the problem; hopefully that meant that Laurel foresaw no problem and Yvette was just overreacting.

Aramis and Porthos broke off from the group and seated themselves at a nearby table. Almost instantly, several serving wenches materialized to find out what they desired, and Porthos

pulled one of the well-endowed young women into his lap. She giggled as he played with the strings that held her bodice together. Then, he bent and nuzzled the base of her neck and proceeded downward.

Yvette turned her eyes away from her brother in disgust. Men—even her own brother! They were little better than dogs in heat, and at least dogs were faithful and loyal companions. Maybe it was better that she was doomed to be a spinster. And how utterly mortifying; she wondered how red her cheeks were.

Laurel dropped back when she noticed the other woman had stopped. The older woman nudged her and silently urged her to come along and follow her and Athos. “Before you ask, Jean-Paul,” she said very quietly, “not all men are interested in only such base pursuits. Nor is Porthos as bad as it appears he is. Do not be too disenchanted. These musketeers have their faults, but they are by far the most honorable and loyal men I have ever known outside my own kin.”

Laurel said more loudly, slinging her arm about the shorter woman’s shoulders, “Come, let us find out what this place has to offer weary travelers.” Laurel was beginning to think she should have been a stage actress, but then again, women weren’t allowed to perform onstage, and if they did act, they were considered whores.

“You’re sure about this, Christophe?” Athos asked when the *marquise* calmly insisted that she would share a room with Jean-Paul, and the others could make whatever arrangements they pleased.

“Jean-Paul offers me no danger. And besides, it is safer if I do not spend the night alone, *n’est ce pas?*” The question was rhetorical. “Besides, what would people think if two lads wished to get rooms of their own? Or would you rather that we both roomed with you or Porthos or Aramis?” She threw in this final coup, which she knew Athos would not agree to.

They’d be downright suspicious, Athos knew, if he tried other than Laurel’s plan. Either that, or the *marquise* would have a room all to herself, which would be worse and less safe in a lot of ways. Still, Laurel had best know what she was doing. And she had well better be very careful with that disguise, not that she wasn’t usually, but this time she’d best be more careful than even that. The eldest musketeer, at roughly thirty years of age, turned back to

the proprietor and decided to procure three rooms. He and Aramis could share tonight, seeing as they both would probably be sleeping, whereas Porthos would more than likely be entertained otherwise and would more likely need a little privacy.

“Shall we,” he addressed the two women and gestured toward the large table where Aramis and Porthos sat sipping at mugs of what Laurel assumed to be ale or some other awful concoction. Not that she didn’t like a bit of champagne or wine, even a brandy every once in a while, but what they served in these places left a lot to be desired.

The *marquise* maneuvered so that Yvette was basically out of sight of her brother and well in the shadows of the flickering candles. At least these places didn’t dictate that men take off their hats, or she and Yvette could have been in a rather uncomfortable situation. As it was, Athos was the only one who had removed his hat. Well—Porthos had had his removed for him, but that was a different story.

Laurel glanced at Yvette and saw her staring at the concoction men called ale. Gracious. Why hadn’t she realized it before? Yvette had never had anything stronger than a little wine with dinner. She most definitely could not drink that ale, or she’d regret it. Come to think of it, Laurel might regret it too. As naturally as Laurel could manage, she shifted a glass of water toward the other woman and took the glass of ale from her. Phew! One pitfall avoided; who knew how many more to go?

Laurel surreptitiously glanced around. No one had noticed, and if Porthos or any of the musketeers asked why she was not drinking, they would soon discover that it was ale in front of her, and they knew how much she despised the vile stuff. Really, she should have become an actress; she was becoming more and more convinced of it. She could play boys’ parts. After all, Shakespeare’s theatre, and French theatre as well, had used boys to play women’s parts. Turnabout only seemed fair.

Fair was fair, she thought as she dug into the food on her plate, scarcely looking at it. Had she looked at what passed for food, she knew she well might not have been able to eat it. Fare in these places always left much to be desired.

Laurel extracted herself from the main room, and right behind her was Yvette, who had spoken very little the whole journey and

throughout the meal. Of course, that worked to Laurel's advantage. The less Yvette said, the less likely she was to give herself away.

Aramis' eyes followed the pair as they ascended the stairs. What was Laurel up to? He probably did not want to know, but he was nearly certain that blasted woman was up to something that would cause a great deal of problems. Nor would he be surprised if that boy she had taken under her wing would be at the center of the problems—one way or another.

Maybe it was time for him to do a little of his own investigating, seeing as Laurel was unlikely to be forthcoming. Perhaps he could even concoct a way to get rid of this boy that Laurel seemed fiercely set on protecting.

"I see we've lost our young sheep," Athos commented to Aramis, deciding to take on the role of the Biblical scholar ever so briefly.

"They do seem to have wandered off," Aramis agreed, setting aside the empty mug of ale and refusing more when it was offered to him. Moderation was good for men's souls. "It seems our two youngsters have decided it is to their benefit to become inseparable." Athos glanced at the *duc*; he got the distinct feeling Aramis was insinuating something about Jean-Paul and Laurel.

"Or, perhaps young Christophe has decided to cast himself in the role of knight errant and champion to those less privileged than himself," Porthos broke in, momentarily shifting his attention from the woman in his arms back to his friends.

"*Mais oui*," Athos agreed, dismissing the worries he and Aramis both seemed to harbor, and Porthos jumped to his feet, pulling the serving wench with him to join the rollicking dance.

"Porthos most definitely is making up for the time he was forced to behave himself at home." Aramis nodded, noting that Athos looked longingly toward the bottle of bourbon that Porthos had abandoned. However, the man did not reach out for it. Instead, he finally pushed away from the table and made his way toward the room. Moments later, Aramis followed. That had taken Athos a great deal of strength and willpower. No wonder he was proud to call the man friend.

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Rebelle easily leaped over the log that crisscrossed the path, as did the rest of the mounts. The animals could sense their riders' excited tension.

They were close to their destination, and the animals were as eager to arrive as their riders.

"*Avancez, mes amis,*" Porthos exclaimed, urging his own mount faster, and the others followed suit until the pounding of hooves reverberated in the companions' ears.

Yvette skillfully maneuvered around the stones that littered the road, feeling each jolt of the horse go through her body. It was easier and more freeing to ride a horse in this manner, except that she was aching in different, unmentionable places from riding in a way she rarely dared to ride.

The horses slowed as the sun rose higher in the sky, and the sounds became louder of people milling about, and horses, and carriages and more things than could be identified. Yvette gawked as they rode slowly into the busy streets of Paris, thronged by more people than she had ever before seen in one place. "So this is Paris," the woman gasped. "It's so big. I've never seen so many people in one place."

"You get used to it," Athos assured the disguised woman. "Just concentrate on getting through this crowd and keeping your horse under control." Yvette nodded and led the pretty dappled mare after Athos, only a fraction of a step behind. Hopefully, he knew where they were going and had not lost sight of Laurel, Porthos, and Aramis as easily as she had. The horse shied as a wagon rumbled by like the crack of thunder, and Yvette soothed the animal with a gentle touch and soft words.

The crowds began to thin, and the streets became almost devoid of scurrying figures. The noise gradually dwindled into the background, no longer a din. Still, Laurel, Porthos, and Aramis were nowhere to be seen. Unconsciously, she slowed her horse down, and Athos dropped back to ride evenly with her.

The musketeer gave his companion a look Yvette could not quite name. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

Yvette glanced at him and back at the ground. This was something she had not considered, not considered fully in the least. She was terribly inept when it came to talking with people, even her family, and then to think of talking to a strange man whom she was deceiving was even more nerve-racking. Laurel.

She needed the woman's support. How strange that she felt so at ease with the other unconventional woman. Still, she couldn't just ignore him, and he shouldn't recognize her voice. Finally, she screwed up her courage and spoke with a remarkably steady voice. "Where are the others? How will they find us, or how will we find them, I mean?"

Poor lost lad. No wonder Laurel felt protective of him. He was so unsure of himself, uneasy around people—in short, shy to the point that it nearly handicapped him. "Don't worry. I know where we're going and where to meet up with our friends. We're heading to musketeer headquarters." At the woman's look of slight confusion, he elaborated. "It's not unusual to become separated when you come into the city, so we always are sure to arrange a place to meet and a time by which we should meet. If someone is still missing after the appointed time, then we go look for him."

Yvette nodded. It made sense. She should have realized that sooner, and would have, if she had not allowed herself to be overwhelmed by her first sight of a city and that *maudit* shyness.

Again, her gaze took in what she could see of the city. Frightening and exciting at the same time, but filthy as well. She had taken for granted how comparatively pure and clean her country lifestyle was. Of course, in retrospect, she was not sorry to have left. Her mother and father and sisters had scarcely tolerated her, since she was basically a burden to be married off at the earliest convenience. She could still remember her father taking her to task for not doing more to engage her suitors' interests, yet he could not bring himself to give her a larger dowry. No—his money was devoted to his horses. He loved those horses more than anything else. Now she could almost understand why Porthos had fled, and wished he had taken her with him.

"Stay close to me," Athos warned her. "You never know who might try to surprise you."

"Brigands?" Yvette said, and Athos nodded, telling her that, unfortunately, that was one disadvantage of city life. There was a great deal of crime and too few people to combat it.

"This way." Athos gestured with his head, and Yvette followed him around the corner and toward the gates that rose majestically above the road. The clip-clop of the horses' hooves became more pronounced as Athos and his guest made their way through the gates and into musketeer headquarters. Fortunately,

the musketeers on duty had no problem recognizing him in his travel grit and did not question his bringing in a stranger.

A young man endowed with a wealth of light brown curls and a handsome face approached the pair and held the horses steady while the companions dismounted. Athos and the musketeer exchanged a few words, and the young man led the horses to the stable and returned shortly thereafter.

“D’Artagnan. Jean-Paul.” Athos introduced his friend to the silent young lad. “Jean-Paul, this is our other companion, D’Artagnan.” Yvette sketched a shallow bow and murmured something suitable, she hoped.

The trio set off at a sedate pace across the courtyard, Athos and D’Artagnan just ahead of Yvette, who repeatedly reminded herself not to stop and stare. “Where does this Jean-Paul fit into the plan?” D’Artagnan put the question to Athos.

He shrugged his shoulders and responded, “Christophe insisted we bring him along. The lad wouldn’t have it any other way. I suppose we’d better bring him with us and see what Christophe and our young friend here have in mind.” Whatever it was, the older musketeer probably wasn’t going to like it. He was rather too well acquainted with Laurel’s stubbornness thanks to their last adventure.

The speakers fell silent as Athos, Yvette, and D’Artagnan entered the room. The *comte de Compton* turned a steady glare on Laurel. No wonder the woman had not taken off her hat; she had known she was bringing a stranger among them. “I thought you said there’d only be you and these four musketeers for this mission,” the man said, a muscle working in his jaw.

“I know what I said, *monseigneur*,” she replied, her voice even and her temper, for once, well under control. “I am not sure yet if I will wish to be altering that plan. I must talk to Jean-Paul and then the musketeers before I decide anything for certain.”

Compton leaned back in his chair, and Treville cast a look at his friend. There was still a great deal of resentment and bad blood between Laurel and Compton. If only Laurel were a man, he would have taken her on as a musketeer himself and saved them all this difficulty. She did have skills that had proven very useful.

“Well, go ahead and talk. Time is already short,” Compton reminded her unnecessarily.

Laurel took several very precise steps away from the leader of France's spy network, and proceeded to draw Yvette aside, to a place that was as private as she could get in the small room. "This mission is potentially very dangerous and very urgent," she told the other woman, wasting no words and telling her of the queen's abduction, instinctively trusting that Yvette would never reveal the knowledge to anyone who did not already know. "I would not endanger your life by bringing you along. However, I have no place to put you up where you would not be in danger. I cannot even send you to Langeac by yourself, for that would be total foolishness. What would you have me do?"

Yvette understood. Understood the full ramifications of the role she had taken on. As a woman, she had to stay with women who would not reveal her masquerade, and no one was in Paris who could fill that role. Or, she could try to make it to Langeac on her own. "I can ride and cook and do not complain. I learn very quickly. My father taught me to hunt, so I can even shoot reasonably well," Yvette replied, not clarifying that she shot well for a lady. "I would help you with this mission if you and your companions will have me," she concluded, making the boldest decision of her life.

Laurel closed her eyes for a brief moment. Now to handle the musketeers. *Ca alors*. She had gotten herself in quite a tangle, which was more common for her than she would like. She could not reveal Jean-Paul's true identity or the woman would be left behind or sent home. But, at the same time, she knew that it was only a matter of time before her friends discovered the deception, and then going for a walk in the middle of a battlefield while cannons exploded round about might well become a more cheery option. Her decision made, the *marquise* turned to the musketeers and informed them as to Jean-Paul's qualifications and pushed for them to allow Jean-Paul to accompany them on their journey to Brandenburg-Prussia.

She had been expecting an all-out argument or at least a lively debate, but the men did not give it to her. Instead, one by one, they said they'd agree to have Jean-Paul with them. That was when Laurel caught the look in Aramis' eyes and knew she had not even heard the beginning of this matter from any of them.

The *duc* mouthed something that resembled that this Jean-Paul would have to be dropped off somewhere en route. Laurel

frowned. Another debate that could turn nasty. . . . Then again, she could just play along for a while until she came up with another way to resolve the dilemma of what to do with Yvette.

This task apparently taken care of, the companions turned their attention to Compton and Treville and set about planning their departure for Brandenburg-Prussia the following morning.

* * * * *

The man rose from his position crouched behind the trees and stared at the group that had just ridden by him.

Six riders heading east by north. Four of them he recognized as musketeers even though they weren't wearing their mantles. He crept through the underbrush and freed his horse from the tree where it had been tied. Silently, he mounted the animal and set off in pursuit of the group that was disappearing in the distance.

They were up to something, and he'd better find out what. For if it truly was significant, Friedrich would want to know immediately. The very fact that these musketeers had suddenly reappeared in Paris for no readily discernable reason and then had discreetly left with two more companions in a direction that seemed to be heading for Brandenburg-Prussia could portend a slew of complications.

And if there was truly any chance that they were in pursuit of the queen of France, then he would have to deal with them. They would simply have to be eliminated as soon as Friedrich received word and joined him. No doubt the other man would want to come along personally and see to it the musketeers never made it back to France alive.

"We camp tonight," Athos announced as he led his companions to a clearing that was near a stream. Luckily, the August nights were relatively cool, but at the same time had not become cold.

Hopefully, fall would hold off a bit, long enough for them to get to Brandenburg-Prussia and back before the real cold started hitting. "Christophe, take Jean-Paul and tell him what to do," Athos commanded tersely while he, D'Artagnan, Porthos, and Aramis each took up his own tasks to prepare the camp for nightfall.

Yvette flinched as she bent down to spread her cloak upon the ground and pressed her hand to the small of her back. Aramis looked at the youth with concern, and Laurel broke away from D'Artagnan and Athos, heading for the young lad before anyone else could interfere.

The *marquise* knelt by the other woman's side and touched her shoulder. "What's wrong?" Yvette met her eyes and didn't reply for a moment. Then she mouthed, "Women's problems."

If it wasn't one thing it was another. Laurel encouraged the woman to get to her feet and told her to grab a few of the rags that Laurel had stuffed in Yvette's saddle pack. In the meantime, Laurel went to her horse and dug through her own saddlebags until she found the tightly wrapped bundle.

She had known that this bar of soap would come in handy; she just hadn't realized it would be so soon and for such a reason. Porthos' voice halted her as she finished cinching the strap that held her saddlebags closed. "Just what do you think you're doing, *jeune amie*?"

She met the larger man's eyes without wavering, still recalling the bitter argument she had gone through with him and his friends earlier in the day concerning the latest addition to the entourage. "Well, *monsieur*. That should be quite obvious to a man of your astounding intellect," she teased. "Seeing as you and my other good friends, barring Jean-Paul, have all bathed within the past two weeks and Jean-Paul has not, I have decided that he shall have a bath whether he wants one or not. Now, you're welcome to join him if you so desire." She added the final *coup de grace* and turned to head toward Yvette.

"If you think you are getting me near that water for any other purpose than drinking, you are sadly misled," Porthos informed her, remembering Laurel's fascination with bathing and her strange tendency to make sure all around her did so too. "I will not be pressured into another unwanted bath. As if it isn't enough that you've got us all bathing at least once every seven to ten days."

"Of course," she agreed and trotted off, missing D'Artagnan's efforts not to laugh at the indignant large man. Porthos, the pirate. A man who believed the only place for a true bath was when you fell overboard. Personally, D'Artagnan saw no point in arguing. Besides, he kind of liked the frequent warm

soaks he had engaged in over the past year, and it had not compromised his health in any way either.

Laurel whispered a few words in Yvette's ear and led her downstream and well away from any prying eyes. Provided luck was on their side, none of their companions would decide to come down this way while they were bathing and taking care of Yvette's monthly problem.

Laurel sadly feared she would really not be up to dealing with another argument today, especially after the last one that she was still convinced she hadn't heard the last of. Why didn't problems ever come one at a time so she could deal with them and have them done with? Someone really was out to get her. That was it. She was convinced of the fact.

This was a moment when D'Artagnan wished for the mare he had been forced to sell on his frantic drive for Calais—not that the horse he currently was riding wasn't good. . . . It was. However, he didn't know the mare as well and was not quite sure what to expect of the animal, which could well be dangerous when entering hostile, foreign territory.

Suddenly, Aramis raised his left hand, signaling the youngest musketeer to stop. The value of listening to his companion when they were scouting had been vividly underscored on previous occasions.

Immediately, the young man did so and looked at Aramis, an unasked question written all over his face, but he refrained from speaking.

He was, after all, learning the value of caution and would not compromise safety if the matter was truly urgent.

Almost so quietly that D'Artagnan did not hear, the *duc* asked, "Did you hear anything out of place or notice anything that didn't seem quite right over the past few hours?"

Now that Aramis mentioned it, D'Artagnan had been suffering from the strange feeling that something was severely out of whack all morning. Almost as if someone were watching him with the intent of doing him harm. But he had nothing upon which to base the feeling. "Just a strange feeling like someone's watching me and intends to harm me, but nothing concrete," D'Artagnan responded in an equally hushed tone.

Gambit for Love of a Queen

The *duc* was silent for a moment, wondering if it could just be the bad feeling that he had about Laurel and the lad that she had brought along with her. But it simply couldn't be. Jean-Paul was so very shy and never intentionally harmed anything as far as he could tell. Both men surveyed the road, looking back in the direction from which they had come.

Something was out there. Aramis sent a prayer to God for his mercy, blessing, and continual guidance.

"Someone is following us," he declared. "At a guess, I'd say he's been following us since we left Paris." He'd just been too distracted by Laurel's antics to notice, though there was still no excuse for his disturbing lack of attention, especially when every little detail mattered in the success of this mission.

D'Artagnan stifled a curse, wishing for once Aramis could be wrong about this. Yet Aramis had never, in his memory, been wrong about being followed, and that was part of the reason why he'd never been captured and was able to sneak in to almost anywhere. The man had always had an uncanny perceptiveness and an ability to notice little details most people overlooked. "We'd better tell Athos."

D'Artagnan was solemn, and Aramis nodded. Then they were off as rapidly as they dared push their horses—they had no idea how long the horses would have to endure—to meet with the rest of their traveling companions.

A loud, shrill whistle brought Athos up short, and his companions nearly ran over the man when he stopped so suddenly. Fortunately Laurel, Porthos, and Yvette were all excellent riders and reacted quickly enough to avoid a nasty accident.

Once the horses were back under control, Athos calmly turned his attention to Aramis and D'Artagnan. Aramis did not whistle like that very often. Not a good sign. Aramis' words confirmed it. They were being followed and had been followed since they had departed from Paris.

"We could just flush him out and dispose of him," Porthos suggested, eager to bash a few heads or what have you. He had missed the adventure and excitement of his job more than he had realized over the time he had been obliged to live sedately.

Solemnly, Aramis shook his head. “I already tried. Whoever’s following us is very savvy and not likely to fall for any tricks. We could, however, try to lose him.”

“Just not with so many of us traveling together,” Athos deduced almost as soon as Aramis rejected Porthos’ suggestion.

The oldest musketeer noticed that Laurel’s posture stiffened, and the woman moved fractionally closer to Jean-Paul as if refusing to be separated from him. *Formidable!* Exactly what he needed, another battle. No. No battle. He was in charge, and his decisions would be followed.

Group safety was more important than any one individual’s desire. “D’Artagnan. Jean-Paul. You come with me. Aramis, you take Porthos and Christophe with you and meet me at Giridon when you think you’ve lost our pursuer.” Giridon was the name they had given to their secret retreat near the border of the German states and France—close to Lorraine. “Whoever gets there first waits three days, and if the others still don’t show, they proceed on with the mission. I hope I am very clear.” Duty to king and country came before duty to each other in these sorts of situations.

Athos’ tone was firm and one that brooked no debate, but Laurel had to speak despite her better judgment. There was no telling what might happen once she and Yvette were separated. “Athos, I must protest. Jean-Paul and I—”

“*Non*, Christophe,” he broke in, silencing her. “No protests. This gets done my way even if it means I have to have Aramis and Porthos bind and gag you and take you protesting all the way. I will not compromise group safety. Do I make myself understood?” And he would follow through on his threat. He was not a man of idle words.

Still, he was forced to ask the stubborn woman again, and for a moment he really did think he would have to have her bound and gagged. But, apparently, her better sense won out, and she swallowed her pride very reluctantly. “*Oui, monseigneur*,” she said very respectfully, but Athos could feel the heat of her resentment at her inability to control the situation and have it exactly as she wanted it.

Yvette cast one last desperate and helpless look at Laurel before she, Athos, and D’Artagnan quickly vanished from sight. “This way.” Aramis signaled with his head. “And be quiet,” he reminded, basically directing the censure at Porthos. He had a

feeling Laurel would be saying nothing for a while. She tended to react that way sometimes when she was thwarted and could not give free vent to her temper.

For a long time the three rode in silence, quick, then slow, then more moderately. A twist here and a turn there. Even so, Aramis was not quite satisfied, and Laurel had pulled herself out from her sulking enough to admit that she wouldn't be satisfied either; so she couldn't blame him.

Though there was no tangible sign of pursuit evident, she didn't think their pursuer—more likely, pursuers—had been lost. And she had learned from her father, and he'd been the best. Her father and Sabine. They were both dead now, and it was so very hard to believe, so very hard to know she would never see them again until she too went to her final rest.

Now the only family left was Uncle Joseph and his wastrel son who was bound to end up bankrupting himself before long. Still, she couldn't believe that Joseph had had the audacity to try to force her into marriage with his son as soon as he found out Laurel's father was dead, pressure he continued to put on her since she'd come back to Paris. That, at least, was one good thing. By leaving Paris she was eluding that wasp's nest.

Laurel shook herself enough to bring herself out of her brooding. There was no time to focus on loss. Her attention was needed here in the present. Her very life could depend on it, and the safety of Aramis and Porthos could well depend on her being alert.

A brief instant Laurel took to adjust the brim of her hat. A minute movement of leaves in front and off to the left of Porthos caught her attention.

Swiftly, she kicked Rebelle in the flanks and the gelding spurted forward. "Look out, Porthos!" she cried, and he whirled his horse to a stop, ducking just in time to avoid being brained by a bolas.

Fluently, he cursed God and man in several different languages. There were times when his pirating days did prove quite useful, but he did not fancy the notion of his life being ended, especially not by exotic weapons like the ones he favored.

Aramis did not bother to admonish his friend for insulting God. God was just and merciful and full of grace, so God would

probably forgive him with adequate repentance for the lives he was about to take and the insults Porthos had flung.

Banishing all thoughts but those that were directly needed, Aramis immediately took off in the direction from which the weapon had been flung.

Four assailants burst from the forest as if coming from nowhere, and Rebelle shied on his rear legs away from a bullet that was fired in his direction, almost overbalancing his rider, but saving both their lives.

In the meantime, Porthos withdrew the small crossbow D'Artagnan had returned to him and loaded it, taking careful aim at one of the attackers. Without flinching at the loud thwack or the kickback, he fired, and the arrow found its mark, buried deep in the jugular of the nearest attacker, and he dropped to the ground with a gurgling gasp, breathing no more.

Whistling, Porthos complimented himself on a job well done. And to be honest, that shot had been one fine shot, but also a very lucky one as well. "Ah! I do love my job," he finally said, unwilling to forgo the declaration that he so often employed. Three on three. The odds were even now. Well, maybe not quite even. They were obviously only hired fighters, mercenaries of the lowest kind.

Hardly seemed fair—for them, that is, Porthos thought as he went in pursuit of another of his opponents.

Aramis ducked to the right and then the left, avoiding branches in what appeared to be effortless movements that would have made most men lose their seat.

As the low-hanging branches diminished, Aramis unholstered his pistol and, while guiding his horse, loaded and primed the weapon. The mare responded immediately to his light touch on the reins, stopping as Aramis leveled the gun at the dirt-encrusted, lice-infested mercenary. "You," he said quietly, cocking the gun as he did so, "are under arrest in the name of *sa majesté*, Louis XIII, the king of France."

"*Va-te faire voire.*" The man growled out the insult in the most familiar terms that came to his head and reached to his side.

At the same moment Aramis saw the gleam of the loaded gun. Without a second thought, he fired the pistol, shooting the man through the heart only an instant before the man would have

shot him. Aramis quickly crossed himself and asked God's mercy on the mercenary's soul. He had never liked killing unless he had to, and even then he was not fond of the activity.

Plus, it was notoriously hard to elicit information from dead men. Frankly, there were times he wondered why he'd become a fighter, times when he wondered if giving up any chance at the priesthood had been a wise decision. Slowly, he turned his horse and headed back to the meadow where he had left Porthos and Laurel.

With a slash of his sword, Porthos quickly ended another man's life, cleanly cutting through the victim's midsection. Laurel's eyebrow went up, and bile churned in her stomach at the sight of the blow. That was one very powerful stroke. Sometimes she forgot how very strong the large man was. And how nasty he could be when crossed.

The *marquise* swerved and went for another pass at the last remaining assailant, trying very hard not to think about what Porthos might well do to her for getting his sister involved in this mess. Thank goodness Athos had not let Yvette come with her, though it still rankled that he had been so summarily dictatorial.

Of course, that all rested on the assumption that all the pursuers had followed them and not also Athos' party. Not likely at that. Her sword unsheathed, she made a quick slash and felt the resistance of flesh giving way as her blade cut open the man's left arm. She frowned. *Mince!* She had not disabled his right hand, and the man was right-handed.

Quickly, the mercenary dashed away from the horse, and Laurel was forced to bring Rebelle to a complete stop before she was able to turn him around and pursue the injured man again. Once again, she readied her sword to strike from her superior position. It was a race to beat the man.

Already, the attacker was swinging a bolas in a loop around his head and preparing to release the weapon.

At the very moment the mercenary let the weapon fly, Porthos was driving toward him, and Aramis emerged from the brush and trees; in fact, only a moment later Porthos put a period to the man's life with a well-aimed shot of his own. Unfortunately, it was not soon enough to ruin the attacker's aim entirely.

With all her might, Laurel swerved and pulled back, slowing Rebelle's pace as much as she could. It was not enough. Instead of the bolas even coming near Laurel, they tangled themselves around her horse's forelegs, bringing the animal down to its knees with a cry.

Unceremoniously, Laurel was pitched over the gelding's head. Her saber flew from her hand, and bodily she hit the ground with a thudding impact that jarred her to her bones. Her last conscious thought was to wonder if Rebelle was all right and why Porthos was yelling "Christophe" so loudly.

Aramis and Porthos dismounted faster than they could ever remember dismounting previously and dashed to the woman's side.

Aramis was kneeling by Laurel's side first, and then Porthos was crouching next to him. As Aramis leaned over her and listened to the woman's uneven breathing, the crucifix that hung about his neck bounced forward, up and down, as if mirroring the racing pace of his heart. He grasped her wrist and felt a strong but erratic pulse.

"She's alive?" Porthos asked, forgetting to call Laurel a he. "How bad?" he posed the follow-up question, using very few words. Quite unlike him, all in all.

"*Oui*, alive," Aramis responded and ran his hands up and down her legs and arms and the rest of her body. Nothing appeared to be broken at least. He raised his hand to her head and cautiously turned her face, being sure to firmly support her neck as he did so.

Already, there was an impressive bruise on the right side of her face and a nasty bump on her head, which wasn't bleeding—luckily. For a moment his hand lingered on her abused face as if he wanted to absorb her pain into himself and then leech it away.

Suddenly, as if he realized he was being watched and he still hadn't answered Porthos, he said, "Nothing appears to be broken. She has a nasty bump on her head and a bruise on her face, and that appears to be the worst of it. She may well have been a very lucky woman," Aramis concluded, praying to God that she really was as lucky as he hoped she was, if not luckier.

Methodically, Aramis set about positioning her body, limb by limb, into a more natural position while Porthos dashed off to

retrieve Laurel's sword and check Rebelle, as Aramis had requested.

The large musketeer knelt and stroked the animal's nose, whispering soft words of reassurance like his father had taught him to do with a scared or hurt animal so many years ago. When the horse was reasonably calm, he cut the bolas from Rebelle's legs and gently felt the length of them. The animal flinched, and his sides twitched but there was no sign of breakage. At least he wouldn't have to put the horse down. Apparently he'd escaped with minor bruising.

Nevertheless, he wouldn't want to put Laurel on him, especially in her state. It'd be too easy for her to fall off again, and he'd rather not have Rebelle turn up lame for trying.

Purposely, Porthos walked over to his companion, telling him what he'd concluded about Rebelle as well as handing over Laurel's sword. "You mount up, *mon bon homme*," Porthos told the *duc*. "Then I'll hand Laurel up to you." Aramis did so without a single protest. However, before securing the injured woman in front of him he stashed her sword next to his pack—carefully.

Moments later Porthos approached the gelding and tied a length of rope he'd extracted from his pack to the animal's bridle and tied the other end to his own horse's bridle, allowing enough room so that the rope would keep the horses a safe distance apart, yet not tangle in either animal's legs.

Satisfied with his handiwork, the giant of a man mounted his own horse and looked to Aramis, who had only finished making Laurel comfortable a moment earlier. "Let's get to Girton," the *duc* said, and both men set off as briskly as the situation permitted them, trying not to worry overmuch about the fate of the rest of their group as they continued on their route.

Section Two

“I am not bound to please thee with my answers.”

William Shakespeare

The man remained crouching, completely concealed behind the trees, unmoving, waiting with patience until the musketeers and their injured companion had disappeared.

Unfortunately, he'd been unable to hear their conversation about the injured member of their party. All he knew was that the musketeer called Porthos had called the lad Christophe and that the boy had not been killed or injured too severely in his nasty fall.

When the sound of the horses faded and the meadow was once again still, he pushed himself up from his stomach and checked each of the motionless bodies.

All four of the mercenaries he'd hired were dead, so he reclaimed the funds that he had paid them. It was only fair. They had not successfully discharged their duty, and somehow the musketeers had discovered they were being followed, so they weren't as good as they had boasted either. The Prussian surveyed the meadow one more time and then ducked back into the trees, stepping over jutting branches and sidestepping rocks as he traced his way farther into the trees.

He hiked for a while until he came upon the location where he had lashed his horse. The animal was still there and showing signs of restiveness, pawing the ground in an expression of its anxiousness to be gone.

Could hardly blame the mare; he was anxious to be gone himself. In addition, he needed to get to Brandenburg-Prussia and Friedrich swiftly. Obviously, the musketeers and their two

companions were heading for Brandenburg-Prussia in an attempt to rescue the queen of France he concluded.

He unlashd the horse and mounted the animal, slowly guiding her from the sheltering forest and toward the open road.

Time to be sure that he arrived in Brandenburg-Prussia, well before the rescue party. It helped that they had an injured member, and there were still the other mercenaries that had followed the other half of the party after they had split up. Thus, it was quite possible that injuries or death would strike those other three and impede their task further.

Water sprayed upward in spurts as the hooves of the horses plowed through the stream, churning up mud and sediment as they went.

With a sense of futility, Yvette struggled to keep her eyes open as sprays of water leapt toward her face, soaking her clothes. She was most definitely thankful it was warm out and that the clothes were a bit too big for her, or even the bindings holding her breasts wouldn't have been enough to conceal her gender. Of course under close inspection there was no telling . . . but she'd not dwell on that right now.

As it was, she judged that she was not readily given away by appearance. The woman looked down to avoid a clod of dirt that had been kicked up.

When she raised her head, the stream had pretty much calmed, and she noted that both Athos and D'Artagnan had led their horses up the bank and onto dry land.

Yvette followed suit, slowing her own horse. Grateful that the mare was very surefooted, she proceeded up the steep incline of the bank and brought herself to a stop next to the musketeers.

D'Artagnan looked the water-soaked and mud-splattered woman over, up and down. It appeared that young Jean-Paul was as bedraggled as he and Athos were. Which only reinforced the notion that he had no desire to see what he looked like; he surely wouldn't approve of his own appearance, and he had the sneaking suspicion he could almost be mistaken for one of dubious reputation, such as a brigand.

The horses shook themselves, throwing off all the excess water and scum, and each rider ducked his—or her—head. Not a pleasant experience, but hopefully they would dry out quickly now

that the sun was shining fiercely down on them, even through the relatively dense tree-cover overhead.

Yvette shivered as a brisk wind slammed into her body, pasting the thoroughly waterlogged shirt against her. At the same time, the bedraggled woman grabbed her hat, holding it to her head until the wind died back down. Athos and D'Artagnan had better know where they were going, for she had absolutely no clue, even though she was usually very good with directions. She froze in mid-thought, stiffening in her saddle. What if she were separated from the others? How would she find her way to this meeting place . . . Girton?

In addition, it was very possible that Athos was the only one who knew exactly where they were going, which meant if something were to happen to him . . .

"Is something wrong?" D'Artagnan asked the person he knew as Jean-Paul, brotherly concern in his voice and crystal-blue eyes.

Like a startled young animal, Yvette met his gaze a moment before lowering her eyes back to where her gloved hands rested on the reins. Never had she realized how much she would come to appreciate gloves. They not only hid and protected her hands, they gave her something somewhat interesting to stare at.

Athos mutely observed the exchange, noting that Jean-Paul was much more interested in his hands than he was in replying to anything that D'Artagnan had said. Was the boy really afraid that he or D'Artagnan would persecute him in any way for voicing a concern that was obviously vexing him?

The oldest musketeer brought his horse close to Jean-Paul's. As he did so, he gestured for D'Artagnan to let him see if he could handle this affair. The young man fell away from the inarticulate boy, and Athos took his place. "I did not realize that a pair of hands was so very interesting," Athos teased as if he were playing with Guillaume, his son. "Nor, I confess, do I quite see what a pair of hands, no matter how fine, can have to do with a possible problem you see."

Athos paused again.

"My dear boy, I do guarantee you that I welcome all opinions that could possibly concern safety, including when there is no imminent danger."

D'Artagnan caught sight of Yvette's cautious glance toward himself, and he spoke to second Athos' words. "It's true. He even

listened to me and my opinions, despite the fact he well knew my inexperience and tendency toward recklessness.”

“What if we are separated before we get to Girton?” Her voice wavered a bit as if she felt questioning anyone in a position of authority would bring heaven’s wrath down upon her in all its fury.

In reality, had either man brought up the significant likelihood of being separated and the need to plan for contingencies, none would have found it in the least odd. However, Yvette was not so confident. Always, she’d been obedient and proper until Laurel had spirited her away from her home. Now, well, now she was being forced to see the world in a new way and to reevaluate all those things she had so recently gone along with without even thinking twice; it had been what was expected of her, her duty.

“I mean,” Yvette stammered as if unsure of herself, “does anyone else know how to get to Girton if we get separated, *Monseigneur* Athos?”

Athos nearly groaned. Was that all the boy was afraid to say? It was a very valid concern and one that he had foolishly enough overlooked. And overlooked concerns such as that had a habit of coming back to haunt him and thrusting him into perilous situations.

“I hadn’t considered it, but I should have. Unfortunately, only Aramis, Porthos, and myself know how to get there.” The man pursed his lips, lost deep in thought. At moments like these he wished for Aramis’ ability to come up with ideas or Laurel’s rather unorthodox inventive powers. Only, he wasn’t so blessed in that area, and D’Artagnan was still learning. There was Jean-Paul, but he was afraid to voice a dissenting opinion, let alone any new ideas.

“Do you know about where we are, D’Artagnan?”

D’Artagnan contorted his face in an odd manner as if trying to figure out just what his friend was getting at. “*Oui*, roughly. I’d guess we’re about a day and a half’s ride from the border, somewhere near the village of Tiems. As for more than that, I just don’t know. Besides, that won’t help Jean-Paul if he gets separated from us. I think it’s pretty fair to assume that he’s very unfamiliar with this territory.”

Athos moved his head in an incomplete shaking motion. He hated frustration, hated his own sometimes erratic temper. Why was it that his emotions were sometimes so volatile? “Jean-Paul, are you good with directions and estimating distances?”

“Not bad,” Yvette responded in her mild, self-effacing manner, hoping her direction sense had not abandoned her along with her good sense.

“Jean-Paul,” Athos said firmly, “I have no time for modesty. If you are good with directions, tell me plainly; if not, I must come up with something else.”

“I’ve always been very accurate in the past and have no reason to think that has changed,” Yvette admitted, still afraid she was boasting or getting in way over her head.

“*Bon.*” Athos switched the reins over to his left hand so that his right was free. “Then, if we get separated, we can meet in the village of Tiems.” Leaning forward and pointing, Athos addressed his reserved companion. “About four leagues to the immediate southwest is where the village lies. You can find that?”

The woman nodded firmly, careful memorizing her present location so that if need be she could find her way back to this spot and then make her way to Tiems from this point. She supposed her father had taught her a few valuable skills after all, and that her experience hunting had not been nearly as wasteful as she’d thought it had been. It had helped her refine her riding skills and brought out her near-perfect sense of direction and judgment of distance.

“I hate to break in,” D’Artagnan interrupted, “but I really don’t think it’s a very smart idea to sit around here chatting. I seriously doubt our pursuers are very far behind us, and we still have to lose them before we even try to get to Girдон.”

The older musketeer nodded, urging his horse forward at an easy trot. “Let’s move.”

The silence, even for one who was used to the isolation of having to entertain him or herself, was close to deafening. Tension-filled. So palpable that Yvette was beginning to fear she was suffering from paranoia or would be very shortly. Then Laurel’s words came rushing back to her. “You aren’t paranoid if they really are after you.” Not that the setting sun and impending dusk of night helped matters.

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On that none-too-uplifting thought, Athos called a halt and drew his sword before dismounting, very quietly. D'Artagnan did the same and was soon standing shoulder to shoulder—well, almost, since D'Artagnan was slightly taller—with his friend. Yvette's face was blank, confused, and she remained perched atop her horse. She had no sword, so she could hardly follow suit, and even had she had a sword she couldn't have used it. Nor did she dare break the silence to ask what was going on.

D'Artagnan turned his head, looking over his shoulder at his still mounted companion. Well, it probably wasn't a bad idea for at least one person to have the advantage of a horse. It was the young man's gaze that prompted Yvette to fumble through the nearest pack and grasp her gun and prime it. Absently, she wondered how bad the recoil would be if she were to fire the pistol while mounted.

Finally D'Artagnan asked in a voice so hushed even Yvette couldn't hear. "What are we doing?"

"The horses need a brief rest. They've been working hard all day," he responded without mincing his words. "Nor do I intend on stopping again, so if anyone needs to make use of a facility, he had best do it now," Athos continued, just loud enough that both his companions could make sense of the words.

The two men stepped just off the path to make ample use of the time, and Yvette dismounted, being very careful not to look in their direction, lest they'd see the fiery red blush that was creeping across her visage. Plus, her modesty was quite simply appalled at the notion. But she had thrust herself into a situation of privation where the norms of social modesty did not hold—rough and down-to-earth ruled.

No wonder men didn't care to travel with women often. It slowed things down immensely for numerous reasons, like the fact that most women would not put up with staying out of doors, and the journey would have to be planned around stopping at inns and stops to take care of bodily functions.

While their backs were to her, the woman crept into the deep foliage and farther from the path. She would not have herself observed, and she sincerely hoped neither man would suddenly wonder what had become of her.

Her hopes were to prove vain, for no sooner had she disappeared than Athos asked D'Artagnan if he knew where Jean-

Paul was. The younger man shook his head, searching for some sign of him, but saw none. The lad could have gone anywhere. All the foliage off the immediate path was so dense that even were a person nearby, he would be so well covered he'd probably remain undetected.

At that instant, as if brought to life by D'Artagnan's grim prediction, four armed men burst from their cover, converging on the musketeers. Four on two. Not good. Not good at all, Athos remarked to himself.

Where *diantre* was Jean-Paul?! He had no time to dwell further on the issue as he dodged a sword thrust to his side and parried another from behind him. He danced away, not as light on his feet as he had intended. Sometimes he really wished for some of Aramis' technical brilliance or D'Artagnan's showy finesse.

As for the youngest musketeer, he neatly danced away from several thrusts with a lot more grace and finesse than was strictly needed. Fortunately, it was to his advantage, rather than needlessly tiring him out, for it distracted his opponents enough that he was able to force both men back several steps before he had to take the defensive again.

As D'Artagnan ducked, avoiding another blow, he chastised himself. He should have realized many people would be trying to kill them to prevent them from success, and that would put more than a crimp in his wedding plans.

Athos threw his entire body's force into a lunge, jarring his attacker's sword arm and nearly knocking the sword free. The man stumbled back several steps, unable to maintain his stance at the brute impact of the musketeer's force.

With a swift and powerful downward stroke, Athos ended the man's life and turned to his one remaining opponent, who was viewing him with a great deal more caution than his late companion had. Maybe he was getting better at adapting his style to multiple opponents, Athos noted for future reference.

This time, Athos took the initiative, launching a vicious series of quick deft thrusts, pushing his enemy backward at first.

The other man regained his footing and counterattacked, locking swords with the musketeer. Athos grimaced and pushed away. The man was about his equal in strength and had a fair bit of talent, especially for a mercenary. This could take a while.

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In the meantime, D'Artagnan's deft and minute repartee penetrated one of his attackers' defense, splitting the man's sword palm open. The man almost lost his grasp of the blood-slickened hilt as he bit through his lower lip to stifle the cry of pain. The musketeer took his advantage and disemboweled the man. Turning to his one remaining attacker, he engaged. One fool down, and one fool to go—or one fool remains for now, as Porthos would say.

Athos lunged again at his opponent, glancing toward his friend for a moment, long enough to see what D'Artagnan did not. He was about to trip over a large stone jutting up behind him. Furiously and out of breath, he attempted to lunge away from his opponent so he could get to D'Artagnan's aid. He couldn't, however, break away before D'Artagnan's ankle and calf impacted the protruding surface, knocking him off his feet and to the uneven ground.

A mighty slice ended his opponent, and Athos made a mad dash for his friend. Midway there he caught sight of Jean-Paul, loaded pistol cocked and aimed at the man who was preparing to deal D'Artagnan the death blow. *What is the lad waiting for?* The thought was so loud it should have been shouted.

If looks could have knocked someone down, Athos' look would have leveled her, Yvette had no doubt. But at least it knocked her out of her paralyzing stupor of indecision. Seizing control of herself through sheer, desperate willpower, she stopped the shaking of her hand and pulled the trigger.

Discharge roared and slapped at her ears. Her hands stung as she mutely witnessed the ball plunge into living human flesh, tearing sinew and bone. And as the man's lifeless body struck the ground, Yvette could have sworn her face was as pale as the dead man's. The man whom she had shot through the neck. Many men would have called it a very fine and very lucky shot, but Yvette was not so sure. She'd never been responsible for ending a human life before, nor had she ever in her worst nightmares dreamt of taking a life.

D'Artagnan knelt on the ground, trying to bring his breathing back under control. Near-death experiences were things to be avoided at all costs.

Finally, slowly, deliberately, one foot at a time he got up and recovered his sword, sheathing the blade after he cleaned it. Athos

put a firm hand on the young man's shoulder. "Are you going to be all right?"

The man nodded, firmly. "*Oui*," was his simple reply—as soon as his heart started beating normally again and came out of his throat, but he didn't need to tell his friend that; Athos knew. The young musketeer half turned and caught sight of Jean-Paul, who was staring at the corpse and the scarlet stain on the ground, while the pistol dangled uselessly from his right hand.

"I'm all right now," the young man assured his elder comrade. "But I'm not so sure about Jean-Paul." Athos had to agree with him on that one, and cautiously the two men approached their stunned comrade.

"Jean-Paul," D'Artagnan called softly, trying to reassure the lad without startling him. Yvette did not say a word. Did not even move.

Athos told D'Artagnan to keep saying reassuring things in the same tone while he approached the youngster in small precise steps. He'd seen shock like this grab hold of men before, knew how potentially perilous it could be.

Moments. Endless. Dragged by. Then he was there, reaching out. The discharged gun was in his hand, and Yvette's body convulsed, shaking out of control, arms flailing every which way.

Unceremoniously, Athos thrust the gun inside his tunic and grabbed at the woman's arms, holding them to her sides so that she couldn't do harm to herself. Suddenly, the violent shaking stopped.

Before Athos realized what was happening, he was lightly holding a body racked with sobs and trying, inexpertly, to soothe shock away.

The tears subsided, and the youngster pulled away, staring at the ground, mortified by her utter and complete loss of control. No one said a thing. Not Athos. Not Yvette. And not D'Artagnan, who stood still a few arm's lengths away.

Yvette finally lifted her eyes from the ground and looked at Athos, preparing to apologize. All that came out were the words, "I've never killed a man before." No more needed to be said.

Both Athos and D'Artagnan knew what killing another human being could do to a fighter, especially the first time you killed another man in battle regardless of whether it was in self-defense or defense of a beloved comrade.

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Both men looked at her, with sympathy. Again, she broke down. How could she be deceiving these men? How could she go on lying and pretending? It wasn't right. "Please," she pleaded. "I don't deserve your sympathy." Athos and D'Artagnan both tried to break in to contradict her, but her mind was made up, and she went on, "*Non*, don't say anything more. I am contemptible. I have been lying to you all along, since I first joined you."

Confused, D'Artagnan came forward and asked, "How have you been lying to us?"

"I'm not Jean-Paul," she confessed. "I'm not at all what I seem. Laurel—*oui*, Laurel. I know Christophe is a woman. Laurel gave me my freedom, set me free from my family. And I know my brother might never forgive her for it." Yvette's eyes raced from man to man as the words came out in a tumble. "And I know you might not forgive her for it. But, please, I beg of you to try to understand why she and I did it. Try to find it in your hearts to forgive her. I would not be the cause of ruining her friendship with you," Yvette said as she threw her hat to the ground and pulled her hair from the bun, allowing it to fall just below her shoulders.

"*Saprisiti. Mademoiselle Yvette.*" Athos whispered the words, but somehow they still sounded like a shout, and Yvette silently waited for the men to pass judgment upon her, for her condemnation.

* * * * *

All day. All day it'd been raining. Slow, steady, like the sky was crying and would never cease its mourning. The constant, methodic patter of the droplets against the roof was almost unnoticeable to Friedrich now, except that the infernal rain had abruptly put an end to his plans to travel to see the prince, Frederick William.

Traveling on washed-out, mud-churned roads was not precisely safe for a journey of any significant distance. He tapped his fingers rhythmically upon the table, leaning back in his chair.

The midwife refused to grant anyone access to Anne d'Autriche, insisting that only when the woman was well enough, according to her opinion, would anyone be allowed to see her. She, the midwife, had claimed Anne was still unable to keep down food; little did Friedrich realize that Anne was suffering from

more than just sickness brought on by pregnancy, but also from food poisoning.

Additionally, unless the midwife's instructions were followed religiously, the queen and her unborn child could well die. However, so long as Anne was carefully tended to and not excited overly much, the midwife judged that France's queen would recover fully and give birth to a healthy babe, barring complications that could come up in labor. But Friedrich was blissfully unaware of all of what he would have rather contemptuously dismissed as women's concerns. Thus, he was quite tempted to oust the midwife and do precisely as he pleased.

A rap upon the door brought his fingers to a halt. Leaning forward, and folding his hands atop the desk, he called for the person to enter. Without a sound the door swung open, and a man with windblown, sand-colored hair entered, pushing the door shut behind him. "*Herr* Konrad, what brings you back to Brandenburg-Prussia so soon?" As he asked the question, he directed Konrad to be seated.

"You have not yet heard from the French government, Friedrich, have you?"

He confirmed he had not and went on to say France was operating as if nothing at all had happened. Konrad took a deep breath and looked straight at his elder half-brother. "I think it unlikely that you will get a response from Louis. By all appearances, Louis does not know of his wife's abduction."

"And?"

"And a small band of four musketeers and two tall lads are making their way here, obviously intent on rescuing their queen." Konrad's brother cursed and then brought himself under control. "I hired a number of mercenaries purported to be talented in tracking and fighting to dispose of them. However, one shouldn't depend on hired swords. Still, at the very least, they will delay the men."

"Can you guarantee even that?" Friedrich pressed his brother for more confirmation or assurance on the matter.

"Absolutely positive." There was no doubt in Konrad's voice. "One of the Frenchmen was injured when he was thrown from his horse, and the group was separated; it will at least take them some time to relocate one another."

The older man asked several more pertinent questions regarding the events of the past few days: what his brother had done, why he'd done it, and exactly what he knew about the Frenchmen. Dutifully, Konrad told his brother of all that had occurred since he'd left Paris in pursuit of the Frenchies. Added that he felt it was time to bring Friedrich in to help dispose of the situation effectively. That, and all the evidence showed Konrad was right, and the men in question were on a rescue attempt.

Friedrich's tongue traced over his front teeth with his thin lips pressed firmly together.

There was pensive, charged silence for long moments followed by another more intense bout of silence. The dark-haired man stood and extended a hand to his brother. Politely, Konrad turned the assistance down and raised himself from the chair. "Follow me," Friedrich commanded. "You get some seven or eight of our best men together while I inform our beloved mother about what is going on. We will leave tomorrow morning at daybreak."

"Can do. Until later, *mein brüder*," Konrad acknowledged, and at the door both men turned and proceeded in opposite directions down the hall. They would be leaving at first light, Konrad knew that. No matter how poor the roads or what the weather was like, nothing would prevent his brother from stopping the men who threatened to ruin his pet plan or thwart his ambitions.

Anne grimaced at the foul taste of bile in her mouth, but at least her stomach had calmed. So, maybe she'd be able to eat something and keep it down long enough to do her some good and help her regain some of her strength.

The queen's dark eyes followed the midwife's progress around the room, and Anne sank farther back into the pillows of the bed. If this was what pregnancy entailed: bed rest, misery, and sickness, she wasn't inclined to have any more children. Her good health was more important to her than producing excess children in the event that something might happen to the heir.

A harsh cough erupted from the queen's throat, and the other woman quickly hobbled to her side and plied her with some strong-smelling concoction that was supposedly a type of herbal tea, so far as Anne could gather. Propping herself up on her arms,

the queen dutifully swallowed the warm liquid and felt it flow down her tender throat, soothing the pain from Anne's frequent episodes of vomiting. When the cup was empty, the French queen pushed it away, and seated herself upright against the bedpost. It was too bad the Prussian woman knew so little French, and even less of any other language except her native Germanic dialect, one Anne unfortunately did not recognize well enough to decipher.

In fact, under other circumstances, Anne suspected she and the midwife might come to get along quite well. Already, the devoted and tenacious little woman had blocked Friedrich's attempts to come see her again. As far as she was concerned, that could go on indefinitely. She had no desire to see the man again. She'd rather strangle him. Or if she had a sword she would have run him through. It couldn't possibly take too much experience or talent to simply stab an unarmed man with a weapon even if she was unaccustomed to it. Then, what did she know?

* * * * *

The multicolored sash flapped in the evening breeze, back and forth in an almost playful manner. Porthos pushed the cloth away from his eyes and gazed at the sky long enough to see the first stars appear and the full moon illuminate the sky. One more day and then Athos, D'Artagnan, and Jean-Paul would be more than overdue; they'd be two days late.

Not that he and Aramis could go anywhere yet. Laurel still had not regained consciousness for more than a moment or two of lucidness, and he and Aramis had taken turns tending the woman over the past two days.

Almost, he'd forgotten how peaceful it was in the seclusion of Girdon. It had all a man, or woman such as Laurel, could ask for. A stream and freshwater spring, good hunting, privacy, a dwelling able to accommodate six to ten people easily, and a supply of weapons any fighter could possibly need. There were even things for those who didn't need to fight; for instance, the trinkets, gifts of ladies' favors he and Aramis had accumulated, as well as several different dresses and complete sets of women's undergarments.

Okay, so maybe there were times when he liked to just relax and not be rambling off on some adventure or another, but those

were limited. And they tended to occur when he was with his best friends. His hand caressed the hilt of his sheathed sword and then fell to his side. The large man pivoted on his foot and was about to head back into the “shelter,” as they had named it; so what if the name had been unoriginal? He stopped in mid-turn as a figure with broad shoulders and what appeared to be blond hair approached him in purposeful strides.

Athos. It had to be. Very few men walked with such a decisive, powerful stride that somehow spoke of a great deal of integrity at the same time. Several steps behind the older man were two others. Probably Jean-Paul and D’Artagnan.

“Porthos,” Athos said, using few words, as usual.

“Athos, *bon ami*. So nice to see that you and your young companions have made it safely,” Porthos exclaimed jovially, but no one noticed his joviality was a bit strained.

“Likewise,” Athos responded tersely and looked behind him to be sure that D’Artagnan had properly attended to the mounts. “I want to see Laurel right now.”

Porthos’ eyebrow shot upward. What was Athos thinking? How could he have forgotten to call Laurel Christophe while Jean-Paul was there to observe the goings-on? “Without delay, Porthos,” Athos insisted when Porthos didn’t respond immediately. “Eh, what? Is there some problem?”

“I’m afraid so.” Porthos took a deep breath and released it in a rush. “It’s impossible to see Laurel just now,” he replied, taking his cue from Athos and trusting the man knew what he was doing. “A few days ago she was thrown from her horse, and she’s still not regained her senses.”

“*Sacre nom de nom!*” The invective was Athos’ only immediate response. It was soon followed by a demand to know exactly what had occurred—a response Porthos promptly provided. “And Aramis is with the *marquise* now?” The large man nodded.

“D’Artagnan, come with me,” Athos ordered the young man. “Porthos, take care of your sister,” Athos said, pointing to Jean-Paul. “Apparently, she is partly to greatly responsible for this other *minor* problem.” Athos exited, followed by D’Artagnan, and left behind a stunned musketeer. Perhaps stunned was putting it much too mildly. Submissively, as if ready to take any punishment dealt to her, Yvette stood before her brother, her head bowed. She’d

already braved Athos' and D'Artagnan's anger, and they hadn't really been angry at her, more at Laurel. Okay, so they had called her senseless and worried about her safety but . . .

"Just what do you think you're doing here, Yvette?"

Yvette glanced at her brother from under her eyelashes. He'd never been much for subtlety, and he'd always been loud. Things hadn't changed a whole lot. Silently, her shoulders hunched, she stood as Porthos railed at her, and then he finally got back to the first question he'd asked her.

"Porthos, you ran away from home when you were my age. Why can't I?"

"Why can't you?" He flung his hands in the air. "You bloody stupid girl. You haven't been listening to a word I've said! Women just don't do that. It's far too dangerous for them to be out on their own. There's no telling who could set upon them, and they have no good way to defend themselves."

"Don't you think I know that?" she shouted back, breaking out of her shell for one of the few times in her life. It was only the third time Porthos had ever seen her lose her temper. "I didn't just run away without thinking. I considered it very carefully. You know what mother and father are like. Well, you do, Porthos—so don't you dare glower at me that way."

"Don't you dare presume to lecture to me, *sœurette*." He straightened to his full height and stood towering over her, staring her down. She only took a step back, but other than that, the woman did not cower. "You well know you have a duty to *maman et papa*. And you could easily escape their presence by marrying."

Marrying! Yvette almost choked. So she was supposed to marry while her elder brother ran away from his own marriage. There seemed to be little justice in that—quite hypocritical. Do as I say and not as I do. Plus, who would have her? "I thought of that. But papa is a skinflint. He refuses to increase my dowry. He just chides me for failing to engage my suitors. And with Thérèse and Marianne there to draw all eyes I have little chance of attracting a man's favor. I'm right, *cher*, and you know it well. I'm far too quiet and shy and plain and never could talk to men or even to most women."

Porthos did know it well. He'd been the only one Yvette would really talk to once she was old enough to realize her sisters

were more beautiful, graceful, and socially adept than she. And he was the only one she had ever vented her spleen at.

“Still,” Porthos began, but his bluster was dying down, “it is too dangerous for you, a sheltered lady of good breeding, to be out here. And to be traveling as a man is beyond, beyond . . . beyond redemption. It would ruin you forever if anyone ever found out other than myself or my friends.”

“What about Laurel?” she shot back at him. “Laurel is most certainly a lady of the most impeccable breeding and a noblewoman in her own right. Yet, she travels with you as a lad, and she chooses to remain unwed. She’s even a year older than I.” Suddenly both hands flew to her mouth, covering it, as if Yvette had suddenly realized what she had done. She had told herself to leave Laurel out of this, for she did not want to bring the musketeers’ wrath down on her more than necessary, and she had no desire to ruin their friendship.

“You are not Laurel,” Porthos bellowed, wanting to shake his sister. “You cannot fight. Nor are you the daughter of a spy who took you with him while he traveled Europe to get information for the king of France.” He shook his index finger in her face. “Be glad you are not *mademoiselle la marquise*, Yvette. She has much to explain. You certainly never would have thought of running away in this manner without her promptings, nor would you have ever been able to dress as a lad were it not for her.”

“Oh, come now! Do not rail at her for what I have done, Porthos.”

Porthos whirled to see Laurel walk with tremulous steps from the door frame, followed by Aramis, Athos, and D’Artagnan. Other than her very careful movements and bruised face, she appeared completely well. “Well? Go ahead and tell me I’m reckless. Tell me I’m a fool. I know that I have been in this matter. Yet, be assured that it tore me apart to have to deceive you.”

“You certainly have a funny way of showing that you are sorry for deception. One could wonder if you actually feel the least bit guilty,” Aramis said softly. He would have said more, but he was still worried about her health.

“Absolutely,” Porthos seconded. “You seem to show no remorse over your actions. None at all, and you’d probably do it again in an instant.”

“*Non*—not in an instant,” Laurel interrupted in a remarkably strong voice for an invalid. The *marquise* took several steps toward the large musketeer. “However, I would do it again. From what I understand, she is not in so much danger as you think. She saved D’Artagnan’s life. Nor do I think you realize how terrible it was for your sister at home. Your father was ready to disown her and cast her out because she had received no proposals of marriage. Whereas, your mother was always comparing her to her lovely younger sisters and reinforcing how plain and unwanted she was. And your sisters,” she paused for a breath and went on before he could say a word, “your sisters treated her with merciless cruelty, taking advantage of her sense of duty while all the time reminding her constantly of how freakish she was. On top of that—you, her only solace in the world in that place—left her behind. No, I could not leave a woman to that any more than you could live with your family, especially after they married you off without your consent.”

“You know nothing of that!” Porthos tried ineffectually to shout her down.

“I know more than you think, Porthos,” she defended quietly when his bellows had died down. “Yvette and I have talked a great deal. You did not abandon your wife because you were heartless—you rather liked the young woman. It was your parents that pushed you to it. They’d already forced you to give up pirating and enter into an unwanted marriage, but that wasn’t all. Shall I go on, Porthos? Shall I tell them why you really left? Even Yvette doesn’t really know. *Mais, moi*, I do. You see, servants have a way of whispering, especially around other servants they wish to impress.”

The silence grew as Laurel and Porthos stared at each other, neither giving even the slightest. Finally, Athos’ boots crunched upon the deadened leaves, and he stopped beside his two companions. He put his arm between them and made to pull them apart. “We can continue this later. You are still too weak after your fall, Laurel, and your color doesn’t look very good either.”

“*Non*,” Porthos firmly pushed Athos’ arm away, “I would hear what Laurel thinks she knows.”

Athos dropped back a step, helpless to prevent whatever scene might arise.

“I know that Caroline was an innocent, young girl of scarcely ten and four, and she was scared, terrified of marriage and what happened between men and women. But you promised her you would not take her until she was more prepared, until you were at least very good friends.”

Yvette looked at Porthos as if seeing something she had never seen before, and it blew away everything she had ever thought was true before, leaving her in total shock. “You promised Caroline that?” Yvette asked softly. She had never known her brother to break a promise—his honor was too strong—but she could think of no other explanation for Caroline’s condition.

Porthos met his sister’s hazel eyes. How could he lie to Yvette? He had always cherished her. She had been the bright point of his life at home. “*Oui*,” he finally replied, the words reluctantly torn from his throat. “I never broke my word either.”

“Then what happened?” his sister asked.

Laurel took Yvette’s hand from her brother’s shoulder and squeezed it once before explaining for the musketeer. “Your father cuckolded him, and Porthos could not even protect Caroline in his own house. Let’s say that your father forcibly took your brother’s wife, and that is why Caroline became pregnant and why she died. Only, your brother had no idea what your father had done, so when he found out that his wife had cheated on him, he left her. Only later did he discover what had really happened, and by then she was dead. Before you ask, your mother never knew. Only a few servants suspected. You see, Porthos, I could not leave Yvette to the ‘mercy’ of your family, and had any of you known or discovered the lad was a woman you would have sent her back. I felt I had no other choice but to continue to deceive you.”

Porthos closed his eyes and looked away from the *marquise*, trapped in his own memories and an unexpected surge of guilt. Yvette cautiously put her gentle hands on her brother’s arms, and Aramis took Laurel’s arm and led her away from the brother and sister.

“We should give them some time alone,” Aramis suggested gently, and she did not protest. Thus, Laurel and the three men entered the shelter, leaving brother and sister to come to grips with a relationship that had to be redefined. There would be time later for Porthos’ friends to help him. Family came first.

Laurel looked up from her seated position on the straw stuffed mattress, glancing from one musketeer to the next. "I'm sorry about lying to you," she said, and her voice broke, revealing a hint of the depth of her regret. "But, truly, I could see no other way. I would have left her in Paris had Anne or Constance been there, but they weren't. Nor could I send her to Langeac without an escort I could trust, and I certainly couldn't go with her." No need to point out how ludicrous it would have been to send the woman there alone, especially when she'd never been there before.

Athos stood, his back to her, and stared out the window at the stars. "We don't blame you for taking her away from that place. We simply question your timing and your lack of foresight." He turned to face the woman. "And I speak for all of us when I say we feel betrayed and hurt that you did not think to trust us." The *marquise* winced at the soft, and all too true, accusation.

"But," D'Artagnan added, "we do understand why you felt you had to do as you did. We're just going to need some time to get over the fact you lied to us, no matter how noble your reason."

"I understand." Laurel finally bowed her head, feeling every ache and bruise that had resulted from her fall. Her body didn't much like her at this moment either, and she was not proud of herself. When would she ever learn not to make such a mull of things?

"We'd best get some sleep," Athos said, taking control of the situation before it could escalate into something that they would all live to regret. "We can finish this in the morning. I suspect we all could use some rest."

Athos, followed by D'Artagnan, made his way to the adjoining room. Aramis remained beside the woman. Greatly chastised, the woman asked, "Is there something that I can do for you, Aramis?"

His deep brown eyes rested upon her, and Laurel had the distinct impression that those gold-flecked eyes were looking right through her and detecting every secret she had ever had. As for Aramis, he knew the woman was very good at ferreting out information that no one was supposed to find out. Perhaps she had inherited many of her father's abilities at intrigue and spying.

“If you are going to lecture me, could you please wait until tomorrow? I’m afraid I’m very much not up to it tonight,” Laurel said, trying to dispel some of her discomfort.

“I’m not going to lecture you at all, Laurel,” Aramis told her in a soft tone. The punishment she was leveling upon herself already was more effective than anything he might have added or done himself. He sat beside her and took her left hand in both of his, firmly enough that she couldn’t pull free. “I would know where we stand, Laurel.”

Her eyes widened, and she tried to pull her hand away and stopped, realizing it was useless.

“What are you getting at, Aramis?” she asked, an uneasy feeling gnawing the pit of her stomach.

“I am trying to figure out where our relationship stands, *Mademoiselle* Laurel. It is something we ought to resolve before we go further on this mission. We ought not be fighting all the time or be so uncomfortable with one another that we endanger ourselves and our friends.”

Laurel met his eyes stubbornly. “It will not interfere with this mission.”

“Then you are denying we are attracted to one another?”

“I deny nothing. I say simply, it will not interfere. We both know our duty and are good at it. That is what we must and will focus on. There is nothing else.” And even though there was, she was, once again, unwilling to deal with it.

Instead, she asked Aramis to leave so she could go to sleep. Reluctantly he did so, forbearing to tell her that it already had interfered and would likely do so again.

As for Laurel—she did not sleep for a long time.

Laurel was still asleep, and fortunately so was Yvette, as the four musketeers sat around a table the next morning discussing their options. Actually, it was Aramis, Athos, and D’Artagnan discussing while Porthos sat in sullen silence, not even touching the plate of food that sat in front of him. As for the others, they had finished their meals long ago.

A moment lapsed by where nothing was said, and the *duc de Rouen* shifted his attention to the large bearded man. “Porthos,” Aramis said in a very diplomatic fashion that was definitely more suitable than any approach Athos might have taken. “If you want

some time alone to think, we can discuss this a little later today or discuss it without you. Neither way would be a problem.”

The man scooted his chair forward across the floorboards and said, “I will not have it said that I delayed us or did not contribute my fair share.”

“Porthos,” D’Artagnan fought to keep exasperation out of his voice, “we can’t go anywhere today anyhow. Laurel is still not back to normal, and Rebelle is still recovering too. I may not know a whole lot about doctoring, but I do know that Rebelle’s in better shape than the *marquise* and that he’ll be ready before she is.”

“In other words, we’re staying right here for the next day or two, regardless,” Athos summed it up.

A groggy woman with long blond hair shooting out from a braid that fell down her back wandered into the room rubbing her eyes. Sometimes she really hated the morning—or anytime before eleven. Porthos sent a glare the woman’s way and then thought better of it. The right side of her face was swollen and black and blue. True, it looked better than it had yesterday or the day before, but it still looked incredibly painful. In fact, the young noblewoman moved as if she had just finished riding for the first time and was completely saddle sore.

Laurel propped herself up against a nearby wall. “Now’s your chance. If any of you want to have it out with me, please do so right now.” As she said the words, Porthos got the impression that they were directed more at him than at anyone else in the room.

“*Non*, allow me,” Porthos said, stopping any of his friends from saying a word. “And when I am done this matter is ended. Are we agreed?” The musketeers nodded, knowing, of any of them, Porthos had the most right to go after Laurel. The large man came to his feet and stood looming over the *marquise*. “You should not have done as you did, Laurel, you do know that?”

“I know.” She mouthed the words, at a loss about how to handle the man when he was completely serious.

“It was not your place to interfere. You should have come to me.” Laurel knew that too, and she lowered her eyes, ashamed again. “But you were right that I wouldn’t have listened to you, so I will not hold it against you forever. Do not think that Yvette and I are not grateful that you got her out of that forsaken place. I am, and I know she is. But I refuse to be lied to. Don’t ever,” he waved his finger in her face and with his free hand grasped one of her

arms, “deceive me again, especially when it comes to my family. And don’t you ever lie to any of us again. Our lives depend on our ability to communicate honestly with each other as Aramis and Athos have pointed out time and again. Will you give me your pledge on this?”

Laurel met his eyes with her own. Porthos knew what her pledge meant, and she knew what it could cost her if she ever broke it despite the circumstances. It could cause her much grief somewhere down the road. Still, he was her friend—they all were—and she would not lose that; she’d almost lost it once and almost lost it again now. She would not do so again, ever. “I give you my word, all of you, that I will never lie to you again under any circumstance. However, I would appreciate it if you would be willing to listen and hear what I have to say, and not dismiss it out of hand because it doesn’t fit your notions of what’s proper.”

Porthos loosed her arm and returned to his companions, scarcely acknowledging her last statement, despite the fact it was a sensible suggestion. Athos stared at Laurel. Her deception had hurt, hurt him a lot. He’d trusted her, and she’d trusted him, and to have her pull this stunt stung.

Yet, she was a friend and young, and young people made mistakes. No doubt he’d made more than enough. Nor was he about to make a mistake with Laurel similar to the one he had made with Sabine.

Plus, if Porthos could forgive her, and Aramis and D’Artagnan could forgive her, so could he. “Laurel, why don’t you come join us? Perhaps you could help us decide how we are supposed to proceed, considering the several new developments.”

D’Artagnan slid his chair over and pulled another one up to the circular table, situating it between himself and Aramis. Slowly, the woman made her way over and seated herself in the chair D’Artagnan had procured for her. Finally, she dared speak. “Will you send Yvette back or take her with us?”

“What do you think?” Athos asked the other musketeers.

“She saved my life,” D’Artagnan spoke. “And she knows at least as much about horses as I do.” Aramis agreed with the young man’s assessment. Athos nodded, adding that Yvette had an impeccable sense of direction.

“And what of you, Porthos? Could you handle having your sister along on a mission of this sort?” Athos inquired. He was

well aware it would cost them time they did not have to escort Yvette somewhere safe. Talk about being between a rock and hard spot.

“I wouldn’t like it,” Porthos told them truthfully. “But I won’t send her back, ever. Still, I can’t approve of her traveling as a boy in Brandenburg-Prussia. Brandenburg-Prussia’s already dangerous enough. She has no idea what a boy acts like and would be too likely to be found out, especially in a strange country.”

“What if she weren’t a boy in Brandenburg-Prussia?”

“Come again?” Aramis and Porthos said together.

“What if she took on a woman’s role in Prussian society? It was what I was planning on doing at least part of the time,” Laurel suggested, her grogginess finally worn off. Thank goodness her mind didn’t take long to engage. “As we said before, a woman can learn many useful things a man cannot, due to her gender.”

“The plan doesn’t work unless you also take on the woman’s role the entire time you’re in Brandenburg-Prussia. And one foreign woman simply doesn’t travel alone with five men.” Aramis spoke with excruciating logic. He too was all too conscious of the potentially disastrous repercussions of whatever course of action they finally settled on. “Are you prepared to do that, Laurel?”

“*Oui*,” she replied after an intense moment. “However, we must all take on roles that are suited to the situation, then. Either Yvette or I will have to be a lady’s maid. The other of us will play a noblewoman from another country other than France or Brandenburg-Prussia.”

“I’ll be the lady’s maid, Laurel.” Yvette suddenly appeared in the room and approached the men and woman. “I am fluent in no other language than my native one, except for a little Italian and Latin. You, on the other hand, could perfectly play the British noblewoman.”

“And the rest of our roles?” Athos pressed for more details.

“Are any of you fluent in German and the Prussian culture?” Only Aramis was. Apparently, his mother had been a wealthy Prussian noblewoman. Laurel noted the detail and asked another question. “Are any of you fluent in the British language and customs?”

“I can speak English well if that’s what you’re after,” Porthos said, switching deftly from French to English for a moment before

returning to French. “Still, I’d be a much better sailor or ship’s captain.” Porthos tapped his finger against his lip, more animated than he had been in quite a while. “I believe Athos’ stepmother was a British woman and that Athos is very fluent in all that rigmarole.” Athos confirmed Porthos’ information.

“Okay, here’s the idea then,” Laurel began, and everyone focused his or her attention on the woman. “Porthos is a British ship captain and merchant who has business with my brother, who is Athos. Which explains why he is traveling with us. D’Artagnan is another of our servants who also is quite adept at being a bodyguard. However, he speaks very little other than French because he immigrated to England from Calais.” At this point D’Artagnan almost protested his proposed role and then realized that there was no other role he could safely play.

“And you and Aramis?” D’Artagnan asked instead of bemoaning his fate.

That, she wasn’t quite sure of. It really was the weak point of her plan. It was Aramis who spoke. “I could be a suitor Athos is considering bestowing his sister’s hand upon. And he has just now decided to travel to my homeland to see if my suit is favorable.”

Laurel frowned and then quickly wiped the scowl from her face. It was very workable and not unrealistic. “What interest would a Prussian have in an English woman, and why would my brother consider the proposal?”

“Your brother has only recently become ennobled.” Aramis’ mind raced as the seeds of the idea took off. “He wants a title and influence behind his name. My family could potentially offer that. As for me, I want money to refinance my lands and expand my holdings, which were depleted by my late brother’s gambling and neglect. You would provide that with your handsome dowry,” the *duc* concluded, and Yvette and her brother both whistled in admiration at the hastily concocted plan. It could work.

“Then we are agreed?” Athos asked, and each person assented. “Very well, let’s make our preparations. As soon as Laurel—my sister,” he corrected, getting himself accustomed to the new role, “is well enough to travel, we go.”

Yvette walked slowly to the streamside where Laurel sat, gazing off into the distance. She’d already long finished her bath, and Yvette could swear the woman hadn’t moved in hours. A

breeze tugged at her hat, but the hat remained firmly in place as Yvette sat herself next to the older woman, finding a spot to sit that wouldn't get her breeches wet. Very soon both she and Laurel would be exchanging their men's clothing for proper feminine attire; she wondered how Laurel would handle the change.

"What have you been thinking about so hard, Laurel?" Yvette finally questioned her friend after several minutes had gone by, and the only sign that Laurel was even alive was the slow rise and fall of her chest.

The *marquise* turned her head toward Yvette while the rest of her body remained motionless.

"I was trying to figure out how to better make this plan work."

"The one we have isn't good enough?"

Laurel shrugged her shoulders. "I don't honestly know. I do know that someone was trying to kill us, so the faster we get out of here the better off we'll be, for in our new identities it is much less likely we'll be recognized by whoever was following us."

"So you think you're holding everything up." It was hardly a question.

Laurel raised her hand to her chin and looked the other woman straight in the eyes. "I know I'm holding everything up, and that is dangerous. I was looking for a way to reduce the danger and get us on our way to rescuing Anne. *Dites donc*—to even find out where Anne is." Laurel's brow furrowed in frustrated contemplation as she once again racked her mind for a workable solution.

"So you're saying you want us to split up," Yvette concluded softly.

Laurel whirled around bodily to face the other woman, broken out of her trance and unnatural stillness. "I hadn't thought of that," she admitted, dumbfounded at her own glaring oversight.

The woman pushed herself to her feet as quickly as her abused body would allow her. She took solace in the fact that her face hardly hurt today, and the bruise was well on its way to healing.

Looking down at Porthos' sister, she declared, "That's it, Yvette. I should have thought of it sooner."

"What's it?" Yvette inquired, but it was like asking the air, for all Laurel did was urge Yvette to come along with her so she

could have some moral support while she presented her proposition to the musketeers.

Ignoring the aches in her body, the *marquise* jogged toward D'Artagnan, calling out to him before he could disappear into the woods. He pivoted around and came toward the quickly moving woman. She stopped in time to avoid running into him but only by a hair. Animated, she grabbed his arm in her left hand, her blue eyes sparkling and flashing, "D'Artagnan, where are the others?"

D'Artagnan let out an odd chuckle. It was unusual to see Laurel behave in such a carefree manner, not at all worried about being defensive as she so often was. It really suited her. "As far as I know they're still in the shelter discussing. . . . Actually, between you and me, more like arguing over the merits of different political philosophies."

"Okay," she said, but it seemed as if she was telling herself rather than acknowledging the musketeer.

Laurel tugged at his arm, pulling him toward the dwelling, more or less encouraging him to follow her. He supposed he could have easily resisted, but he stumbled and then hurried along behind her, catching sight of Yvette as he hurried along. "What's going on?" he asked the other woman.

"I wish I knew," Yvette confessed, and then they were in the shelter, and Laurel was breaking up the debate and swiftly hustling the musketeers into the next room and around the table.

Before anyone realized what had happened or had time to take in the events, the six companions were seated around the round table, and Laurel was leaning her elbows on the hard wood.

"Hey," Porthos threw both his hands up, palms facing toward his companions, "easy, *mam'selle*. Slow down. Even if you're raring to go, it'd be nice for the rest of us to have a moment to catch our breath and focus our attention on something new."

"Sorry," she mumbled in a wholly endearing way. The woman was excited and anxious and many other things her companions couldn't really name, but it was a side of her they hadn't much seen.

"I think we're ready now," Athos spoke, signaling for her to begin by letting them know what in the world was going on.

Laurel plunged right in. "With Yvette's help I've thought of a better way we can get our plan started without the necessity of waiting for me to get better. And it would also strengthen our

position.” With those words, she captured everyone’s attention, and Aramis wondered if he was going to like this change. If it was anything like the change she had made to their plan in Calais a year or so ago, he doubted he would.

* * * * *

“So we’re agreed then?” Athos waited for each of his companions to confirm, and they did so. “All right then, Porthos, you leave for the nearest port as soon as your horse is ready.”

“Right.” The large man nodded. “And I make haste to get on a ship headed for Danzig. From there, I’ll head to the rendez-vous point in Brandenburg-Prussia. That way I can cover my tracks, and people will be more likely to believe our story.”

“He’s got it, folks,” Aramis commented while Athos ordered D’Artagnan to help Porthos get on his way.

“Don’t forget,” Laurel called before Porthos and D’Artagnan could leave the room, “that you’re looking for James and his sister, Laura—not Athos and Laurel.” Porthos winked at her and assured her that he’d remember so long as they remembered he was an honorable merchant and sailor called David.

As the two musketeers left, Athos switched his attention to Aramis. “When can you be ready to depart?”

“Give me about three or four hours, and I can be ready to be off. Actually, I will probably need less time than that.”

Athos nodded, telling him to go ahead and do so. “And you’re sure that you’ll have no problem sneaking into Brandenburg-Prussia unnoticed.”

“Positive,” Aramis said firmly, as only a man well aware of his talents, yet devoid of arrogance, could. “I’ll get in and establish my identity and see what I can find out. About ten days from now, I’ll meet James’ party in the prearranged location, and we’ll take the rest from there.”

“All right.” That took care of it. Athos said, “Good luck, *herr* Johan.”

Aramis acknowledged his old friend’s wishes of luck and ducked from the room, leaving Athos, Laurel and Yvette alone. Laurel did not stick around long, however. She exited the dwelling in a rush, following Aramis. “Aramis,” she called, and he stopped and turned to face her. She blinked several times.

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The young *marquise* wasn't quite sure why she'd come after him. Maybe she was doubting how safe it was for him to do as she had suggested. But that was foolish. Amongst other things, the *duc* was very good at blending in, and he'd be able to make ample use of those talents in Brandenburg-Prussia without any problem.

"*Oui?* I'm listening," he prompted softly when she said nothing. "Was there something you forgot to mention earlier?"

His gaze was steady upon her, and she shook her head. "*Non.* Only, I wish you much luck, and go with God, Aramis."

Good luck and God bless indeed. "*Merci, mademoiselle,*" he replied, saluting her smartly and stepping away. Laurel stood, motionless, and he turned to her one more time. His eyes sparkled as if saying, "You didn't think I'd leave with that sort of paltry farewell?" Deftly, he lifted her hand to his lips and bid her adieu. This time he really did leave.

* * * * *

Gerard pushed the sealed letter under Constance's face, and she glanced at it, once again thankful that being in the queen's service had taught her a passable amount of reading and writing skills. Before that time, all she'd been able to do was read and write her own name. She dismissed Gerard, thanking him politely.

Absently, Constance tapped the letter on the desk. Who could it be from? She wished it were from D'Artagnan, but that was highly unlikely. And she'd already received a letter from Louis XIII that pressed for details of how his wife's journey went and inquired after *sa majesté's* health and, more importantly, the health of the unborn child.

As best as she could, she'd written back to Louis, telling him the expected niceties: The queen was tired after her voyage and was now resting quietly. Her stay at Langeac seemed to be agreeing with her and so forth. It had, however, been harder than she had expected to write those lies to Anne's husband, and Constance dearly hoped that the king had not told or let Richelieu know that Anne was supposedly at Langeac. There was no telling what the cardinal might do had Louis given Richelieu that piece of information.

Constance continued toying with the letter, concluding she'd really rather not open it, but that was not an option—so she

delayed, procrastinating as she always did when a task was not to her liking. All things considered, the woman rather liked it here at Langeac. It was peaceful, and the country was beautiful as well as very secluded from the outer world. It was little wonder that Laurel had been able to secret herself here for nearly two years without anyone knowing.

Actually, she almost liked this place better than living in the palace in Paris. There was certainly more freedom, and it was much more relaxed—that is, when one wasn't trying to pretend the queen was staying here when in reality she'd been kidnapped.

With a delicate sigh she broke the seal on the message and read it several times, and slowly, before she could make out and understand each word and sentence.

Mademoiselle Constance:

I have received very little favorable news thus far—very little news at all. No luck yet in finding your friend. Regretfully, someone has been trying to kill our mutual friends.

However, they have assured me that they have the situation well under control and are ready to embark on the next phase of their journey. I hope this letter finds you in good health, and may He watch over you. I hope to hear from you soon.

Your obedient servant,
Compton.

Constance's hands shook as she let the letter fall from her hands. There had been an attempt on D'Artagnan's, Laurel's, and the other musketeers' lives—from what she could gather.

Compton seemed to be indicating that there was still someone pursuing them with the intention of doing them harm.

Why, oh, why hadn't she considered the danger of having both her fiancé and one of her best friends go off on a mission like this? She should have tried to talk Laurel out of it at least.

Then again, Laurel was unbelievably bullheaded and impossible to talk out of anything once she'd set her mind to it, so there wasn't much she could have done. Plus, Laurel really was

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good at this international intrigue business, maybe even better than anyone else she'd ever known, including the musketeers.

So, they had the situation well under control. Not likely, she harrumphed as she stood and paced around the room in mincing steps. The waiting and the worrying were going to send her to her grave prematurely. But there was no other option unless she tried to pursue them. That definitely was not a viable option.

She grabbed the letter and stuffed it in a drawer before she swept from the room and headed for the stables. She needed a ride, a long ride, to steady her nerves. Later, she'd think of what to write Compton.

* * * * *

Anne didn't like Eva either. The woman was no better than her son, Friedrich. Worse, almost, for she followed her son blindly and did exactly what he requested of her, and Eva was smart enough to know better. Did the woman never exercise her mind nor her opinions?

The queen of France leaned against the windowsill and looked out the open minuscule window. The crisp, pungent smell of autumn was in the air. Already the days were drawing shorter, and it wouldn't be long before the leaves turned and fell and the days became downright cold.

Being at *Prinz* Frederick William's court was better than the last place she had been, somewhere near Strausberg. That much she grudgingly conceded; at least here she had a window even if she was secreted in some unknown tower room, and the only ones who knew of her presence were Eva, the *prinz*, a handful of guards, and, well, Friedrich.

Anne splayed her delicate hands atop her rounded abdomen, wondering how much more she would increase before this child was born. Already she was feeling sluggish on her feet and heavy, and her ankles were hurting. Swelling. At least she was feeling much better and was no longer throwing up. Nor was Friedrich here to pester her, but the midwife had departed, her duty successfully discharged. At least the Prussian woman had been company, and Anne missed her beautiful voice humming and singing the most delightful songs in German. So what if she hadn't

been able to understand more than a few words and phrases of them. They had been well crafted and well sung.

Going home would be so . . . Startled, she paused and glanced down at her abdomen.

Once again she felt it—the light kicking flutter against her stomach and hand. Could it be her baby? Her baby that was moving, alive inside of her? What a wondrous notion. Anne’s hands fell to her sides, and she slowly made her way to the center of the room, standing a long moment before sitting herself in the chair. She had no idea how many days or weeks it had been since she’d been seized from Paris. For a while she’d been too sick to notice much passage of time, and her windowless room hadn’t exactly helped her judge how many days had gone by.

The sound of a clanking lock alerted Anne to the fact that the door to her prison was being opened. Instinctively, she pulled herself up straight and collected her wits so that she was the perfect picture of a monarch and leader despite the circumstances.

A short, slight, grey-haired woman entered the Spartan chamber and favored the queen with a malicious and piercing glare. Anne did not outwardly flinch at Eva’s glare, though inwardly she shrank from the woman. Who had corrupted whom? The mother the son, or the son the mother? Not that it particularly mattered in the end.

“I trust your majesty has made herself comfortable,” Eva said, her French quite heavily accented with a Germanic burr that resembled so closely the Austrian dialect she had learned.

“As well as can be expected,” Anne allowed, smiling with a smile that was obviously false. “If that is all you came here to check on, I must inform you that I am quite tired and would like a bit of rest.”

“Of course, *votre majesté*,” Eva said smoothly. “But keep in mind the next time you do not finish an entire meal you will be force-fed.”

Eva left with as little ceremony as she had come, and Anne stewed helplessly. Always, someone was trying to control her life and its every aspect. Louis may not have liked her, but he did basically leave her to herself and let her do much as she pleased, more so than most queens were permitted. Still, she would have liked more, though affection was probably too much to ask for.

The noise of the festive party—it was one celebrating relative peace and stability after the latest burst of war and the somewhat recent acquisition of Pomerania—had died down as two men, one a noble much favored by Frederick William Hohenzollern and the other a tall stranger, entered the hall.

Speculative whispers sped through the assembled notables, and all eyes watched as the men approached the *prinz*, side by side, almost. The larger man's longer stride did keep him marginally ahead of the powerful young nobleman. Several ladies and gentlemen melted aside, and Frederick William turned his eyes to the two men who bowed before him. So the man was back from Berlin and apparently his father, Georg Wilhelm, still lived. But it couldn't be long now before Georg wasted away, and Frederick William ascended the throne; thus he kept close tabs on the occurrences in Berlin despite his father's strictures.

"*Herzog Erik*." Frederick nodded his head slightly in acknowledgment of the nobleman's greeting. "It is a welcome surprise to see you back at court so soon. I thought that you would not be returning for another six or seven days."

"I concluded my business more quickly than I had thought," Erik replied rapidly in German and then gestured to his companion. "May I present to you David Jones of Dorchester, England and captain of the *Virginia*. He has recently come through Danzig to do business in our great country."

The young yet commanding *prinz* nodded, assessing the large man who stood before him and topped him by a good head. His dark brown beard was neatly cropped and a sash was tied around his waist. He had the aura of a man drawn to the sea and the mystique of a pirate.

"Do you speak German?" Frederick asked the man, and in very faulty German the man replied that he spoke little other than English and French. Porthos now heartily wished he had a better understanding of the German language other than a few phrases and a plethora of curses.

Switching to English, Frederick William said slowly and deliberately, "What business brings you through Danzig and to Königsberg?"

The *prinz*'s shrewd, assessing eyes never left the presumed Englishman. Finally a jovial smile broke across Porthos' face. "I was invited by a *Herr Johan*, who claimed he has a proposition for

me. He is expecting to come into a large sum of money soon and has offered to fund an expedition of mine.”

The *prinz* was silent for a moment, so Erik spoke up in rather good English. “And where does *Herr* Johan expect to get this money?”

“I do believe he said he was soon to contract a marriage with a very rich, young, but low-ranking noblewoman,” Porthos responded, a twinkle in his eye.

“So you have arranged a meeting with *Herr* Johan?” The mock English captain nodded, and Frederick William was quiet only a moment before he also asked, “And where and when are you to be meeting him?”

“He said to meet him in Berlin.” The large man shrugged. “As for when, he told me as soon as possible.” No need to say he had gotten sidetracked by Erik. Affable Erik had a habit of doing that to other people’s plans, whether he intended to or not.

Frederick William deigned to smile and fired some German words rapidly at Erik. For a few minutes the men talked and Porthos waited quietly, not understanding more than a few words that they were saying. Suddenly they were silent, and the *prinz* turned his attention to the captain once again. “Good. Then if you’ll be so kind as to grace us with your presence for the next week or two I will have my servants prepare a room for you.” David, actually Porthos, knew that to turn the hospitality down would get him thrown out of the country at the very least.

Now how the heck was he going to get in touch with Aramis and the others? There was no way he’d be able to make the *rendez-vous* now. Politely, Porthos replied he’d be honored, and Erik and a servant saw to it the man was delivered to a well-appointed chamber where he could clean up before dinner.

* * * * *

“No.” Athos’ voice was unyielding as he spotted Laurel fooling with the bodice of the dress and squirming in the sidesaddle that neither she nor Rebelle were accustomed to.

Her hand fell from the bodice and back to the reins, and she forced herself to present the illusion that she was very comfortable riding as she was. They’d been in Brandenburg-Prussia only two full days, and two full days in a sidesaddle was already becoming

more than she could really tolerate. But Laurel put up with it anyhow, for she had no other choice.

No one had questioned their story, but it depended upon her accurate portrayal of an Englishman's sister who had never before journeyed abroad. Which meant she had to do nothing short of pretend to love the sidesaddle, for an English noblewoman would have been raised on it.

"James." She addressed Athos in English, and both D'Artagnan and Yvette glanced at their two companions. They hated this dearly. Neither of them had a good grasp of English, and Athos and Laurel spoke nothing else unless they were absolutely sure that they could not be overheard.

"When are we to be meeting my prospective betrothed?"

"Soon," he replied tersely, glancing at a Prussian fighter who passed them by, eyeing them like he didn't appreciate their kind. "Within the next day, maybe two. You do not have a problem with that, dear sister, do you?"

Her eyes narrowed and Athos knew Laurel was almost ready to sock him for playing the condescending, protective brother. But, actually, she'd managed to stay pretty well controlled and might be labeled as a basically well-behaved and slightly headstrong young woman. "No, James. I just would like to be prepared when we do meet him."

"We will be. If all goes well, Laura," Athos said, "then we'll see him in Potsdam or Berlin very shortly." Laurel nodded, and Athos and Laurel continued on, trailed by Yvette and D'Artagnan. Longingly, Laurel gazed at Athos' sword. What she wouldn't give to get her sword out of her pack and strap it around her waist. It was so very tempting . . .

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The author would very much appreciate it if you would send an e-mail with your comments about any of the books. Send comments to laurelanlass@forhonor.com

Books previously published

***For Honor: An Adventure of What Might Have Been:
Book One of By Honor Bound*** by Kat Jaske
Historical fiction, swashbuckling action/adventure

. . . 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. . . .

A swashbuckling tale of adventure and spies, traitors and sword fighting, with a dollop of romance added. Set in seventeenth-century France, this action-packed story features headstrong Laurel d'Anlass—as the likeable, feisty heroine—who

has been plunged into her father's world of international intrigue and into a reluctant alliance with several of the king's musketeers. Together, these mismatched heroes must attempt to foil a plot that could topple France's king and also transform the very face of Europe.

Books coming soon.

Check www.forhonor.com for availability.

Righting Time: Book Three of By Honor Bound

by Kat Jaske

Science-fiction, action/adventure. Jala travels eight hundred seventy three years into the past to enlist the aid of Laurel and the musketeers.

. . . Panic did no good. That point had been vividly driven home to her by harsh experience over the course of her ten years with the Guild of History and Time Observation. Before long, the time fluctuations would manifest and the true time—her time or her present—might be inextricably altered. Right now, there was still some chance to try for correction and containment. “Find me the date of the first time fluctuation in the timeline and pinpoint the locale on the main screen.” Daryl nodded and did so swiftly. The trio turned to the screen as the map blipped into place. It was a very old map. At a guess, Keith would place it at least eight hundred years old.

“Old-world France?” Jala questioned, and Daryl nodded as the woman came close to the screen.

“France in 1641, eight hundred and seventy-three years ago, to be exact,” Daryl enlightened his companions. Jala punched a button and another section of the screen leapt to life. United States of America, 2060. Those dates were linked. Linked very closely. Jala's eyebrows came together in deep thought. Without needing to be told, Daryl set about determining exactly how they were related.

At the same moment, Keith and Jala lifted their heads and looked at one another. “Something or someone from 1640 or 1641

was thrust forward into the year 2060,” they said together. “Make that, a person from 1640 was thrust forward, but a secondary big-time disturbance occurred in 1641, then was manifested further in 2060,” Jala said as she scanned over the data Daryl had discovered.

“But who was pulled from the seventeenth?” Daryl asked. . . .

Science-fiction and adventure with a creative twist mark this unforgettable story. The author weaves a tale that becomes so intriguing and thought-provoking, your whole concept of time may be altered. How does one go about finding someone in time when you don't even know who you are looking for? What you do know is that whatever this person did in their future of 2060 is slowly winding its way to the future, your present, and you could very well cease to exist. Jala must enlist some help from the past, from people you are quite familiar with from previous books, or people you will soon come to know and love if this is your first book. Laurel discovers powers she never knew she had, but if she fails to learn how to control and use these powers, the past, present, and future could be altered with tragic consequences. The ending will bring tears to your eyes, tears that are somehow sad and happy at the same time. There will be more stories to bring back your favorite characters (friends) again and again.

Out of Phase: Book Four of By Honor Bound

by Kat Jaske

Science fiction, action/adventure with some of the same people you loved in *For Honor*.

. . . Jean-Pierre met his father's eyes for the first time, looking down on the man just an inch or two, perhaps three. Porthos read the unspoken message there—the one about whether he really wanted that information said here. Porthos nodded his head in response to the unasked question, and the young man took a deep breath. “I'm your son.”

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

Porthos finally found his voice. “How old are you?”

Gambit for Love of a Queen

“Two and twenty,” was the automatic response. Nearly three and twenty, but Jean-Pierre wasn’t going to quibble.

“Who’s your mother?” The whole room seemed to wait tensely for the man’s response to that question. Laurel met Jean-Pierre’s gaze, and in that instant the young man knew that she already knew who he was and *when* he was from. Even with her powers somewhat latent, the beautiful *duchesse* knew.

“Cynthia,” he said softly.

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

This story has everything for the science-fiction fan. Aliens, time travel, wars for survival of the universe, and powers of the mind not yet even dreamed of. The love story of two people from the past woven throughout has implications for survival of the human race itself. The author has plots and subplots going on in the far future, near future, and the distant past. The outcome of each affects all the others. True science-fiction fans will find the story challenging, thought-provoking, and just plain fun to read.



Story-teller, teacher, and national award-winning poet, Kat Jaske

(www.forhonor.com) was a winner of her high school top-five senior thesis award for her novel. She has bachelor degrees in English and psychology from Wake Forest University, earned certificates from Jean Paul Valéry University in France, has a master of education from UNLV, speaks fluent French, and currently teaches English and French in Las Vegas.

Along with her writing and storytelling, she enjoys fencing, singing, and playing piano and is an avid runner who helped the Upper Arlington High School team win the Ohio cross-country state championship. Of historical interest, her

grandfather was a Dixon High School friend of President Ronald Reagan, and Jaske has put 23 pages about Reagan from the 1928 high school yearbook on her website, www.forhonor.com.