don't want to fight alone anymore

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Summary

Third installment, set after 'a cruel kind of careful'.

Basically a re-write of Season 2, where events have changed thanks to all the previous changes in the series.

Notes

Hi! I told Athena1008 that I'd write an alternate Season 2 in this AU months ago. Then I got really busy at work and writing anything became pretty much impossible. I'm sorry I disappeared for so long, but here it is! I hope you enjoy it! This is for you. Thanks for all your incredible reviews <3

Just a few notes:
1. Where things happen exactly the same as in canon, I'm mostly not going to bother rewriting it, and certainly not word for word. That would be boring :) So if you don't see something, you can assume that none of the important parts changed.
2. As you can probably guess, in some cases, the events of the episode are going to be pretty much exactly the same. Other times, they'll be wildly different, because Athos is Captain, Milady's an ally, Rochefort is already dead (and died in a different way than in canon), Treville's in a different position, and so on. Please don't poke at it too hard, I've done my best, but I didn't have 1500 extra hours to rewatch everything multiple times and
try and figure out the logic of a series that doesn't always have much logic.
3. Athos and Milady are going to come across as if they have a lot of issues. This is partly
because a) they do have a lot of issues, and b) each episode is set a few weeks apart (as near
as I can tell) so I haven't written much about the relative periods of calm and quiet.
4. I toned down anything too horrifying about childbirth or newborn babies, in the
traditional style of all TV and literature, because I didn't want to gross out anyone else or
myself. I'm aware my depiction of it all is considerably nicer, cleaner and easier than the
real thing.
5. Each episode will probably have two chapters, because they ended up being longer than I
thought. The first episode won't have anything because all the events there happened earlier
in the AU, thanks to Richelieu's earlier death triggering events months before the Queen
gave birth instead of immediately after.
Milady wakes early – it’s difficult not to, these days. The child inside her seems to kick near-constantly, but it has an especial fondness for the time just before dawn, and never lets her miss it. Her wonder at the feeling of it moving inside her hasn’t entirely dissipated, but it’s certainly dimmed. She misses sleeping late. Today she’s even wearier than usual, having been woken by the child kicking or by nature’s call repeatedly throughout the night. Still, she can doze all day if she wishes, regaining every bit of her lost sleep.

She rests her hand on the ever-growing curve of her stomach and lets her eyes slide closed again. After a minute, Athos’s hand settles just below her own, and she smiles to herself. His face is half-buried in her hair, and she doubts he’s really awake, but Athos seems to be able to sense the child moving even when he’s asleep. He’s in awe of it, and in awe of her for carrying it inside her, and in awe at being allowed to sleep beside her in this comfortable bed and wake with her most mornings – really, her husband spends half his time lost in stupefied amazement, these days.

The rest of the time, he seems more of a mother hen than she could ever be. He worries about her lifting things, her falling down steps, her being jostled in crowds, her not being strong enough to survive the birth. She shouldn’t have taken him to the midwife with her for her last visit, but she did, and now she’s reaping the consequences. At first, the woman was a little stiff – if men are concerned enough about their wives to accompany them, then they normally end up insisting on doctors instead of midwives, assuming men are wiser even when it comes to women’s mysteries. She didn’t welcome losing a client. But Athos acted like the midwife was barely short of a prophet, full of arcane wisdom he couldn’t hope to comprehend, practically begging for whatever assistance she could give him in understanding. Milady’s never seen her dry, clever husband so completely give way to another’s judgement before. By the end of it, the midwife was all but besotted with Athos, and Milady was thoroughly annoyed. His concern warms her, of course it does, and she understands where some of it comes from – his own mother died in childbirth, delivering a stillborn – but she’s no weakling.

Athos believes that if she avoids any kind of exertion, if she eats and drinks exactly as the midwife recommends, if she treats every suggestion as a holy commandment, the birth will go well. He thinks of it almost as some kind of bargain with the universe, from what she can tell. She doesn’t think that way. No amount of lying still on her back (because it allows the child to focus on growing in a way it can’t when she’s moving about, according to the midwife) or drinking milk with every meal (because it will create a stock for her to feed the child with, according to the midwife) will somehow guarantee safety. In any case, her child is strong – in her seven months of pregnancy, she’s done any number of dangerous things, and been subjected to bodily harm a few times, but she can still feel it kicking inside her. Her child is every bit as much of a fighter as she is, and she forces herself to believe that, because she can’t afford for Athos’s obsessive concern to infect her as well. She has enough of her own fears as it is – not that she knows how to share them with him.

They lie still together for a long time, his warm breath ruffling her hair, his warmer hand resting on the child, the morning sun slowly rising and shedding light across the sheets. The only movement is the babe kicking. Then, finally, Athos yawns and rolls from his side to his back, blinking up at the ceiling. “Good morning,” he says sleepily. Then he seems to wake up slightly, adding with a bit more urgency, “How do you feel?”

“Pregnant,” she says, resisting the urge to roll her eyes at the concern in his voice. “But otherwise fine.”
From anyone else, it’s polite small talk. From her husband, it’s a panicked enquiry.

Well, perhaps not just from her husband. Whenever she sees Aramis, he pelts her with interested questions about her health as well. There’s something strange going on there, she thinks, and it’s not just to do with his somewhat excessive preoccupation with the wellbeing of her child. She’s never had much to do with Aramis – when she worked for the Cardinal, she focused her efforts on d’Artagnan, after all, and Athos was always her obsession. Porthos and Aramis she dismissed as simple. She decided that one thought with his fists, and the other with his – well, whatever polite euphemism springs to mind – and that was all. Now that she’s spent so much time with them, she thinks that her previous opinion might have been doing both a disservice, but Aramis catches her attention much more than Porthos. Porthos has troubles, but he speaks of them often – he’s quite open. Aramis, on the other hand, has a secret. That alone she would hardly care about, but it seems he shares that secret with her husband, and she can tell it troubles Athos. Sometimes when she watches them talk in quiet, fierce undertones, she feels the urge to tell Aramis off for whatever it is he’s doing – her husband is quite stressed enough without the additional weight. Perhaps Athos is angry about it as well, since she’s noticed that Aramis cleans stables more than the average Musketeer and is rarely assigned to the relatively enjoyable, comfortable duty of guarding their monarchs.

She makes a mental note to look into it at some point – after all, it’s not as if she has much else to fill her time with. Athos comes over every evening he can spare, and stops by quickly for midday meal as well most days – partly to check on her, partly to make sure she’s eating and drinking as directed by the midwife, and partly just to spend every minute with her that he can. But the rest of his time is filled by being Captain of the King’s Musketeers – it’s not a job for the lazy – and she’s alone in her new house. Well, not alone – she has a housemaid who does the cleaning, a footman to run errands and answer the door, a cook who keeps the larder stocked and cooks the meals, and a nurse for the child who at present fills her time with sewing clothes for the babe and helping the maid clean. That leaves Milady little to do besides read, wander from room to room, wait for Athos to arrive, and go slowly out of her mind with boredom. Is it any surprise she breaks up her day with other activities whenever she can find them?

Perhaps today she’ll go and gossip with the palace maids. Some of them meet regularly in the dress store of Madame Elaine near the Louvre, who worked with the maids many years ago before she married and who allows them to use her backroom to gather and socialise. They’ve welcomed Milady easily to their number. She’s discovered that a belly swollen with child makes women who might otherwise be suspicious coo and offer immediate friendship. She dislikes that they also feel the need to touch her stomach continually, but it’s survivable. They think she’s newly arrived in Paris and lacks company – and, she supposes, they’re not entirely wrong. The information they share so casually is her first priority, though. The maids see everything, after all, and while she can’t use what she hears at present it’s always best to stay informed.

Athos stands up, stretching, and begins the work of strapping all his weapons back on. He always places them as far from the bed as possible, as if he’s worried he’ll stab her in his sleep. Given some of his nightmares, perhaps that’s a real risk. She has her own knives stowed a bit closer though.

“Busy day today?” she says idly.

He shakes his head. “A few small tasks for the Dauphin’s christening tomorrow – escorting ambassadors, that sort of thing. But apart from that it should be slow. I’ll be by at midday… that is… if you would like…” He’s slightly nervous, as he always is – worried about intruding, about pushing her too quickly, but also unwilling to give up time he could’ve spent with her. They’re both a little cautious around each other, right now.
“I’ll look forward to it,” she says firmly. It’s the truth, and not just due to boredom – she loves sharing food with him, chatting about their mornings, tentatively discussing the child and their future. On very slow days, they can even curl up on the settee for a while, her head in his lap, his fingers combing through her unbound hair. The servants probably find them ridiculous.

He will, of course, try to persuade her to drink milk and eat to excess, and attempt to press on her money for the food despite her not needing it in the slightest at present. To her own surprise, Treville (now First Minister) did end up giving her the money promised by Rochefort, more than doubling her savings. She thought he’d consider it preposterous to reward her further for assassinating members of the King’s council, but he didn’t even hesitate. At first, she thought he saw it as recompense for her help against Rochefort, but then she realised he actually felt guilty about allowing her to risk her life and that of her child to kill Rochefort. King and country come first to Treville, and he’s not above risking women and children for that, but he doesn’t like that he nearly got a pregnant woman killed by ordering her to stay in France and letting her come with them to that final confrontation.

Anyway, whatever the reasons, she’s rich, at least by most people’s standards (compared to a comte’s wealth, of course, it’s not quite as impressive). As a result, even with a nice house, four servants employed, and whatever potential disasters she makes allowance for, it will be years before she starts feeling the need to count livres. Since she got it in such a lump sum, she was even able to buy her house and invest some of the money, providing more security. Athos doesn’t like the feel of living off her even slightly, though (even though he doesn’t technically live with her at all), so she allows him to give her a share of his wages, which will make the money stretch out even longer. He also likes to bring her gifts, whether expensive or cheap, and it’s embarrassing how each one makes her melt, however practical or foolish it is.

Sometimes he even brings her forget-me-nots, like he would have once long ago – although he always has a slight expression of anxiety when he does, as if afraid she’ll throw them to the ground and berate him for bringing them. After all, the meaning they’ve attached to the flowers is much darker than most – pressed and exchanged for a broken promise, held by a woman seconds from hanging, used as a signature by a killer. But there are other meanings – earlier ones and new ones – and they will always be her favourite flower, the one she wears in her hair, has embroidered into her clothes, has embossed on her knife sheaths. He’s cautious about giving them, but she loves it whenever he does.

He kisses her farewell, and that, at least, neither of them are cautious in.

Athos finds a faint smile has taken over his face as he strides towards the Garrison. He’s smiling a lot more these days. He knows he’s more even-tempered with the men, too, and they find it reassuring. He sometimes worries he’s neglecting his duties for his personal life, but if he is, no one has so much as implied that to him. He thinks he spends as much or even more time at the Garrison as he used to. Although he fills his evenings with Milady, he’s cut down his drinking to the occasional bottle every now and then with his friends, instead of binging regularly, which frees up a lot of time. This also makes him more effective when he is there, since he’s not nursing an ever-present hangover.

The first week he spent drying himself out again was certainly unpleasant. It was one of the requirements he set upon himself, now that he’s going to be a father – Anne didn’t ask it of him. She doesn’t even know. He didn’t want her to. He told her he would be busy with his duty for a few days and locked himself in the little room he uses for such things. She’s decided to give him a chance to be a father, and he wants to give her no reason to doubt that decision. Sobriety is,
strangely enough, one of the easiest steps to take. When he drank to excess, it was always for a reason, and while a lot of his guilt, pain and self-hatred remains, they aren’t the emotions most prevalent in his life at present. Joy, hope and terrible fear hold primacy, and while he sometimes craves alcohol to help with the latter, his wife’s presence is more effective. Well, for the most part – as strange as it sounds, sometimes her lack of fear increases his.

Apart from the occasional complaint about her sore back or feet, and one or two mentions of boredom, she’s been surprisingly positive about everything. She never gives any sign she regrets her choice to keep the child, even momentarily, or regrets staying in France with him. She never mentions the possibility of anything going wrong, never seems afraid of giving birth, never seems intimidated by what’s coming after. The staff sometimes imply to him that she’s been upset or in a bad mood that day, but she doesn’t show any negativity in his presence except for her usual light sarcasm, so perhaps it’s only boredom sharpening her tongue sometimes.

Basically, she’s a pillar of strength, and he knows he should take strength from that as well. Instead, he feels like her unconcern aggravates his own fears, while at the same time making them impossible to share. The stronger she is, the less he feels able to be weak in her presence, and the more dishonest he feels for downplaying his own fears. Oh, he’s sure he gives her indications – his excessive worry over her health, his obsessiveness with the midwife’s orders – but he doesn’t really talk to her about it. He wants to, he desperately wants to, but he won’t. How self-centred a person would he be if he tried to make this all about him? How selfish would he be to whine on about how scared he is? So he stays silent and afraid, and oddly guilty about that fear.

Today, though, he feels happy. He slept well. Anne seems healthy and strong. The world is good.

His happiness, however, shrivels and dies as he enters his office, replaced by suspicion. Porthos and Aramis, clearly in the middle of a furious argument, both look up with smiles so bright they have to be an attempt to soften a forthcoming blow.

“Captain!” Aramis says, looking manic. “We have a… slight problem. I wasn’t there, but -”

“Sure, lead with that,” Porthos mumbles, giving him a glare.

“- we appear to have lost the King,” Aramis finishes.

Athos runs the words through his head a few times, as if that will make them more comprehensible. “You did what?”

Porthos clears his throat. “Me and d’Artagnan were guarding him -”

“- and it seems he got an idea in his head to experience Paris -”

“- as a commoner, so we took him to a tavern -”

“- but a fight broke out and now he and d’Artagnan are nowhere to be found.”

“I was keepin’ the mob from tearing them limb from limb,” Porthos says, looking sheepish. “I don’t know what happened or where they went, but they haven’t turned up again. I spent the whole night looking.”

Athos gets an immediate headache, pounding in his temples. “Why didn’t you come and fetch me?”

“You were at Milady’s,” Porthos says. “Didn’t want to disturb you.” It’s a blatant lie – obviously, what he wanted was to find the King before he had to tell anyone, even Athos.
“For future reference, if something like this happens, disturb me.” He nails the two of them with an indiscriminate glare. He doesn’t bother to rail at Porthos for taking the King to a tavern – it’s impossible to stop His Majesty when he gets the bit between his teeth – but he can certainly be annoyed he wasn’t alerted sooner. Milady’s footman has standing orders to come and grab him if a Musketeer shows up at her doors, regardless of what they’re doing.

God above, he’s going to have to go the Louvre and inform Treville and Her Majesty that the King is missing. That he’s been missing for hours.

“Run me through every detail,” he orders Porthos. Perhaps the King is lying under a table somewhere passed out, or hired a room to sleep it off in, or is currently ensconced in a brothel. If so, though, d’Artagnan should have come and found them, or at least paid someone to deliver a message. It’s not like the younger man not to check in and keep them informed.

‘Every detail’ proves to be unhelpfully few.

“Start back at the tavern,” he tells them, after he’s heard the whole thing, fighting the urge to thump his head repeatedly against his desk. “Check everything. I don’t care how many people you threaten or offend, we’ll deal with the complaints after we’ve cleaned up the current mess. I’ll go tell Her Majesty.”

And the day started so well.

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The talk with Treville and the Queen goes exactly as poorly as expected. She’s furious. By the end of it, Treville has stopped even trying to defend the Musketeers, Constance is shooting him looks of sympathy, and Athos fervently wishes for a strong drink. But they have a plan to buy them time, and Athos assures them that the Musketeers will use that time well.

He speaks to Chaput, the new Captain of the Red Guards, and has him send his people off to join the search. The Musketeers are already looking. Of course, none of them realise they’re looking for the King – he’s working with the assumption that finding d’Artagnan will allow them to find the King, so they’re all searching for him. He doesn’t even tell Captain Chaput, although for once, this has nothing to do with distrust – the new leader of the Red Guards was handpicked by Treville and is completely trustworthy, but he combines being a painfully bad liar with being utterly devoted to the King, and his reaction would give the truth away to everyone in minutes. They can’t let anyone realise the King is missing, and if they tell every guard and soldier in Paris, it’ll be common knowledge by midday.

Midday… he looks at the sky. He’s supposed to meet Milady now. For a moment he struggles between two duties. He should send a message, apologising for not turning up and explaining that he has much to do today. But he hates the thought of not seeing her, and he hates the thought of failing to meet her when he said he would, and God knows he needs to find some kind of a bright spot in this Hell of a day. Then he stiffens as it occurs to him – he at least needs to warn Milady about this. While he has absolute faith in Porthos, Aramis, and d’Artagnan (wherever he is), there’s always the chance the King is dead or out of their reach. If so, Her Majesty won’t have much choice but to write to her brother for help holding the country. It will be chaos in Paris, dangerous chaos. While he’s not sure they can make the connection, the Spanish also have more than a few reasons to want Milady dead for her part in recent events. She needs to know, so she can prepare to shift her household to somewhere in the countryside at short notice if the worst happens.

He surprises himself continually with how desperately, fiercely protective of her he feels, how terrified he is of something happening. It’s a miracle to have gotten her back, one he doesn’t
deserve. He keeps expecting that impossible blessing to be whisked away from him somehow. The world doesn’t give out blessings for free, after all: there is always a cost, and someday he knows it has to come due. He never deserved his wife’s love in the first place. He never deserved to know she was alive instead of dead by his hand. He certainly never deserved her forgiveness and willingness to try again. And then when you add in the child they’re expecting… it’s too many blessings, too much happiness, and he’s earned none of it. He spends every day waiting for the other shoe to drop. He’s had this kind of sublime happiness once before, after all, and it didn’t last.

So he heads for her house. The footman lets him in immediately, used to his constant visits, though he has no idea if the servants know he’s Milady’s husband or not. Probably not. If they disapprove of what must seem like an illicit relationship between a wealthy widow and a Musketeer, though, it never shows.

His own men don’t know quite what to make of Milady de Winter. Most of them remember the drama with d’Artagnan last year, the wild rumours that spread like lice through the Garrison: the infidelity, the fight in the square, the morning duel, Athos’s supposed death. Half a dozen even helped Richelieu arrest his wife after that fiasco, and know her face. But since they were told most of that was pretence for an overly-complicated secret mission, up to and including Athos attempting to assassinate the late Cardinal, they assumed the part about him having a wife who slept with his friend was a lie too, just to give an excuse for their falling out. After all, most of them had served with Athos for years, and never seen a hint of him having a wife. Her six-month-long disappearance after her arrest supported the idea she was nothing more than an actress playing the part of his wife, who vanished when the job was done.

Now, of course, she’s back, and her return has created some confusion. The rumour mill has judged it unlikely she’s really Athos’s wife – she’s been absent for too long, and doesn’t go by his name. Very few believe she ever had an affair with d’Artagnan, since they don’t seem over-familiar with each other, there’s no friction between Athos and d’Artagnan, and Athos doesn’t seem concerned about his woman straying. The persistent rumour that she worked for Richelieu is generally scorned – a woman? Really? Finally, a consensus formed – the theory is that she’s Athos’s mistress, who he asked to pretend to be his wife for that little charade, and who used to only visit Paris but has now taken up residency here to be near him. Possibly because Lord de Winter (whoever he is) decided to live separately from his wife now she’s having another man’s child, or perhaps because he met his maker. This technically makes her an adulterer and a fallen woman in their eyes, but since they’re Musketeers and not monks, there’s no judgement attached to this appraisal. Most of them would love a rich mistress of their own, married or not.

Athos isn’t sure if he should be doing something about these rumours – if it wasn’t for Porthos keeping him informed, after all, he would never have heard them in the first place. Part of him wants to tell everyone she’s his wife, announce it to the whole world for everyone to hear. But while that’s true, it also seems presumptuous – she promised to stay and try, and in return, he agreed to take things slowly. She’s his wife, she will always be his wife, but they don’t currently live as man and wife, not fully. Their situation is a work in progress, their position uncertain and fragile, and the last thing he wants to do is give Milady the idea he’s decided exactly what they are and exactly where they’re heading without discussing it with her. And besides, what right do any of his men have to know his personal affairs? They know as much as they need to.

She’s already at the table – he’s late. Her face lights up when she sees him, despite this, and he feels his own lips curve in response. She’s so impossibly lovely, his wife, however many sarcastic comments she makes about being unable to fit through doorways. She’s finally abandoned any pretence of wearing corsets, along with the cloak that hid her condition so completely. The airy, comfortable dresses she’s switched to seem to suit her, along with the flowing hair she plaits loosely most days.
Then her smile fades. She always seems able to tell when something’s wrong. “What’s the matter?”

“A hard day, that’s all. We can talk about it in a moment.” He’s not going to distract her from her meal with bad news – the midwife says keeping her well-fed is very important. He glances down at her plate – to his prejudiced eyes, it looks like she’s eaten hardly any of what she’s put there. He frowns.

With a sigh, she picks up a roll and tears into it. “Stop hovering, Athos, and sit down and grab something to eat. Food is a requirement for everyone, you know, not just me.”

“I could fetch you some more milk first,” he suggests, only half-teasing.

She snorts. “Now that’s something to look forward to about the birth. I won’t ever have to drink milk again. It’s ruined for me now, you know.”

“You don’t take the midwife’s orders very seriously,” he says. It’s the truth. She lets him worry about that kind of thing. Even when she does follow them, it’s clear she’s mostly humouring him.

“Athos, they’re… they’re like those talismans you buy on street corners,” she says dismissively. “They’re a way to feel like you can control the uncontrollable. Drinking gallons of milk will not guarantee I survive childbirth, spilling salt won’t curse the house, seeing an owl doesn’t mean we’ll have a daughter, and prayers are just hopeful lies. Some things you can’t affect, can’t change, however much you wish.”

Honestly, it’s not so far from his own beliefs, deep down, but he prefers to live in denial about that. He needs to believe there are things he can do, otherwise he’ll go mad with fear. With that in mind, he gets up and fills an ewer with milk.

She rolls her eyes at him, but pours herself a glass of it anyway.

The footman appears. “Milady? Captain? There are two Musketeers at the door, a monsieur Porthos and -”

“Let me guess, monsieur Aramis.” Milady lets the roll she just picked up drop and waves her hand at the footman. “You may as well let them in, then.” Any other Musketeers and she’d probably suggest he go out and speak to them in the street, but he thinks she has a sort of fondness for Porthos and Aramis – or at least a fondness for mocking them.

“Told you he’d be here,” Porthos says with satisfaction, being ushered in by the mildly appalled footman. He glances down at the somewhat overfull table (Athos isn’t alone in his conspiracy to keep Milady well-fed at all times, the servants are quite devoted to it too) with a brief expression of longing. The footman looks at Milady in case she wants him to fetch still more food from the kitchen and lay it out for her guests, but at a wave of her hand withdraws back to the entryway again.

“Sorry,” Aramis says. “But you did say we could disturb you at the house -”

“- if it was important, and I think at this point it’s all important -”

“- so we thought -”

“Are you secretly one person in two bodies?” Milady asks, apparently fascinated by this. She eyes Porthos, who seems a little distracted by the food still, then sighs and says, “Want a roll?”
“Yeah, thanks,” Porthos says, grabbing one immediately. He bites off a piece and says indistinctly, “Haven’t had time to eat yet today.”

“Then this must be an even bigger disaster than I thought,” Milady comments. “Does anyone want to fill me in? It’s not like I’ve got anyone to tell.”

There’s a pause, as all three of them exchange glances, then finally Porthos swallows his mouthful and admits, “Could be we’ve… misplaced… His Majesty.”

“You idiots lost the King?” Milady says, somewhere between appalled and amused. Amusement does seem to be winning out, however. “Have you checked everywhere? Where did you see him last?”

Aramis glares at her. “Yes, thanks, we did. It was a tavern. It turns out the proprietor has a deal with a mystery man – he guides drunks out into the alleyway and traps them there, and then they disappear.”

“What’s his side of the deal?”

“Not having his place burnt to the ground, apparently.” Aramis sighs.

“Man thought the drunks got taken for their cash and then dumped in the Seine,” Porthos continues. “But we checked the morgue, and there’s no sign of ‘em there, thank God.”

“Them?” Milady looks between them, then clearly does the math, blinking in realisation. “Ah. So d’Artagnan isn’t just absent because he’s afraid of entering my lair. I see.”

She doesn’t seem too worried about him, but that’s not surprising. D’Artagnan dislikes that Milady is staying in Paris, disapproves of Athos’s relationship with her, and doubts that her child has anything to do with Athos. He hasn’t said a word of this to his friend, but Athos knows anyway. It’s there in his eyes. There’s no doubt Milady can see it as easily as Athos, even though she hardly ever runs into him. There’s not much Athos can do besides ignore it and hope in time that d’Artagnan comes to terms with this. He doesn’t hope for a friendship between them – he’s not a fool – but a ceasing of open hostilities would be nice.

Athos watches as she flicks her eyes around the room thoughtfully and then bites her lip – clearly, she’s coming to the same conclusion he did, that if the King is dead she’ll need to leave Paris, at least for a while. He reaches out and takes her hand under the table, squeezing it for a moment. Milady returns the pressure, then pulls her hand away with a half-smile and uses it to pour herself another drink of milk. The resigned look she gives him screams you’re lucky I love you enough to drink this swill. A moment later, though, she gets lost in her own thoughts again, sipping distastefully at the milk as she presumably calculates how speedily she can get out of Paris and where she should go.

Athos sighs, reluctantly moving his attention back to the issue at hand. “So you have nothing,” he says, defeated.

“Got a theory,” Porthos says hesitantly. “There was a man at the morgue who had shackles. Thing is, didn’t look like a convict, from what we could tell.”

It takes him a moment. “That summer two years ago,” Athos says slowly. “When there were drunks and vagrants being snatched in the streets.”

“Yeah. Went on for months until the culprit was finally caught.”
Athos struggles, trying to remember the name, then gets it. As pickled as his brain was back then, his memory is generally reliable. “Sebastian LeMaitre.”

Milady chokes on her milk.

Athos reaches out and steadies her as she stops coughing and gets her breath back, and she looks up to find them all staring at her. It’s unlike Milady to react so dramatically to something, and even more unlike her to look guilty, so Athos knows immediately that the conversation’s going to get rapidly more unpleasant. “Do you know Sebastian LeMaitre?” he asks silkily, already trying to control his temper in preparation for whatever she’s about to say.

She waves her hand dismissively, avoiding meeting his eyes. “Perhaps slightly.”

Aramis gives a low whistle, because it’s abundantly clear to all of them that slightly means intimately in this case.

Porthos raises his eyebrows. “Maybe we should wait outside?” he offers awkwardly. Aramis brightens visibly at the suggestion, already trying to back out of the room.

Milady rolls her eyes. “What, so Athos can pass everything I say onto you anyway?”

“If you know something about LeMaitre -” Athos starts to say.

“I know enough,” she says, a little too flippantly for the topic. “I know where your missing King is, for starters. He’ll be in the Forest of Evreux. We had a few camps we used, and I can pinpoint their locations if you get me a map. Right at the moment, though, I think they’ll be in the pass.”

“You worked for him?” Porthos asks, his face hardening slightly as he waits for her reply. Few things anger Porthos as much as slavery.

Milady nods. “A few months ago, before Rochefort hired me.”

“You worked for a slaver.” Athos’s tone is flat. He’s bursting with the question of whether she did more than simply work for him, but he won’t ask it, at least not in front of the others. He’ll certainly be unable to resist bringing it up to her later though, whether it causes an argument or not.

“It’s not like I had many options,” she snaps. “The Cardinal was looking for me. I had to avoid towns and cities. I ran into Sebastian and he said he might have a place for me in Gus’s group, and that it was out in the forest, no chance of the Cardinal’s people finding me there. I took the job.”

“That it was selling human beings didn’t make you pause?” Porthos looks more than angry: he looks disappointed, even betrayed. He’s never forgotten who Milady is or the things she’s done, Athos knows, but since everything with Rochefort he’s considered her to be like Treville, or even like himself – someone who’s made a few mistakes and missteps, but with reason, and someone who’s trying to do better. But slavery is indefensible.

“All I did was examine the valuables they took off the men,” she says. There’s no apology in her voice, because Milady doesn’t like showing guilt or regret. “See if they were worth anything. Gus didn’t want to be swindled when he resold them.”

“Gus,” Aramis says. “You said it was someone named Gus’s group? Not LeMaitre’s? I’ve never even heard of this Gus.”

She shrugs. “Gus keeps his hands as clean as possible, most of the time. If you get Sebastian or his brother, though, they’ll probably be able to help you find him.”
“The priority right now is the King,” Athos says coldly. “Aramis, go get a map of the Forest of Evreux. Once we know where they are, we can go get His Majesty and d’Artagnan. I assume you can also give us rough estimates of how many men, their defences -”

“I think I should go in.” She delivers this quite calmly.

There’s a ringing silence. Aramis, on his way out the door, stops stock still. Porthos’s anger fades to concern. Athos stares at his wife, and then says quietly, “No.”

Milady rolls her eyes. “You just said the priority is the King. If you run in with a crowd of trigger-happy Musketeers, you’ll spook them all. His Majesty might die in the chaos.”

“So what, you want to sneak in?” Athos shakes his head, fury rising in him. “I won’t allow it.”

“Not sneak,” she says, as if this is perfectly reasonable. “Walk in. They know me. I’ll tell them I want to buy a few men, and that I’m willing to pay many times what the Spanish will offer. After the King’s clear, then you can wipe them out.”

“That might make ‘em realise that Louis’s more than just some random drunk,” Porthos protests. He does look a little approving at the suggestion, though – probably less because it’s a good plan than that he thinks it’s her way of trying to make amends for working with LeMaitre in the first place. There’s not many things Porthos won’t forgive, as long the perpetrator does their best to make up for their actions.

“So I’ll buy half a dozen, lose him in the crowd. I can come up with a good reason for wanting them, trust me.” She smiles coolly. “A patron with unusual interests, perhaps.” She lets her gaze slide back to Athos. “Lose the uniforms and a few of you could be my guards – they wouldn’t expect me to go in alone.”

“You can’t even ride a horse at the moment!” Athos snaps.

“It’s a good thing that coaches exist, then, although you’re right that the last mile or so will have to be on foot.” She rests her hands on her swollen stomach and meets his glare serenely.

“Anne.” Athos stares her down. “I said no. I’m Captain of the Musketeers, and this is my call to make. You’re not doing this.”
She’s enjoyed not wearing the overlarge cloak this past month, especially with how hot it’s been. When she puts it on and looks at herself, though, she’s impressed all over again by how well it masks her pregnancy. She’s huge, now, but the mass of fabric handily disguises that fact. Well enough that Sebastian won’t be able to tell? No way to know, but she’s hopeful.

Her memory had turned the cloak into something ugly and coarse, but in truth she would never have gotten away with it for so long if it had been – someone would have questioned why she was wearing it constantly (Rochefort, for example). In fact, it’s very nice. The folds of cloth cascade like a waterfall, the fabric is an inky black that reeks of style and expense, and even the way it masks and hides her figure is somehow attractive. After all, what’s hidden can sometimes be just as effective a lure as what’s on display, especially when it seems like one untied knot or one good hard tug could remove all concealment. Of course, she suspects most men would be extremely disappointed if they did that and revealed her heavily-pregnant form. Except her husband, that is, who seems to find her attractive however massive she grows, as strange as that seems.

Not that Athos seems to be in the mood to remove any of her clothing right now.

He’s sitting beside her driving the coach – they both opted for the outside, because it’s too hot a day to want to be inside instead. He’s so tense he’s practically turned to stone. His friends are riding ahead on their horses, dressed as common muscle-for-hire like he is, and they’ve got more horses tied to the back of the coach in case they’re needed. “If you ever go over my head to Treville again -” he says, and there is a furious, vicious note to his voice that makes her want to flinch. It’s the first word he’s spoken to her in hours, although she’s received a surfeit of glares.

It was a surprise to her as well that Treville agreed so readily. She’d barely even finished outlining her plan before he was nodding. He seemed to feel guilty about putting her at risk before with Rochefort (even if only because of her pregnancy), so she thought a plan that involved her walking into a camp of slavers might give him pause. But then, for Treville, duty will always win out over any qualms of guilt or doubt.

“This is the safest way for the King,” she says in her own defence, echoing Treville’s reason for agreeing.

It is the safest way, she believes that absolutely – and while she doesn’t care the snap of her fingers for King Louis on a personal level, she cares a lot about the life she’s currently got. If Louis dies, Her Majesty might call in the Spanish, bringing foreign troops to the city. There will be a series of violent coups and uprisings attempting to take the throne from the new Regent. Paris will be in complete anarchy. Athos might be fine, but she wouldn’t be, not heavily pregnant or with a newborn babe to worry about, so she’d have to leave. She doubts her husband would leave with her, not if it meant leaving his brothers, Treville, the Queen, the Dauphin and all of France in grave danger and doing nothing to help (she tries not to resent that). Walking into a camp full of slavers might create more immediate danger for herself and the child inside her, but it’s also more likely to keep them safe in the long term. Not that Athos will ever recognise that fact.

And, if she’s being truthful, she needs this. Needs something besides boredom and frustration and uselessness. She knows it’s only going to get worse as her time approaches. She’s already slow and weak compared to her usual self. She can’t be in a fight. But this is only negotiation, which she’s very good at, and perhaps it will take the edge off her desperate need to be doing something besides sitting at home and getting lost inside her own head. She would much rather face a thousand angry slavers than be stuck with her spiralling worries – what if I’m not able to give birth
safely? I don’t want to die like that. What if the child is stillborn? I don’t think I could survive the loss. How can I ever be a good mother? I’m the last person in the world who should be raising a child. What if this happiness is merely the peace found in the eye of a storm? I cannot stand to lose it all again...

“So you’re still committed to this foolish plan,” Athos says, drawing her attention back to him.

“Yes. I’m not sure you should be one of the guards, though,” she adds, because she doesn’t trust Athos’s overprotectiveness not to get in the way of this plan.

She also has her own reasons for not especially wanting him there – who knows what Sebastian could say to her? If he has her searched and realises she’s pregnant, he might get the idea in his head that the child’s his, because God knows he’s no midwife. And if he brings up that possibility in front of Athos – her throat tightens at the thought. She can’t stand the thought of watching Athos’s face darken with distrust as he starts to wonder if it’s all been another lie. It doesn’t matter that she’ll be able to prove Sebastian can’t be the father simply by getting him to admit which months they spent together and asking the midwife to reconfirm how pregnant she is. It will still hurt to see that lack of belief, to realise how little progress they’ve made, to know he’ll always fall back to thinking the worst of her. And how many arguments like that can they have before it’s one argument too many? She worries that someday he’ll look at her and suddenly realise how ludicrous this all is – playing house with the liar, the thief, the murderess, the monster. She worries that someday he’ll remember what she is and leave. He loves her, she knows, but sometimes that love seems built on shaky foundations. Every time she thinks the past is gone, she’s reminded that it’s not.

“The only reason I’m allowing this stupidity is because I’m here to protect you,” Athos says darkly, “If I wasn’t accompanying you then I’d tell Treville to go to Hell and send a troop of Musketeers to keep you confined to your house.”

She rolls her eyes at that. “No, you wouldn’t.” Athos would never be that rude to his mentor, or risk his commission, or abuse his position.

He reaches out and tilts her chin so she’s looking him square in the eyes. His are deadly serious. “Try me.”

She swallows hard. “Fine, then. I suppose I’ve had worse guards. Do try to look less… less professional, though, will you? You’re supposed to be a thug.” He glowers at her in response. “Good, like that.”

When they emerge from the carriage, the tension between them must be palpable, because Porthos and Aramis immediately set out to try and lighten the mood as they make their slow way to the camp. It’s ineffective, of course, but she appreciates the effort, and even though she calls them babbling idiots in her head there’s a touch of fondness to the insult that horrifies her.

“So I hear you haven’t come up with a name yet,” Aramis says. “How about Fleur, for a girl? As in fleur de lis. Like the Musketeers’ emblem – well, France’s emblem, really, but we wear it best.”

“Oh or you could call him Athos, after his dad,” Porthos suggests brightly. “Athos the second.”

“Full name, Athos d’Athos?” Milady raises an eyebrow, caught up in the conversation in spite of herself. She can’t stand to come up with a name yet, half-convinced that it will somehow curse its chances even though she knows that conviction to be foolish, but there’s no harm in listening to their suggestions. “I think I’ll pass.”
“Well, after Athos’s real first name then. What is it again?”

“Olivier. And again, no. Why would I give the child a name his father hates so much he refuses to ever use it?”

Aramis looks at Athos, who’s still brooding in silence. “You hate the name Olivier?”

After a long moment, Athos gives a dismissive jerk of his head, deigning to join in with the discussion, but still refusing to look at her. “Why do you think I go by Athos?”

“I don’t know,” Aramis says, apparently pondering this deeply. “I never really questioned it before. I mean, I don’t go by Aramis because I hate the name René. It’s a rather nice name. It’s just that everyone’s called me Aramis for so long I don’t think of René as my name anymore.” For Aramis, this seems to count as a complex metaphysical question.

“What about Jean?” Porthos says helpfully, returning to the more important subject. “After Treville. You can use Jeanne for a girl, and you’re sorted. Nice and easy.”

“Every second person in France is named Jean or Jeanne,” Milady informs him. “And the next person to try and suggest a stupid name for our child will be banned from speaking. All you’re doing is giving me a headache.”

“Alright, I can take a hint,” Porthos says, easy-going as always. “We probably need to quiet down anyway. How close are we?”

“Still a ways to go.”

The path through the forest is narrow. She hasn’t been walking great distances of late, and certainly hasn’t been clambering over tree roots and rocks, but there’s no way the carriage will fit so she knew there was no other choice. She’s much too far along to ride. Still, she tires easily now, and she’s unsteady on her feet – it’s not pleasant. She doesn’t enjoy feeling helpless, but she reminds herself over and over again that her current frailty is only temporary. Sometimes that reminder helps, sometimes it doesn’t.

At first, Aramis and Porthos steady her whenever it seems she’ll stumble, because apparently Athos is so angry he’s not even willing to touch her. When they reach a large fallen tree, though, Athos gives up his childish silent treatment and helps lift her carefully over it. From the way he clutches at her, if he could carry her the entire way, he’d do it.

“I’ll be fine,” she says to him quietly, for once not rolling her eyes at the idea she might not be, or throwing in unnecessary bravado.

He looks at her for a moment and then sighs, some of the anger in his eyes dissipating. “Let’s just get this over with, all right?”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Aramis says cheerfully, having caught Athos’s words.

She straightens as they enter the camp, lowering her hood and walking slowly and purposefully into the clearing. For a few moments, it’s chaos, Gus’s men calling out to each other, readying weapons, getting under cover. Then someone recognises her and calls out her name, and Sebastian barks an order from up the hill and strides towards her, hand on his gun.

She looks around, and there, chained to the same post, are d’Artagnan and Louis. D’Artagnan has a careful poker face, though she’s sure he’s surprised by them all just walking casually into the camp. Louis, on the other hand, looks stunned.
Then there’s Sebastian before her, and she returns all her focus to him.

“Milady,” he says, looking her up and down with a scowl. “It’s been a while.”

She gives him her sweetest smile. “I’m afraid opportunity called.”

“Found a better offer elsewhere, did you?” His scowl deepens. She realises with a sinking feeling that this is going to take some charm to achieve. Judging by the look on his face, she’s going to have to presume on their previous relationship to talk him around. Who knows what Athos will make of that.

“Oh, yes.” She reaches out and runs playful fingers down his chest, not daring to look at her husband as she does so. “But I’m fond enough of you to share some of my good fortune, as it happens. I’ve got a patron, a rich one, and he’d quite like to sample some of your wares.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Wants some slaves, does he? You know we’ve a deal with the Spanish. Gus’d flay me alive for wrecking a business relationship.” He looks slightly disappointed as she drops her hand and moves back, though.

“Your deal with the Spanish is to provide however many men you can get your hands on,” she says reasonably. “You always lose a few in transit – the weak ones, the stupid ones, the ones someone might come looking for. If you lose a few more to me, they’ll never know the difference.”

“Hmm. True enough. Who’s this patron of yours?”

“Now, what kind of fool would I be if I told you that? I won’t cut myself out of this deal or any future ones, and believe me, there will be future ones.” She wants to give him an incentive not to slit their throats and take every coin they have, although she likes to think his excellent memories of her might make him hold back from murder anyway. “But only think how happy Gus will be when he finds out how much of a profit you made on this load.”

“Gus is never happy. And what’s this boss of yours want ‘em for?”

“Believe me, you’re better off not knowing.” At his frown, though, she lowers her voice and says, “You know how noblemen are. If you tell them something’s monstrous, disgusting, and illegal, they only want to try it more. He needs slaves because no one’d volunteer for what he wants.”

“Maybe I am better off not knowing, then. But what if he gets caught with them? They could lead the authorities right back to us.”

“They won’t be in much condition to talk, trust me.” She hopes he doesn’t ask for more details, because while she’s sure she can embroider more about this imaginary nobleman and his horrifying, murderous sexual appetites, she’d rather not. She’s met a few nobles in her time who weren’t so far from the monster she’s describing, which grounds this lie in horrible realism. “Or much condition to do anything else.”

He lets out a bark of laughter at that. “Can’t tell me some perverted freak of a man can keep you satisfied, Milady.”

“Hmm, perhaps not in all ways,” she says flirtatiously. Now she definitely doesn’t want to look at her husband. In fact, she can’t even bring herself to glance at Aramis or Porthos, because odds are they’ll be reacting to Athos’s expression. “But I find most pleasures come a distant second to the feeling of a full coin-purse, I’m afraid. So let’s say half a dozen men, hand-picked by me, for twenty times what the galleys would give for them. Do we have a deal?”
Of course, it takes rather more conversation than that. Eventually, she makes a deal for five of them, and hands over nearly every coin she has on her. The child kicks a few times but she keeps her face blank and gives no sign of it – she’s grown used to the feeling, inasmuch as anyone can grow used to that feeling.

Once they’re agreed, she walks toward the gathered prisoners with as much grace as she can manage – she doesn’t waddle like some women she’s observed, but the way she moves right now is not exactly as she normally does, and she really doesn’t want Sebastian to notice.

“This one,” she says, pointing at a random dark-skinned man close to Louis and d’Artagnan. He cringes away from her pointing finger – her voice carried well enough that none of the men here want to be picked out for a fate seemingly even worse than the galleys. “Hmm, that one as well. Such lovely hair.” Louis blinks at this, looking like he’s not sure whether to be flattered or not by the comment. Still, he manages to suppress his ecstatic smile at being freed by his Musketeers and the woman who saved him from Rochefort a month ago, forcing his face into an unconvincing pout.

She picks another two young men, also at random, then wanders back towards d’Artagnan. He’s glaring at her, and she rather doubts it’s to sell the act. She deliberately ums and ahs over whether to choose him, purely to be annoying, and then takes his chin in her hand. He looks like he wants to bite it like an animal. “Quite a pretty one, isn’t he?” she drawls to Sebastian, who’s gesturing for his men to line up her chosen slaves. “I’m sure my patron will love him.”

She meets Athos’s gaze as she turns, and her stomach sinks. He’s expressionless, but the fire in his eyes does not bode well for her. Whether his anger is due to her previous relationship with Sebastian, her current flirtatious air towards him, or her not racing through this as quickly as he’d like, she has no idea.

“Get them moving,” she orders him, in her most imperious tone, and he inclines his head.

She has Aramis take the shackle keys from Sebastian, because she’s a little concerned he might go for a farewell embrace if she goes that close to him again. Then, with Porthos and Athos hurrying the five men along with sharp orders and shoves, they begin the walk back. The first man she picked sounds more like he’s sobbing then breathing.

“Thank God you got here so soon, Captain,” Louis says, too loudly, and there’s a murmur of confusion from the other captives. “And you, Madame -”

“You need to stay quiet for the moment,” Athos says, barely loudly enough to be audible. “We may be being watched.”

Louis quiets again, but he gives Milady a speaking look full of gratitude, and she smiles at him sweetly in return. It can do no harm if the King thinks she’s his saviour again. In fact, forget saviour – right now he looks like he wouldn’t be surprised to hear she’s his guardian angel. D’Artagnan looks slightly disgusted by his obvious admiration.

When they finally reach the coach and the rest of the Musketeers, she turns to Athos and raises her eyebrows. “I assume we can talk now?”

Athos nods, business-like. “Porthos, ride back to Paris with His Majesty as quickly as you can. Everyone else, mount up. We need to clear out those slavers and free the rest of the captives.”

One of the men gasps at ‘His Majesty’, another starts trying to say something shocked. They’re wide-eyed and utterly stunned at their change of fortune as Aramis goes down the line unlocking
shackles. Athos turns his attention to them. “It’s up to you if you want to join us for the fight, or wait with the coach and remaining horses until we return.”

The hard glance he gives Milady makes it clear that it’s not up to her which she does, that she’ll be waiting in the coach. That’s fine with her. She’s exhausted, and she can’t do everything for them.

“I’m joining you for the fight,” d’Artagnan says, voice hard, although she can’t imagine Athos thought otherwise for so much as a second.

Porthos helps His Majesty onto a horse, and once he’s mounted the King leans against the horse to talk to her and says fervently, “Once again, Milady, I owe you my life. Someday you must tell me how I can possibly repay you.” His eyes are big and doe-like with sincerity, more a child’s eyes than a King’s.

“Helping you is reward enough, Your Majesty,” she says, with another sweet smile. She doesn’t attempt a curtsey, it seems much too difficult at the moment and she can’t be bothered, but she does bow her head in reverence. Louis likes a bit of reverence. Then she raises her face, making herself blush slightly and fluttering her eyelashes in a way that would be overkill for anyone except their King. Every ounce of affection, gratitude and admiration she can inspire in him, she’s going to try for, just in case she ever needs it.

Porthos looks amused at the sight of her easily charming the King yet again, but he doffs his hat and urges the men forward and then they’re all gone, galloping across the open field towards the road nearby. She wonders if they’ll be on time for the christening.

Something occurs to her. “Try and leave Sebastian alive,” she calls out before the others ride off on their assault.

“Don’t tell me you actually are fond of him,” Aramis says, looking appalled.

She rolls her eyes to the heavens. “If his brother doesn’t know where Gus is, Sebastian will. If you want to cut the head off this particular snake, getting them both is your best bet.”

“Got it.”

To her surprise, Athos clasps her hand before he goes, and drops a quick kiss on her cheek, leaning precariously out of the saddle to do so. “Thank you,” he says quietly.

“And here I thought you disapproved of me helping out.”

“I meant thank you for not getting yourself killed, despite your best efforts.”

Then he’s gone, and the rest of them with him. She stares after him, more confused than ever. She was sure he was unhappy with her. Of course, perhaps he still is, and is just unwilling to make that explicit in front of his men. He has to have gathered that Sebastian was more than an employer to her, and he must still be disappointed she didn’t tell him there might be a group of slavers still active near Paris, and God knows he’s beyond furious she involved herself in something risky yet again. They’ll probably be having a discussion about all of that later, complete with accusations and insults.

She feels her stomach twist in dread at the thought.

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He’s too busy to spend the night at her place, but perhaps that’s for the best, with how he feels
right now. The Musketeers need to return the former captives back to their homes, deliver the unfortunate news to the families of the seven that were killed in the crossfire between his men and the slavers, and interrogate the surviving criminals. They get a location for Gus, and Porthos and Aramis head off to arrest him.

D’Artagnan comes and finds him in the early morning. “You look ready to drop.”

“I feel it, too,” he admits. D’Artagnan looks just as exhausted as him, though, perhaps even more. The slaves’ sleeping conditions in the Forest of Evreux did not look comfortable. “You did well keeping the King safe.”

“But not well enough to make up for getting him taken in the first place,” d’Artagnan says wryly. “And I didn’t protect him as well as you think. LeMaitre was on the edge of shooting him when you showed up. Something to do with his hands being too smooth.”

“We were lucky Anne knew where you were.”

D’Artagnan nods noncommittally, eyes momentarily dropping to the replaced scarf at Athos’s neck – when he’d yanked it off unexpectedly earlier, he’d done a brief, startled double-take at the marks of lips and teeth at Athos’s throat. Athos feels both embarrassment and amusement at the recollection. But he also feels something else.

Technically, he has no reason to feel guilty about their renewed relationship – Anne is his wife. But she’s also d’Artagnan’s manipulator, Constance’s kidnapper, the Cardinal’s creature, Rochefort’s assassin, Ninon’s tormentor, Thomas’s killer, the Queen’s would-be murderer, and now they know she is also a former slaver.

It’s clear to Athos that his friend wants to say something, but also that he won’t – as always, d’Artagnan doesn’t want to offend Athos or start an argument, despite his reservations. There have been awkward silences between them ever since the day after Rochefort’s death, when d’Artagnan found out that the world wasn’t the way he thought. Athos understands. D’Artagnan thought they were a team, arrayed against Milady de Winter, the cruel, manipulative murderess who’d used him, abducted Constance, betrayed them all, and tried to have Athos killed. They might work with her if they had no other option, but any truce was temporary and sure to end in bloodshed. D’Artagnan thought their goal was to see her arrested, or if that wasn’t possible, at least get her permanently out of their vicinity. After everything she’d done to them – to him – that was the only thing that made sense.

Then one morning Athos had sat him down and informed him in short order that Milady was staying in Paris, that they were trying to rebuild their marriage, and that the child she was bearing was his. Adding that all her crimes had been pardoned and Athos wouldn’t allow her to be threatened in any way probably hadn’t helped. As far as d’Artagnan was concerned, this went against everything Athos had said and done in the past, everything he believed about his mentor – it was more than hypocrisy. It was almost a betrayal. Athos had kept too much of the truth to himself for his change of heart to seem anything but utterly jarring and out of character. If d’Artagnan was a religious or superstitious man, Athos suspects he’d accuse Milady of beguiling him with witchcraft. As it is, he doesn’t accuse her of anything, doesn’t say a word against her. He just stays silent, watchful and wary, waiting for her to show her true colours again. At times like this, it almost seems like he’s making notes, storing up pieces of evidence to use against her later.

This is, of course, Athos’s own fault. He’s the one who worked hard to persuade all of his friends that Milady was nothing but a monster and that they both wanted each other dead. He was trying to persuade himself of that at the time, and it didn’t work, but he did manage to convince his friends – for a while, at least. Aramis stopped seeing Milady as a monster the moment he saw her as an
Porthos realised it was more complicated than previously stated after learning a bit more about their brief stay in Pinon. Then both of them warmed to her even further after they rescued her and then all stormed the Louvre together (breaking into a palace being the kind of bonding activity they enjoy). But d’Artagnan’s never experienced anything from Milady except lies, schemes, spite and manipulations. Even his pleasant memories of her (and Athos recoils from the thought) are tainted now by the fact he was unknowingly betraying a friend and being groomed for further betrayals. So it’s understandable he’d hate her.

Of course, the situation being understandable and not at all d’Artagnan’s fault doesn’t stop Athos’s sudden flare of irritation. “Say it,” he tells d’Artagnan.

“Athos, no,” d’Artagnan protests, flushing faintly. “I wasn’t going to -”

“Say it,” Athos repeats. Then, when d’Artagnan only shakes his head, Athos lets his own anger carry him forward. “How about I start you off: we’re not lucky Anne knew where they were. We’re lucky she finally decided to come clean about it. She’s known about the existence of this group for months, and said nothing.”

“Exactly,” d’Artagnan says, seeming encouraged by this. “We could have arrested them long ago. How many other men did she condemn to the galleys by keeping quiet?”

“And when she finally did help -” Athos starts, before cutting himself off.

D’Artagnan nods, face twisted in a scowl. “It was only because she had no choice. Yes, her plan was good. She saved my life, and the King’s. But it was for her own selfish reasons. A way to keep her comfortable life, and another chance to charm the King.”

“Speaking of charming,” Athos says, voice coming out low with pain and jealousy. “Did you see how she was with LeMaitre? That – that disgusting slaver.”

“I know. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was -” This time d’Artagnan is the one to cut himself off, his expression of self-righteous disgust immediately morphing into frantic apology. “Athos, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that -”

Athos waves him quiet. He needs to think.

To his surprise, the first thought that comes into his mind is how much d’Artagnan reminds him of himself, even now. Oh, there are differences, but there’s also similarities. One is how quickly they leap to anger when they’re emotionally involved in an issue. The way they think often runs in parallel, too. Of course, d’Artagnan’s feelings in this case are maybe a thousandth as strong as Athos’s – d’Artagnan never loved Milady. He never really knew her. Athos loves her, and sometimes he thinks he knows her, so discovering another of her lies sends him spiralling again. Her lying to him is something of a sore spot.

Like d’Artagnan, he finds it too easy to think the worst of her. But when he looks at those dark thoughts, really examines them, they wisp away like they’re nothing. And they are nothing, he realises. Just old echoes from the past, old suspicions, based on the hurt and betrayal he’s learning to move past. While he knows now that her lies back then were only about her background, that she didn’t murder his brother for spite, and that she loved him and wasn’t using him, that knowledge doesn’t erase his memories and it doesn’t reverse how that perceived betrayal changed him. The pain he felt back then was boundless, too deep and wide and all-encompassing to comprehend, too much for him to deal with rationally. He twisted hurt to anger and self-righteousness and he hung her from a tree. Anger was an easier emotion to cope with, to use, but he
couldn’t escape the pain forever and eventually it found him.

And now he is doing it again, albeit with fear instead of hurt, and to a much less extreme level. He’s scared all the time, scared of losing this fragile happiness, scared of losing her or their child. Then she terrified him further by insisting on wandering into a camp of violent slavers, a situation he couldn’t control and might not be able to protect her from. It’s natural for him to turn that to anger, to look for reasons to lash out.

He finds he’s holding the locket. Over the years, it feels like the curves and ridges of the metal have imprinted themselves onto his skin, so it fits perfectly into his hand, like a key in a lock. He holds it out and flips it open for a moment anyway – looks at the tiny, perfect flower within.

Turning to anger is natural, but stupid: if he doesn’t learn how to recognise his emotions, he’ll never learn how to deal with them. It’s reasonable for him to be annoyed with her for withholding information from him, or jealous that she was involved with another man recently, but he can’t channel the full force of his fear into anger about that. He needs to be honest about his feelings, at least to himself, and not punish her for his own weaknesses.

“Athos, I’m not…” D’Artagnan looks at him for a while, then sighs, and speaks more quietly, “I’m not trying to ruin things for you. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

He hurt every day without her. How much worse could it get than that? “Allow me to worry about that. I need to go.” He clicks the locket closed and stows it under his shirt again, against his skin.

D’Artagnan looks relieved that Athos seems relatively fine – not about to challenge him to a duel, or collapse into misery, or fly into a murderous rage. “Going to finally get some sleep?” he asks.

“No,” Athos says. “Going to see my wife.”

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There are little vases of forget-me-nots throughout Milady’s house, some brought by him, some not. He inhales the scent, as familiar to him as the jasmine of her perfume. There’s a flower-seller between the Garrison and Milady’s house, and whenever he passes it, he thinks he can detect forget-me-nots even through the cacophony of other smells. It’s probably all in his head. At first he found it painful, the flowers seeming a symbol of their destruction as much as it is a symbol of their beginning, but it appears to bring her pleasure when he gives them to her. Perhaps it’s a symbol of their reconciliation too, the flowers she gave him to promise she’d see him again the day they created their child, the flowers in the locket she gave back when she decided to stay. And if that’s the case – if it’s a symbol for every part of their relationship, from new love to loss to finding hope again – then perhaps it’s just a symbol for them.

The footman ushers him into the main room, and this time when she looks up there’s no immediate happiness in her expression. “Athos,” she says, wary. “Shouldn’t you be at the Garrison?”

“I’m only stopping by here for a few minutes.” He pulls her up and into his arms and kisses her, long and slow and sweet, before pulling back.

“A few minutes, hmm?” Now she seems much happier, curling her hands around his neck. “Please don’t say it’s to check I’m eating enough.”

“I had to return your money to you, for one thing. We retrieved it from the camp. Consider it France repurchasing the King and d’Artagnan from you, if you like.” He gives her the coin-purse and she weighs it in her hand before tossing it carelessly onto the nearby table, to be dealt with
later. He barely cares about it either at the moment, to tell the truth, but it made him feel better to have concrete, official reason to come by.

“For one thing,” she echoes, too quick to miss this. “What’s the other?”

“I need to speak to you. About Sebastian LeMaitre.”

He doesn’t like the look on her face, the way she closes off from him so rapidly, covering up emotion with deliberate blankness, visibly preparing for a fight. It’s like a door being shut in his face. “Ah,” she says, drawing the syllable out. “Are you going to ask me if there’s a chance he’s the father?”

“No.”

She blinks, impassivity failing in her surprise, then asks, “Why not?”

“Because you already told me I am,” he says patiently. “Do you remember our discussion about learning to trust each other? I’m not going to fall at the first fence, Anne.”

There was a moment of real doubt, of course. When he saw the way that amoral slaver was looking at her, realised that his first unflattering assumption about their relationship had been an accurate one, it crossed his mind to wonder how many months ago Milady had worked with him. But it had only been a moment, and then it had passed. If another man might be the father of her child, she’d tell him that, he knows she’d tell him. Cynicism is a reflex for him, now; he finds believing in people difficult. But if there’s anyone he needs to push past that automatic distrust with, it’s her. Otherwise they don’t have any chance of lasting, of being happy together.

Of course, the decision to believe her doesn’t negate the surge of furious jealousy he experienced when she ran her fingers down another man’s chest. He’s trying not to be angry about it, to remember that he’s the only one she’s ever loved, but it’s difficult and it doesn’t help as much as it should. Perhaps he’s the only one she’s ever given her love or trust to, but she’s given other parts of herself to plenty of people. He’s the father of her child – he believes that, he does – but it could easily have been another man. Still, he forces that thought back, reminds himself that it is in the past, that they’re trying to start again. He cannot let himself risk ruining that, especially not for something so small as this – better just to put it from his mind, as he does with d’Artagnan. Better just to pretend she has been as faithful to him these past years as he has been to her memory.

She stares at him for a while, and then her face relaxes into a smile. There’s something disbelieving about it, like she honestly can’t comprehend that he might trust her in this. It makes his heart hurt, but they did say they would take this slow, that it would take time. The world doesn’t change overnight, and neither will they.

“So what did you want to ask me about him, then?”

“You didn’t tell me about him, or Gus, or Evreux,” he says simply. “I just wanted to know why.”

“Until recently, we were busy with Rochefort,” she says. “By the time we weren’t, my information was months out of date, and I didn’t think they were still operating – groups like that normally fall apart much quicker. I hadn’t heard rumours of anyone vanishing, so I assumed they’d broken apart.”

He looks at her. “And that’s it?”

She meets his eyes for a long moment, and then sighs, expression crumbling into weariness and regret. “No. I suppose not. I just… I didn’t want to disappoint you, hurt you. I’ve done enough of
that. And as far as I knew the group was gone, so I didn’t think there was any reason to upset you like that. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think there’s anything you could tell me that would change things between us,” he tells her, feeling it absolutely in that moment. He believes she loves him. That’s all that matters. Oh, it would hurt him if he found out she were lying to him again about something major – for example, if she admitted that the child wasn’t really his, he would be distraught – and perhaps he’d be very angry for a while. But he wouldn’t leave, or force her to leave. So long as she loves him, he will do whatever it takes to make this work, to make her as happy as she makes him, to build a life together. Everything else is just details, and they’ll work past them. “So please, if there’s a chance something you know could help people, then next time, tell me about it.”

She kisses him, curling even closer against him. “I will. And I promise not to do anything else dangerous… at least until the child’s born, anyway.”

“That would be greatly appreciated.” He can hear how his voice drops into gruffness. It’s in her nature to always be in the thick of the action, but he can’t like that fact – he wants her to be safe. Right now, she’s vulnerable, even if she refuses to admit it. Relief flows through him at the thought of her staying safe at home. It doesn’t entirely dampen his fear – there are so many ways he could lose her, lose them – but it helps him contain it a little.

“Will you be round tonight?”

“If you want me to be, of course.” The other Musketeers must be jealous of him these days, he thinks – eating delicious food in a fancy house, sleeping in an absurdly comfortable bed, having an impossibly beautiful woman who loves him and a child on the way. “And I could stop by in the middle of the day. I mean, if -”

“Athos.” Now she looks exasperated as much as amused. “Stop by whenever you like, as often as you like. If I ever want more space, I’ll let you know. Though it’s not seeming likely.” She draws him close again, and a few minutes turns into more.

The other Musketeers must be jealous of him, he thinks – and they should be.
Athos’s eyes ache, he’s exhausted, and the rain outside is getting steadily worse, but his mood is lighter than it’s been all day. He’s been signing off reports for hours now, and he’s nearly finished. If he gets through the rest at this pace, with no further interruptions, he’ll be able to see his wife before she goes to bed. She says he can slip in beside her at any time of night, but he hates waking the whole household up and disturbing her sleep, so he rarely does.

He thought he’d have to sleep at the Garrison tonight. Amazingly, it seems he was wrong. Athos signs off the last report with an air of triumph, closing his eyes for a moment to rest them. He can head over to Milady’s now, check how she’s doing, perhaps even read to her for a while or talk to her about his day, hear about hers, and then –

Then a voice says in his ear, “I warn you, I am a desperate man. If you resist I will kill you.”

Athos freezes. There’s a blade at his throat. Discordantly, the first thought that flashes through his head is an exasperated oh, for God’s sake. He’s been held at sword- or knife-point too often in his life for it to excite much alarm. Instead, he calculates whether he can grab the blade in his gloved hands without cutting himself too badly, shove his chair back to catch the man in his midsection and knock the air out of him, then roll off the chair to the side and draw his rapier. After that it will be blade against blade, and Athos likes his chances.

“I want an audience with your King. And I have no time to waste.”

The loud cock of a gun makes any of Athos’s plans irrelevant. “Drop it, or I’ll kill you where you stand,” d’Artagnan warns the man coldly.

The man backs away. Athos stands up and stretches slightly – being bent over a table for most of the evening has done no favours for his back, although he thinks if he complains about that to his eight-months-pregnant wife he won’t get a lot of sympathy right now.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Athos asks wearily. He could just order the man locked up, but anyone desperate enough to break into the Musketeers’ Garrison and threaten the captain just on the off chance he’ll be added to the King’s schedule probably has something important to say. “Please make it quick.”

Unfortunately, ‘quick’ seems to be impossible. It only takes a few more minutes of discussion for him to know there’s no chance of seeing Milady tonight. Keywords like ‘Spanish Army’ and ‘better than gunpowder’ have a way of cluing him into that.

He sighs, and resigns himself to it.

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“You know this could anger the Spanish,” Treville observes, keeping pace with the King. Athos lags a few steps behind, still slightly deafened by the explosion. Porthos and d’Artagnan bring up the rear, escorting General Alaman. Aramis isn’t here, of course, per Athos’s standing orders for him to never enter the Louvre.

“Frankly, I don’t care if it does anger them,” Louis says petulantly. “After their behaviour recently,
they deserve it. Sending Rochefort to try and gain my trust and steal my secrets! If I wasn’t such a good judge of character, he could have done real damage.”

Lately, the King is spoiling for a fight with Spain. He’s never liked the Spanish, of course, but this is different. He isn’t about to start a war over there being a Spanish spy amongst the Red Guards, but he doesn’t like that he came so close to giving an important position in his cabinet to a traitor. He feels personally betrayed, as well, Athos thinks – after all, he trusted Rochefort. So did the Queen. Spain, meanwhile, are defensive, claiming that there’s insufficient proof Rochefort was their agent, and that they’re still unhappy about the death of their ambassador. They won’t send another, they say, until they believe he’ll be safe in France – given the general public’s current mood towards the Spanish, that could be a while.

“While it’s important to consider whether or not it’s a good idea, Your Majesty, there’s also the question of how we’ll do this,” Athos points out. “General Alaman says he has no idea where they’re holding his daughter. We need to be able to contact them to make a handover.”

“I leave such details to you, Captain,” the King says, with an airy wave of his hands. “I have larger issues to consider.”

“Just a moment, sire,” Treville says to the King, and pulls Athos aside and away from the rest, then says in an undertone, “Get the secret to the powder if you can. But if you can’t, at least don’t let Spain get it. That is your first priority. If it looks like they’re going to get the cipher or Alaman, prevent it. Whatever the cost. Understand?”

“Perfectly,” Athos says, just as quietly. He can’t stop a frown, though. He knows what Treville is saying. If the Spanish need Alaman to use the cipher and decode the formula, then if the situation goes south, Athos needs to make sure Alaman isn’t in a condition to help. If there’s a choice between saving Alaman’s innocent daughter, and making sure the Spanish don’t get the powder, he also needs to make the harder choice there.

He doesn’t like the thought of going back on his word, or of sacrificing an innocent, and it’s unlike Treville to ask it of him. While they’ve been ordered to sacrifice people rather than let them fall into enemy hands before, it’s normally been their own people, who would rather die than betray the secrets of France. He doubts Alaman would appreciate dying for the good of France, or his daughter dying for the good of France.

Of course, they can’t allow Spain to have this power, especially not since they seem on the brink of war with them half the time these days. But Treville is changing, Athos thinks – although whether he’s changing into an effective First Minister, or simply a more ruthless and pragmatic man than he used to be, Athos really can’t say.

Louis is already sighing in exasperation, irritated with a conversation he’s not involved in. “Come, Treville. I’m sure the Musketeers can sort this out…”

“I think I actually find it more unnerving when he has faith in us,” d’Artagnan notes in an undertone, as the King and Treville disappear around the corner, Treville giving an apologetic look back.

“They wouldn’t’ve snatched the girl without a plan,” Porthos says reasonably, looking at Athos. “I bet they were planning to – to persuade her to tell them where Alaman was. We could leave a message there.”

Athos pulls him mind back to the issue at hand. If they do this right, hopefully the issue of whether to help Alaman and his daughter or prevent the Spanish getting the powder will never arise – they
should be able to do both.

Alaman is already shaking his head, though. “My Samara would never tell them where to find me, whatever they do.”

Unless his daughter has experience resisting torture, Athos finds this unlikely. “By now, though, she must know you wouldn’t still be there,” he points out instead of saying this. Anyone with sense would give up the location once they knew it was useless, even if they resisted beforehand. “Besides, it does no harm to leave a message there offering a trade, just in case.”

“They’re more desperate than we are,” d’Artagnan says. “They’ll probably agree to an exchange if you offer it. They can’t afford to go back without Alaman or the powder.”

“And I cannot afford to lose my daughter!” Alaman says, voice raw.

“I understand,” Athos says. “But that helps us too. They’ll think you’re in the weaker position, that you’ll do whatever it takes to get your daughter back, that this deal is one last desperate gamble. They won’t know you have our help.”

“Do you really?” Alaman asks, and then seeing Athos’s confusion, clarifies, “Do you understand? Are you a father, Captain?”

“Not yet.” Athos gives him a tight smile. “But in a month or so, I will be.” Well, he’ll either be a father, or a drunk, despairing widower with a stillborn child, depending on how the birth goes. But few women die in childbirth now, he reminds himself sternly, trying to quell his own unreasonable fear. Milady seems sure she’ll be fine.

It feels strange to think he has a wife, and might soon have a child – he trained himself out of the word wife long ago, because he knew he would never have another, and he couldn’t stand to think of the one he’d lost. And child was never part of his vocabulary to begin with, to tell the truth. It’s something he wants desperately, but fears just as strongly.

“Ah.” Alaman actually smiles, even if it’s brief. “I remember that feeling. Do not worry, captain. Being a father is like being a husband. You are so sure you’re not ready, and then one day, without warning, you are. Once you see their face…”

“How comforting,” Athos says, unable to prevent the sardonic tone that enters his voice, even though Alaman isn’t the one he’s annoyed at. “I’m sure I’ll be just as wonderful a parent as I have been a husband, then.”

Porthos shoots him a look of concern, whereas Alaman just seems confused by the response.

“We want a location for the handover that makes them think they have the upper hand,” d’Artagnan says, focusing on the practicalities and covering up the awkward moment to the best of his ability. “Nowhere near the palace. We don’t want too many people around, but there needs to be enough for us to blend into the crowd.”

“With a building nearby with a window we can use,” Athos says. He glances at Porthos, who knows Paris better than any of them, and who can probably come up with the perfect place. “We can hide Aramis in it well before they get there, and then he can take out this Baltasar as soon as he shows his face.”

“They won’t risk shooting you from a distance – they’ll want to make sure you brought the real cipher first,” Porthos adds, looking at the worried Alaman. “Also, it could break or be lost in the chaos if they just start firing. Sides, you say they want you alive.”
“But what about Samara?” Alaman persists.

“If they’re sensible, Baltasar’s men will surrender once he’s dead,” Athos says.

“And if they’re not?”

“Then it will get messy. Regardless, this is the best option we have, if we don’t want to spook them.”

Alaman subsides, but he doesn’t look appeased. He’s a General, so he must know there’s no perfect plan in a situation like this, but the idea of his daughter being hurt is clearly torture to him.

There’s something about the panic on his face that makes Athos feel strange. So far, Athos’s fears for his child have been short-term – he rarely thinks further than the birth. He’s worried exclusively about Milady and the child surviving that. Now, he’s almost dizzied as he thinks about a whole lifetime of worrying about his son or daughter, a lifetime of the same agony of hope and fear that he sees in the other man’s eyes.

Someone could use their child against them, like Alaman’s enemies are using his. What if one of their old enemies goes after he or Milady through their child? What if someday he’s confronted with the choice of letting his child die or making a deal like the one they’re pretending to make with Baltasar? He worries he would trade in his honour for his loved ones in a second.

“Athos?” Porthos is looking at him, concerned.

“Find General Alaman some paper,” he says, shaking off his odd mood. “We need to move as quickly as possible.”

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“What are you doing here?” Milady shifts her position on the lounge and abandons the book she was pretending to read.

Despite her tone of disdain, at the moment she’d be happy for almost any distraction – her back hurts constantly, she’s exhausted, and it feels like the child is attacking her from within. She’s used to her body being something she can use – right now, instead, it’s like an anchor weighing her down. She’s consumed by it, by heat and discomfort and clumsiness, by the heavy uselessness of everything. And that’s not even the worst part – she could deal with her body’s betrayal, but her mind can no longer be trusted either. She’s easily distracted, often dazed, forgetful, and above all emotional.

The owner of the shop where she goes to gossip with the palace maids has been very sympathetic in a self-centred sort of way, claiming these symptoms occur in every woman, that she’s experienced themselves with her two children. Milady doesn’t care if it’s normal or not, she hates it. She feels unlike herself, and not entirely in control of either her body or her mind, and so having a Musketeer to take out her bad mood on isn’t the worst thing in the world.

Still, she wishes it was Athos. She hasn’t seen him in two days, and it feels like a lifetime. She’s lonely without him. The forget-me-nots he brought her three days ago are wilting in the little vase on her bedside table, and she hasn’t replaced them, because somehow flowers she buys aren’t the same as the ones he does.

“How are you feeling?” As always, Aramis’s gaze drops to her stomach, filled with concern. It’s as if every pregnant woman is the Madonna to him or something. She thinks if she hadn’t made it clear she’d remove his fingers for the presumption, he’d even try to touch her stomach the way the
maids do. As it is, whenever she sees him, she gets a barrage of questions about her health that she rather resents. Aramis seems to know far too much about pregnancy, childbirth, and young children, considering his life contains none of those. It almost seems like an obsession – and that’s interesting to her. In the five years of observing her husband and his friends, he never seemed unduly interested in babies – he wasn’t uncomfortable about them as some men are, but he never seemed obsessed. Now, any pregnant woman or crying babe is a magnet for his gaze, and he seems like he could discuss babies forever with her if only she’d allow it.

It reminds her of her husband’s too-rapt attention with the midwife, come to think of it. Athos is interested in the topic only because of her health, and the health of their child, and she knows if she wasn’t pregnant he’d be happy never to discuss such things. But because she is, he’s intent on learning every fact, dealing with every risk, obsessively checking and re-checking any potential problem that could crop up with the birth. As if by doing that he can prevent any of them from ever coming to pass.

“Fine,” she says shortly, not in the mood to dive into the quagmire of her own fears right now. “Now answer my question. What are you doing in my house?”

“Waiting to see Athos,” Aramis says.

“Do any of you remember you have a whole Garrison for these meetings?”

Aramis gives her a thin smile. Something’s upset him, that’s obvious, and it’s not just her unwillingness to discuss the minutia of pregnancy with him. “They’re all at the Louvre right now, and since this is between the Louvre and the Garrison, you know he’ll stop by here on the way. I thought I’d join them as soon as I could. I would have waited outside, but the footman ushered me in.”

Interesting. The streets outside the Louvre are crowded and oversupplied with alleyways, so it’s difficult to try and intercept people going from the Louvre to the Garrison, but choosing her home to wait at still has interesting implications. So he couldn’t go inside the Louvre with the others? He couldn’t even wait directly outside the gates and catch them there? And judging by his sourness, that’s not by choice.

What would make her husband order Aramis not to enter the Louvre? Guarding the King and Queen is a fairly major part of a Musketeer’s duties, after all. Perhaps Athos hasn’t been making Aramis do chores around the Garrison out of spite, she realises, but to keep him from the palace, which means this state of affairs has been going on for some time.

A bit of gossip from the maids suddenly pops into her head – she’d barely cared about it at the time, but now she realises that Aramis sneaking into the Queen’s apartments and sleeping with the Dauphin’s governess is also him disobeying orders. The woman must be beautiful indeed. Or perhaps it’s just a quiet rebellion against Athos’s orders. That seems a somewhat immature response, though.

“Being banned from the Louvre must make doing your job much more difficult,” she observes, looking at him sideways.

Suddenly, Aramis looks sketchy, uncomfortable. He glances away from her. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Aramis. Please. Do you really think my husband didn’t tell me what’s going on? We swore to be truthful to each other when we decided to try again, and when I asked him what the reason was for all those strange conversations with you, he couldn’t lie to me.”
“He wouldn’t tell you,” Aramis says, but he doesn’t seem entirely sure. She can use his uncertainty.

“I think he wanted someone to talk to about it.” She lets just the slightest bit of sympathy creep into her voice, the slightest bit of softness. “You know how worried he’s been. I imagine it’s been hard for you, too, keeping it a secret from the others, dealing with it alone.”

A shot in the dark, but the intense arguments only ever seem to be between Aramis and Athos, while the others are elsewhere. He looks up quickly at her, and she keeps her face as smooth and innocent as she can. This is where she’ll either draw the truth out of him or accidentally give away that she knows nothing, depending on her guesses, but she has to keep the conversation moving smoothly, confidently and swiftly or he’ll realise the truth anyway from her uncertainty.

“Yes,” he concurs, a little unwillingly, still watching her face.

“Honestly, you’re lucky they’re too dim to have noticed yet,” she says languidly, because her not insulting the Musketeers at every opportunity would be more suspicious than anything. “To anyone paying close attention, it’s really rather obvious. Athos keeping you away from the Louvre, all those little arguments you’re having…” she takes a quick breath, and a risk, “…the way you are around me, and other pregnant women, and children.” It has to be related. It has to. She can’t otherwise explain how Athos’s face furrows with concern whenever Aramis deals with her.

“He still shouldn’t have told you,” Aramis says, having apparently bought her lie lock, stock and barrel. “We need to protect Her Majesty’s reputation.”

Her Majesty’s reputation? Please let him not be saying what she thinks he’s saying. “Among other things,” she says, nodding as if she agrees entirely. “If this gets out… if people realise… it would be disastrous. Really, Aramis, what were you thinking?”

She keeps the accusation vague, but makes her voice as reproachful as possible – people reveal a lot when they’re being defensive, just like they do when they feel angry or betrayed, or when they finally think they’ve got a sympathetic ear to vent to. Finding things out is one of her specialties, after all.

“I already get enough of that from Athos,” Aramis snaps, then appears to regret his harshness. He lets his voice fall to barely more than a whisper. “I’m sorry. I understand why you’re angry, I do. We were reckless, even foolish. But how can I regret anything that led to my son?”

His son. His son. My God.

Milady bites her tongue to restrain from screaming at him. He can’t be serious. He implicated her husband in treason. No wonder Athos spends so much time looking as if he’d like to punch Aramis. “The Dauphin is your son,” she says, low and deadly.

“What? You said you…” Aramis grinds to a stop. Then he massages his forehead with one hand, clearly barely holding onto his temper. “Athos never told you a thing, did he.”

“No, you did,” she says. She’s running through everything else she knows with this new information to fill in the blanks, figuring out how it all fits together. “Are you mad? You and the Queen…” she lowers her voice even to say it. “…that’s treason.”

“As if I’m the only one here who’s committed treason. You’re the reason we were in that convent to start with!”

So that’s when it happened. He has a point, but she scowls at him anyway. “Yes, you’re right, it’s
all my fault. It’s practically my child too. I wonder if he has my eyes!” She finds she’s toying with
her choker, like she does when she’s worried, and stills.

He rolls his eyes at her. “You know what I mean. You’re hardly in a position to lecture me on my
behaviour.”

“Only one of us swore loyalty to the King,” she points out. “Besides which, all my crimes have
been officially exonerated. Perhaps you should go to His Majesty and ask for him to pardon you as
well… oh, wait!”

“I know how badly this could end,” Aramis grits out, cheeks pink. “You’re not telling me anything
I don’t know. But what’s done is done. What happened between Her Majesty and I… it’s over.
Whatever we may feel for each other, we will do what’s best for France. We promised that.”

She makes another connection. Her head is starting to ache. “The governess, the one you’re
sleeping with. You’re using her to get to the Dauphin.”

“What governess?” His attempt at innocence doesn’t survive her gimlet stare, and he throws his
hands up in frustration. “Tell me you wouldn’t do anything at all to see your child. No matter how
good a liar you are, though, I won’t believe you.”

“Of course I would,” she snaps. “But are you really aspiring to the lofty moral heights of being like
me? You’re using this woman -”

“I didn’t know my love life was of such interest to you.” He arches an eyebrow at her. “Or is it
concern for Marguerite? Your compassion is admirable.”

She snorts. “Oh, please. I couldn’t care less about the softer feelings of some woman I’ve never
met. Go ahead and seduce half of France, if they’re fool enough to have you, but I suspect this
specific victim wasn’t chosen for her beauty or allure.”

“Victim,” he echoes, a bitter smile tugging at his lips. “How flattering. You know, we don’t all
bite off our bedpartners’ heads as soon as we’re finished with them, Milady.”

“In this case you may have to. If she realises your motivations… few things are more dangerous
than a scorned woman.”

“You would know,” he says sharply. “But the situation will never arise. Marguerite won’t find out,
and even if she did suspect, she’s not like that. She would never harm me or the Queen.”

“No woman’s like that until they are. Also, she’s hardly the only one around who might notice
you’re more interested in the child than the woman whose bed you’re sharing. There’s the
maidservants who gossip about the affair, the guards you walk past every time, the Dauphin’s
nurses -”

“I know what I’m doing.”

She shakes her head, and loses any air of playfulness that still remained, letting her face harden to
ice. It’s difficult to be threatening at eight months pregnant, but she straightens even though it
sends a throb of pain through her back, and crosses her arms above the vast swell of her stomach.
“I thought Rochefort was the one trying to burn down all of France. If only he’d known he had an
ally in you.”

“Don’t,” Aramis warns, face darkening.
“And you even have the same motivation. But is ruining her life and wrecking her country really the way to Her Majesty’s heart? If so, perhaps the Cardinal’s aims were not so misguided after all. It says a great deal if assassinating the Queen would make a country safer.”

“How dare you.” Aramis’s voice is low and dangerous.

The expression he wears would make anyone quail, but she’s experienced the Cardinal’s displeasure, and Aramis could never be as dangerous as him in a million years. Besides anything else, she has the ultimate advantage – the child inside her. Aramis won’t even dare raise his voice to her. She’s not above taking advantage of that. If he continues being argumentative, perhaps she’ll bend over, groan, and clutch at her stomach. Unethical? Cruel? But of course. She can live with that. She cannot live with Aramis getting her husband executed for his knowledge of this.

And she has another advantage. She doesn’t hesitate to play that one either. “If I hear from the maidservants that you’ve been seeing her again, or trying any other foolish schemes to get to the child, I’ll tell Athos,” she threatens, feeling absurdly childish even as she says it but still quite willing to go through with it. She might even cry when she does – she’s not above that, either. She likes her life and won’t allow it to be ruined by Aramis’s stupidity. “Finish it.”

“And what if I really am fond of Marguerite?” He wants to know, defiant.

She doesn’t know when she ever gave him the idea his feelings matter to her. Perhaps she dislikes him a little less than she does most other people, but that’s hardly a ringing endorsement. “Then give her a nice farewell gift,” she snaps, “I don’t care. But end it, or I’ll tell Athos.”

“Tell me what?” Athos asks, coming through the door.

There’s a brief, horrified pause where the two of them look at each other, alarmed and suddenly on the same side. She doesn’t want Athos to know she pried secrets from his friend instead of trusting him to manage his own problems. Aramis doesn’t want Athos to know he’s disregarding his orders and endangering Her Majesty and the Dauphin. Discretion, in this case, is the better part of valour.

“Nothing,” Aramis says hastily, which is useless as lies go.

“That my footman thinks I’m carrying on illicit relationships with half the Garrison,” Milady says, letting her tone turn light again. “With the reputation your Musketeers have, I suppose that was inevitable, but it would help if Aramis stopped lurking outside my house waiting for you to appear.”

“It’s good you’re here,” Athos says to Aramis, apparently deciding not to worry about her footman’s opinion at the moment. “We need you. We’re pretending to hand over the secret to a powder so powerful it can destroy galleons to the Spanish in return for the captive daughter of a former Spanish general, and we need you to shoot a different Spanish general in the head.”

Aramis blinks, but nods, and Milady sighs jealously. He’s just making her day seem even more boring in comparison. She’ll be spending her time on some light reading, handling inane questions from her servants, lying down and staying as still as possible, and going steadily mad with boredom and frustration and worry. If she’s feeling really wild, she may walk down the street despite the midwife’s strictures, or perhaps even cook some stew for lunch. A life of constant excitement. At least she got to discover high treason, she thinks, comforted by the thought, and it’s not even midday yet.

She picks up her book again, then raises her head to glare in indignation when it’s plucked from her fingers. “What -” she begins, but stops as a bouquet of forget-me-nots falls into her lap. She can’t
help her smile. It’s such a stupid, small thing to find pleasure in, after all this time – the lovely scent that perfumes the air, the bright blue of the petals, the warmth brought by knowing he thought of her while apart. But she finds pleasure in it anyway.

Athos kisses her briefly but thoroughly, his fingers cupping her cheek. “I’ll be by tonight, I promise,” he says against her lips.

She steals her book back with a huff and places it on the table, but she can’t hide her delight at the promise and at the flowers. “Good. I think you’re my footman’s favourite. Not to mention my own.” When he’s gone, she brings the flowers to her face and inhales, closing her eyes.

X_X_X_X_X

The street has maybe a dozen people in it, and two little stalls. Athos is at one of them, pretending to haggle for apples. Since the apple-seller is actually d’Artagnan pretending to be a merchant, the haggling can go as long as needed. Porthos is across the way, doing his best impression of a hungover Red Guard in the gutter – one person’s already kicked him as they passed, so Athos thinks it must be pretty convincing. Alaman is in the middle of the street holding a wooden box.

Aramis is up in a nearby window, musket at the ready. The building he’s in looks a hair away from falling down, as does most of this street – Porthos picked a place where not even the poorest people dare live for the exchange. The only people who use this street are on their way to another, and even they hurry through, alert to sudden rock falls. The whole place is in the process of being torn down as part of one of the building projects Louis started last year. It’s the perfect place for this meeting, provided it doesn’t fall down around their ears.

Apart from its state of disrepair, the building is ideal. Baltasar will have to walk into Aramis’s sightline to even enter the street, let alone approach Alaman, but Athos told him to wait until they see Samara – if they don’t, Aramis is to shoot Baltasar in the knee or leg on Athos’s signal, and they’ll grab him and try a repeat of this handover with Baltasar as the trade instead. He told Aramis to get out once he’s made his shot, instead of being trapped there.

He didn’t tell Aramis anything else – specifically, he didn’t tell Aramis that the Dauphin is sick. It wouldn’t have occurred to either of the others to mention it, not when they have this as their priority and they don’t know the connection between Aramis and the child. Athos knows he should tell his friend, that if Aramis’s son dies without him even knowing the boy was ill he might never forgive Athos. He feels a twist of guilt at the thought.

He’d want to know if it was his child. The closer it comes to Anne’s time, the more Athos thinks he understands Aramis’s feelings. He finds himself being harsher despite that – or perhaps even because of that. Understanding Aramis means understanding how impossible this must be to move past. That provokes sympathy, but also caution and a certain amount of distrust. He feels he has to keep Aramis away from any temptation.

But still, perhaps this is too far. The Dauphin’s attendants tend to react excessively to the smallest problems, but there was real fear on Constance’s face earlier, and Constance is not a fearful person.

He knows he’s giving more attention to the Dauphin’s illness than he should – usually, he’d happily leave that problem to be dealt with by people more suited to the task, and focus on issues he can do something about. But right now it’s another reminder that children die every day, that even if the birth of his child goes well it won’t guarantee the babe survives the first few months. Many infants die before they’re a year old, after all. He understands, suddenly, why Milady’s been so averse to talking about names for the child, why she doesn’t want to plan even that far ahead.
But – no, that can’t be it. She seems certain they’ll both be fine. He’s the one who’s terrified.

No matter how much he plans for the birth, Milady or the child might die. No matter how much he tries to keep them safe afterwards, Milady or the child might die. No matter how careful and cautious he is with his own life, he might take a bullet or a blade and be unable to protect them at all. No matter what he does, he has something to lose now. It was easier when he had only himself to worry about, and he hardly cared if he lived or died.

At least Milady can take care of herself. As much as he might fear for her sometimes, she’s the toughest person he’s ever met. But their child… it will be small, and weak, and helpless, and it will need them, and when has Athos ever managed to come through for someone who needs him?

“Athos?”

Athos blinks and looks at d’Artagnan, who’s speaking in an undertone, and then casts a careful glance over his shoulder. There’s a man striding quickly towards Alaman – he matches the description of Baltasar. Behind him are men with weapons, lots of them, more than Athos expected. Two of them hold a struggling young woman between them.

Alaman inclines his head without looking at them, indicating that the man is Baltasar, and Athos raises his hand slightly, indicating that Aramis can take the shot.

The crack of the musket rings out, and Baltasar falls.

“Lay down your weapons,” Athos says, speaking so his voice swells and carries all the way down the street. “And you won’t -”

The moment of frozen surprise vanishes, and the Spanish soldiers start moving again. “We’re surrounded! Surrounded!” one screams out, losing his head completely, and takes a shot in Athos’s vague direction. D’Artagnan hits the ground to avoid it and then returns fire with the pistol he had concealed in his cloak.

Unfortunately, all the rest of them seem to take this as the sign that Athos’s offer is now off the table, and they’ll be slaughtered regardless of if they surrender or not. In half a second, the quiet, crumbling street is echoing with the clash of swords and the report of gunfire.

Aramis is down to ground level in moments, so they’re all together, but there’s far more men than Athos thought there’d be – Baltasar must have realised that his old friend would go to the French for help, and planned accordingly. Still, they manage to take down half a dozen of them in only moments, before the combination of crossbows and muskets forces them back behind the table, now turned on its side. Still, that gives them plenty of time to reload, and nearly every shot finds its mark.

Samara kicks one of the men holding her, then ducks the swinging sword of the other so that he strikes his companion, and then she’s free, stumbling down the street towards her father. He grabs her close and they embrace. Then she scrambles at her clothes and looks up at him in horror – it seems she dropped something while struggling free of her guards, some kind of book, and she starts towards it again despite the danger.

“Get back,” Porthos orders her, trying to corral her behind him. She evades his arm for a moment and then cries out in pain as a crossbow bolt sprouts from her shoulder with a dull thud. Her father grabs her and pulls her back, dragging her to the ground behind their flimsy cover.

“We need to lay her down, get the bolt out and sew her up,” Aramis says, loud enough to be heard
over the sound of muskets. He leans around the side of the table and shoots. There’s a cry.

“You need to do your jobs and get us out of here, you mean,” Samara snaps, accent getting heavier in annoyance. “I’ll bleed out if you remove it now.”

D’Artagnan leans over their cover for a second to pull over a Spaniard who’s gotten too close, then lays the man out with a punch to the face. Samara tries to grab at the man’s crossbow, apparently determined to take part in this fight, but the bolt through her shoulder makes her arm almost useless and all she drops it almost before she can raise it. Apparently she has enough sense to stop after that, reaching up to press hard on her shoulder and slow the bleeding.

Athos has no doubt he and his friends can take all of these men. They have cover, and plenty of ammunition, and given time they can remove every threat with a carefully-placed shot. However, judging by the look of the bolt in Samara’s shoulder, they don’t have a lot of time. She’s bleeding very heavily.

He looks over at Porthos, and finds his friend is looking down at the crossbow thoughtfully.

“There’s too many of them,” Porthos says, glancing up at Alaman. “You got any more of that powder?”

“I won’t risk killing an innocent!”

“They’ve either fled, or died already,” Athos says bluntly, even though the words twist his heart. In those first few moments of paranoia, the Spaniards attacked everyone, not sure who was a Musketeer in disguise. “There’s only soldiers left here, and they’re gathered around that building.”

Alaman hesitates, then passes over a small vial.

Porthos picks up the crossbow and holds it out, letting Athos do the honours. It’s the work of moments for him to wrap his scarf around the crossbow bolt, tying the little vial tightly to it. Lighting the very edge of the scarf on fire makes him and everyone else in their little refuge cringe, but it doesn’t blow immediately, and Porthos is able to rise and take the shot.

He’s no expert with bows, Athos knows, and the weight of the vial makes it fly poorly, and it being on fire doesn’t seem to help either, but he’s only aiming in a general direction anyway. The second it’s loosed they all hit the ground, lying face-down in the dirt, Alaman covering Samara with his body despite her audible protests at this protection.

For a second Athos thinks the fire went out, but then the world shudders and shatters.

The explosion is just as deafening and overwhelming as the last. The table they’re behind skids a few inches in the dirt, pushing them all against each other, and there’s a load noise as piece of debris hits the wall nearby. Athos’s ears ring. The ground lurches as if the earth’s been shaken.

Before the smoke or the dizziness clears, though, they’re leaping over the table, weapons drawn, ready to use this distraction to deal with the few enemies that remain. Athos knocks out a man who’s confused and staggering, Porthos cheerfully slams two dizzy Spaniard’s heads together, and d’Artagnan takes down a soldier who was far enough from the explosion that he’s still competent. Aramis stays behind cover, trying to stem Samara’s bleeding.

“No, get the book!” Samara shrieks, shaking off her father’s grip and trying to stagger upright although her shoulder’s still bleeding heavily. Athos can barely hear her over the ringing in his ears. “It’s the cipher! It’s -“
Porthos glances back at her and changes direction, heading for the book that’s still lying on the street, but one of the few remaining Spaniards is grabbing for it as well – presumably he’s realised he needs some kind of leverage if he’s to survive this. He slashes at Porthos with a curved knife, drawing blood. Athos and d’Artagnan start forward to help, but by the time they get there it’s too late.

Porthos roars and slams into the man, driving him into the nearest wall, and then pulls him back by the front of his shirt to slam him back into it again. There’s a grinding noise and a shudder as the man collapses to the ground. It seems this particular wall was hanging by a thread after the nearby explosion, and Porthos just broke it. Athos and d’Artagnan glance at each other for a fleeting moment, and then each of them grab one of Porthos’s arms and yank him backwards and away as fast as possible, staggering as far from the wall as they can get.

There’s a strange moment of silence in the middle of the fight, and then the whole wall falls down in on itself, burying everyone and everything nearby… including the cipher.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's noticed the episode titles changing, that's because I'm altering them slightly to be more in line with Athos's and Milady's thoughts/issues/storylines.
Athos is standing in a ruined marketplace, with a man whose child may be dying of a fever and a man whose child has a crossbow bolt through her shoulder, directing his men as they shift stones, help civilians, and tie up any survivors. One task involves laying out the corpses of eighteen Spanish soldiers and three citizens of France. One of the bodies is of a boy who must be twelve at the oldest. Athos wonders how any parent survives their child’s journey to adulthood with so much danger in the world to steal them away – but then, Samara is an adult, and she still might die before her father’s eyes, so even that’s not a promise of safety.

“Press here,” Aramis orders, still focused on Samara’s wound, and Alaman hurries to obey. “I need to get this out -”

“No, a little higher, father,” Samara says, a little dizzily. Athos is quietly impressed that she’s able to act as an assistant to Aramis while bleeding out and in considerable pain. “Harder than that! Really push!”

“Here, I’ll do it,” Porthos says, shouldering him aside gently and bearing down much more firmly, making Samara let out a whimper. “General, you try and keep her calm.”

“I am calm!”

“Yeah, yeah. Well then you keep him calm, alright?” Porthos raises his eyebrows at her, crooked smile in place despite the urgency of the situation.

“There we go,” Aramis says, and with a twist and high-pitched cry from Samara, the crossbow bolt is out and clatters to the ground next to her. “Porthos, keep the pressure up – I need to sew it -”

Athos leaves them to it – unless they want Samara knocked out, he’s not much use in a sickroom. Instead, he gives orders to the other Musketeers, makes sure the area is cleared of any other potential Spanish soldiers, and checks that the survivors are secure. Then he looks at the book of poetry they’ve unearthed – it’s well and truly wrecked, all those strange little gears mangled by the collapsed masonry, cover half-burnt off from the explosion, the pages dirty and ripped and stained with soot. In a way, he’s relieved. If it wasn’t, he’d have to face the question of whether he really wants France to have the ability to blow up houses with a teaspoon’s worth of powder. Imagine what Vadim could have done if he’d had that instead of gunpowder. For that matter, imagine what Louis could do with that, the excessive use he’d put it to, the war he’d undoubtedly start.

It’s not the kind of world he wants his child to grow up in. This one is quite dangerous enough as it is.

“She’ll survive,” Aramis says, appearing by his side. Alone out of them, he’s not covered in dust and bruises from the falling rocks – if he and d’Artagnan had acted even a second later, Porthos would probably have been buried with the book. Come to think of it, he and d’Artagnan might have been as well. It doesn’t bear thinking of.

Athos lets out a breath he didn’t realise he was holding. “Good. Good. How’s the General?”

“My lord? I’m fine. Just a little shaken.”

“A bit, yes. But you’re a tough old bird, Athos.”

Athos imagines he would confide in his friend, talk about his fears, the ones he can’t bring himself to talk about with Milady even though he desperately wants to. If things were different. As it is, how can he talk about how incredibly afraid he is to be a father, when
there’s nothing Aramis wants more in the world? How can he talk about hypothetical future worries of his child in danger and dying, when Aramis’s son is sick right now and he can’t go to him?

Which is something he still has yet to tell Aramis, he realises with a dull thud of guilt.

He draws the other man a little ways away, and Aramis allows it. “There’s something I need to tell you,” Athos says in an undertone. “And I need you not to overreact. It seems that the Dauphin came down with a fever in the night.”

Aramis pales slightly, but the tremble in his voice is almost undetectable as he says, “I see. How bad a fever?”

“Constance seemed quite worried.”

“And I suppose your orders still prohibit me going to the Louvre, don’t they.” Aramis sounds cold. Athos is torn between guilt, anger, and terrible pity. Aramis deserves to be able to see his sick child, of course he does, but Athos doesn’t think that his orders are the main prohibition here. It’s about keeping everyone safe, being sensible, being careful. Perhaps Aramis didn’t ask for this, and he’s doing the best he can, but so is Athos and the tension between them these days pains him.

He sighs, giving up. “Would you listen to me anyway? But I suspect Her Majesty won’t welcome you turning up right now. And you need to think about what this is likely to -”

“Your objections are noted,” Aramis says curtly, and strides away, most likely to go straight to the Louvre.

Porthos clears his throat behind him, and Athos wheels around to look at him. “Did you hear any of that?” he wants to know.

“Only the bit at the end,” Porthos says. “Listen, I was wondering, do you think we can put Samara and her dad up at the Garrison? It’s not exactly fancy, but they could use a place to sleep, and we have the room.”

“Of course,” Athos says. He holds out the book. “I’m not sure if it’s any use now, but give it to Tariq anyway.”

“Will do.”

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The cook directs him to the kitchen with the sombre air of someone leading him to a murder scene. It appears that Milady’s cooking again.

“Before you say anything,” she says over her shoulder, somehow knowing he’s present without turning around. “Please remember that whatever our midwife says, peasant women often work to the day of the birth without any problems. I’m not going to spend a month abed.”

Yes, but peasant women often die in childbirth. Then again, so do noblewomen – it’s not like his mother taking to her bed two full months before her time saved her. As much Athos would like it if Milady slavishly followed the midwife’s every order, he’s figured out by now that she finds this one impossible to keep. To be fair, so would he. And moving about and doing light chores doesn’t seem to be doing her any harm – she positively radiates health and strength. Surely that’s a good sign, surely it means there’s no chance of anything going wrong – but he feels that old lurch of fear
choking him again.

She swings around and studies him when he doesn’t respond. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” he says, because there’s no need to infect her with his worries, but he knows his attempt at a smile doesn’t reach his eyes. He shouldn’t be allowing this to get to him. A sick baby and a mission with a father, and all of a sudden he’s distracted, the fears that always plague him now seeming overwhelming.

Milady visibly considers whether to believe him, but then thankfully backs down. She looks him up and down, wrinkling her nose slightly and settling on another topic. “You smell like gunpowder and smoke. Good day?”

“Fairly standard,” he says, relieved by the relatively simpler question. He decides not to mention nearly being crushed by a wall, or the Dauphin’s sickness, or the crossbow bolt in the shoulder of the girl they were supposed to rescue, or the black powder that can destroy streets. He goes for flippancy instead. “More explosions and collapsing buildings than I was expecting, but it could be worse. One of my scarves did sacrifice its life for the good of France, though.”

“How heroic of it.” She smiles, and he’s struck by her like always. These days whenever he sees her he has the mad urge to spend every coin he has and many he does not on the services of a painter, as if he could freeze them in the moment simply by recording it. He dragged a knife through the last portrait she sat for years ago, furious and betrayed, sure even her smile was a lie. Now, though, he knows her smile is honest, and that this particular warm, intimate, affectionate smile is one only he gets to see, entirely for him, and he wishes he could preserve it.

She’s beautiful at the moment, whatever she might think, but more than beautiful, she’s unforgettable. She is so completely unlike anyone else he’s ever met. Any other woman would probably look entirely domestic like this, he thinks. The curve of her belly is now too steep for any cloak to conceal, her dark hair is in a messy plait with soft tendrils and flyaway wisps framing her face, she’s wearing a loose blue dress and white apron as she brandishes a ladle, and her smile is sweet as she looks at him. But she doesn’t look domestic, or at least, not just that. It’s a tableau of the fascinating contradictions that make up his wife. Her smile might be sweet, but the spark in her eyes is entirely wicked. There’s something formidable about the way she stands, as straight-backed as a general in front of his troops. She’s even unconsciously holding the ladle in the position Athos spends hours trying to hammer into his recruits’ heads – as if she’s about to do battle with the meal, instead of just cook it.

Of course, Milady does seem to approach cooking as if it’s a kind of battle. Back when they were married, he thought she knew nothing about how to cook, and since women of his own class typically did not it never occurred to him to really question that. Now he knows that she does know some cooking, but not how to make the kind of meals that grace noble tables – he recognises how she cooks as being like that of the poorest of the poor. Everything is boiled slowly, over many hours, to soften meat that would be otherwise too tough to chew through and disguise off or squishy vegetables, and then the water is kept so that not one tiny shred of nutrition is lost from the meal. Everything becomes a kind of watery soup full of tasteless lumps, which can then be used to soften the impossibly hard bread that’s all some people can afford.

Her whole life, she’s either been very poor, and that was the best way to cook whatever scraps she had, or very rich, and not needed to cook at all. Now she’s still in the latter category, of course, but she’s bored enough that she’s learning a few things to fill the time. At first she seemed instinctively embarrassed by how much of a feminine, wifely activity it is, and paradoxically annoyed by how basic her skills at it are, but her defensiveness has gradually lessened over the past few weeks.
Still, that doesn’t mean she likes it enough to do it when there’s anything else available – it’s definitely a boredom activity, instead of a real interest. “Agatha,” she calls out, pulling off the apron carelessly, “You can have the kitchen back now.”

The cook takes the apron with a curtsey and a definite look of relief, picking up the ladle from where Milady’s left it. “Of course, my lady.”

“It probably won’t be ready for another hour or so,” Milady tells him. “However will we fill the time?” The flirtatious smirk she shoots him holds a suggestion.

“I thought you objected to the idea of staying in bed,” he teases gently, letting her grab his hand and pull him along.

“So persuade me, then.”

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Milady stretches, and still feels every little ache and pain thrum through her body, but much less acutely than she did earlier. It’s strange that her body only feels like hers these days when she’s curled up with him like this. It brings her back to herself. Perhaps it’s because this is one small thing that is completely unchanged, in all the mood swings and discomforts and indignities of this – when he touches her, she still feels exactly the same. It’s slightly different, of course, thanks to the advanced stage of her pregnancy – they have to constrain themselves to certain positions and certain actions, have to be more careful than they’re accustomed to. But this is something she can still do, a part of herself that is still hers, not belonging to the child inside her or to the respectable woman she’s pretending to be. And that Athos still wants to be close to her, even when she feels bloated, unattractive, and as far from seductive as can be, always comforts her as well – she never thought for a moment his love for her was based on how she looked, but it’s always good to be reminded.

She’s not sure what she thinks when she looks at herself, so far from the sleek seductress she is used to being, but she knows what he thinks on this one subject, because he makes it very clear. He looks at her as if she’s unimaginably perfect, the most beautiful, enticing woman in the world, impossibly desirable, and he doesn’t seem to consider the heaviness of her pregnancy any impediment to this. If anything, she thinks when he looks at the ever-growing swell of her belly, he sees it as something magical, a sign of broken things fixed, of lost things found, of second chances given. But even his endless gratitude at getting to touch her doesn’t seem to have lightened his mood today.

She thinks about teasing Athos that he’s joined her again in her rebellion against the midwife’s orders – the woman had said no excitement of any kind, and she certainly found that exciting – but he’s seemed so worried lately she thinks that the gentle joke will fall flat.

There’s something troubling him, that much is obvious. It’s not just Aramis and his follies, and it’s not his current case, either, she’s somehow sure of that. When Athos is troubled by something he can fix, a problem he can do something about, he strides about, and curses, and focuses on practicalities. When it comes to external problems, he can be proactive. It’s only when the issue is entirely in his own head that he seems to pull away like this, sinking down into the darkness of his own thoughts. Even right now, pressed against her, she can feel his distance.

She wishes he would just tell her whatever it is. This isn’t the first time she’s lain beside him recently and notice him withdrawing into himself, although today he seems even more perturbed than usual. She could ask, of course, but whenever she does he simply changes the subject to something else. She’s oddly hurt by that. The only explanation she can think of is that whatever’s
troubling him, she’s at the centre of it.

Well, perhaps that’s not unreasonable. She came very close to leaving for England, after all. Maybe he worries she’s still considering it. Or it could be her history that troubles him – he might lie awake doubting if she’s capable of settling down and being a mother, or wondering when she’ll backslide into her old ways. God knows she does. No doubt he thinks that if she wasn’t so well-off at present, she already would have fallen back into criminality. She’s not even entirely certain he’s wrong.

She’s been trying so hard not to give him reason to doubt her. She gives herself some leeway – she can complain about her discomfort, and the midwife’s rules, and a little about her boredom – but she holds back from anything too real. If she told him how trapped she feels sometimes, how her body seems like it’s not entirely hers anymore, as if it’s been appropriated by the child within her, she might give off the impression she wishes she was anything but eight months pregnant. She doesn’t want him to think that, because she would never wish away the child. She worries about sending the wrong message – it’s better not to communicate at all, if that’s the risk.

She still trips up sometimes, though. She finds it difficult not to show her frustration, although he must interpret that as a dislike of domesticity, of settling down. She just can’t stand being inactive, feeling pinned down, unable to go anywhere or do anything, only able to sit and wait for things to happen to her. She’s not passive. She never has been. Of course, normally she’s also not the size of a whale. Her body and her life are all but unrecognisable to her right now, and that gives her a horrible sense of dislocation.

And when she thinks of what she’s waiting for, she feels worse. The idea of giving birth makes her feel sick – she’s faced worse things, more dangerous ones, but those were dangers she was equipped to face. To her, giving birth is the domain of plump, sweet-faced peasant women, who somehow seem to automatically know how to do everything from the moment they conceive. To her, the idea of giving birth herself is horribly alien, unnatural despite being logically very natural. And what about afterwards? She isn’t exactly the motherly kind, and however much she loves the child inside her, she can’t magically transform to someone more maternal. None of this is what she pictured – but no, she never pictured this, not really. Even when she and Athos were happy in Pinon it had always seemed more of a daydream than a plan. Now it’s real, and yet conversely even less real, because it seems utterly impossible to her. How can someone like her bear a healthy child, love it, care for it, raise it? Every part of the future seems unbelievably complicated, and she thinks she might be completely unsuited to dealing with it. Her child will need a mother. She doesn’t feel like one, even with it inside her. She’s overwhelmed at all the things she doesn’t know – not practical concerns, because those she can manage, but emotional ones. She’s never even seen a real family, unless she counts the glimpses she sometimes got while robbing their homes. She has the vague idea that mothers are always calm, always kind, always loving. But she knows that she has a quick temper, that cruelty is her specialty, and that her own love comes with sharp edges. Not very motherly.

At least she’s managed to keep her nervousness, her fretfulness, and her fears of being incapable to herself though. God only knows what Athos would make of that – it could seem like regret for keeping the child, regret for staying in France, regret for giving up her old ways. She even tries to hide her loneliness when she goes a long time without seeing him, because while he might be flattered or warmed by it, he’s equally likely to see it as a criticism of the hours he works and an expression of dissatisfaction at their renewed relationship. Boredom is one thing – she can be sarcastic about it, make it seem trivial. Loneliness, insecurity, and fear aren’t trivial. Athos might think they mean she’s unhappy, that she regrets all of this, that she’s likely to take off at the first available opportunity.
The truth is that she doesn’t regret any of her choices, not really, and she has no plans of going anywhere. She loves Athos, and she loves the child inside her, and she loves this life they’re building together. She’s committed to this path and it’s the right path, she has no doubts about that. But no matter how much she loves her life, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t feel worried, or restless, or intimidated by the future, or strangely lonely, or uncertain about who she is now that she can barely recognise herself in the mirror.

None of that is likely to make Athos feel any better, though. No, she’ll keep being as optimistic and unconcerned as she’s capable of being, instead of loading her own worries on top of him as well as his own. No doubt he can take the weight, but why should he have to? She wants him to relax, to feel calm and secure. He already has all these unknown worries eating away at him. She wants him to have faith in her, even when she’s not sure it’s justified.

“How are you feeling?” he whispers into her hair, before pressing a kiss to it. She can feel him lapse back into brooding even as he asks it though.

Abruptly, she’s frustrated. She wants to tell him not to ask a question if he wouldn’t be willing to answer it himself. Instead, though, she gives him the answer he always gives her. “I’m fine.”

Athos is looking for Porthos, to pass on the news that the Dauphin is well now – the news came from Constance to d’Artagnan, and from there to Athos. Aramis has already been informed, judging by his renewed cheerfulness, but Athos doesn’t know who told him – hopefully not the Queen, but at this point, anything’s possible. Still, Porthos will probably want to know too, even if his interest is somewhat less personal.

Athos is happy the Dauphin is better, of course he is. Aramis’s son survived. The General’s daughter survived too. That should inspire optimism. Somehow it doesn’t, though. If anything it just feels like it emphasises the unpredictable nature of it all – one moment a child is dying of fever, the next they’re well. One moment they’re hale and healthy, the next they’re bleeding out. How can anyone ever relax when at any second everything could change? How can they ever prepare themselves?

Porthos is probably visiting Samara right now – he’s a frequent visitor as she heals from her shoulder wound. Athos has stopped by a few times, but he has little in common with her, and she can’t help but look at him distrustfully – as a high-placed military officer who walks and talks like a nobleman, he probably resembles the ‘friends’ who turned on her and her father. But Porthos and her seem to get along fine, even if every second conversation Athos overhears is an argument.

This time, it’s not. He still waits at the door, hesitant to interrupt them – it looks serious.

“Thought you were heading to Morocco.” Porthos looks troubled by this.

“I was. I want to.” Samara sighs, shifting to sit up even though her shoulder still looks painful. “But how can I? Father insists that he has promised to provide France with the secret of the powder, and that he must keep his promise. It will take him years to decode it, with the book so damaged, and he won’t leave until it’s done – even if your King would let him. What would you do, brother?”

“You know what I’d do, because I’m doing it. Musketeers are my home, Samara.”

“My father is a great man. He taught me everything. Life would be hard without him. But I want to find a home for my children, somewhere they can belong. I think that’s Morocco.”
“So go there in a few years, then, once he’s done here.” Porthos pauses, then says, “I never knew my father.”

“Not at all?”

“No. Guess he abandoned us. Anyway, I don’t remember him at all, but if I had a father like yours, I wouldn’t leave him. People are more important than places.”

“Father tells me to go, to live my life away from him, where I will be safer. After what happened with Baltasar…”

“So he’s scared for you. Not really a revelation. Seems to me good parents are scared all the time.”

“I wasn’t scared, though. Father has always protected me, always saved me. I knew he would again.”

It hits Athos in the stomach like a fist, leaving him breathless. He leans against the wall, winded, as Porthos and Samara continue their conversation, debating the pros and cons of Morocco.

He’s scared all the time, of course he is, but he could never be like the father Samara’s describing, could never live up to Porthos’s casual proclamation of ‘good parents’. He’s not a great man – he’s a killer and a drunk. He can’t teach a child everything they need to know – he feels like he’s barely managing to stumble through life himself, constantly on the edge of ruining everything. And he’s never managed to protect the people he loves – if anything, he’s the biggest danger to them. Look at what he’s done to Milady in the past.

Alaman’s a wonderful father, and an honourable man, and he still hasn’t been able to protect his daughter. In fact, he nearly got her killed. Not just here, but back in Spain. He worked with what he thought were good men, men he trusted, and he did the best he could every day. He thought he was building a stable life for her, a good life. But it fell down around their ears, and they were left with nothing, and it’s only through luck that she survived. And now Alaman’s choice is between sending her off to another country entirely on her own, with no one to protect her, or persuading her to stay even if it might make her a target for his enemies yet again. No safe options. No way to protect her.

If a good man can’t keep his family safe, what chance does someone like Athos have?

Porthos steps outside and sees Athos. Immediately, his eyebrows rise. “Looking for me?”

“I… yes. The Dauphin’s fever broke. He’ll make a full recovery.”

“You don’t look too pleased about it.” Porthos studies him. “Everything okay?”

“Of course,” Athos says automatically. He knows it shows on his face that it isn’t, though.

Porthos gives him a sideways look, and says, “This about what you said the other day?”

“What I said the other -” Then he remembers. He hesitates, nearly decides to play it off as nothing, but then doesn’t. He’s keeping enough from his friends that he wants to share a little bit of honesty, one tiny corner of his fear. “A little, maybe.”

“Because I reckon you’ll be a wonderful father.”

“I somehow doubt it.”
“Yeah? You planning to take off?”

“What?” Athos blinks at him, honestly surprised by the question. “Of course not. But being a good parent requires more than just not leaving.”

“Not much more. Good parents stay, and love their kids, and keep them fed, and look out for them. Good parents try, and keep trying.” Porthos shrugs. “That’s all there is to it. You’ll do fine.”

But what about when trying isn’t good enough? “Thank you for the thought.”

Porthos doesn’t look reassured by this, but being Porthos, doesn’t push further. All he says is, “You ever want to talk about it, you know where to find me.”

He does know that, and he does want to talk about it – but not to Porthos, as fond of him as he is.

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He’s at Milady’s house again, lying on his side behind her on the chaise longue. He’s rubbing at her back, massaging it with his fingers – it feels like it should be ineffectual, or even painful when he presses too hard, but she’s stated quite clearly that she’ll kill him if he stops anytime soon. It makes him feel better to be doing something, to be able to help her somehow, even if it’s in such a small way. Most of the time he’s so useless when it comes to this, unable to lift any of the burdens off her shoulders. Pain, sickness, discomfort, danger… she’s the one who deals with it all.

It’s beyond miraculous to him that there’s a child within her. No amount of feeling it move, its tiny fists and feet pressing against her skin, will ever stop that instinctive awe. He can’t imagine how she copes with it, day in and day out, how she faces the enormity of that. He’s overwhelmed by it, and he’s had to do nothing yet, unless you count spending time with his beautiful wife in her lovely home – not exactly a hardship.

He would do anything at all to keep her comfortable, happy… and safe. But there’s nothing he can do about the latter, really, is there? He’s as useless in that as in everything else.

She must sense some change to the quality of his silence, or perhaps to how he’s kneading at her back, because she says, “Athos? Are you alright?”

It seems everyone is asking him that these days. For a brief moment he imagines telling her no, he’s not sure he is, before sanity resurfaces. Is he supposed to monologue about how thinking of her death or the death of their child hurts him? He would absolutely deserve her scathing response to that, both to the selfishness and the hypocrisy.

“Fine,” he says again.

“Of course,” she says. “When aren’t you?”

He nearly pulls away from the bitterness in her voice, but instead says, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

There’s a long pause. He drops a kiss on the back of her neck. She sighs, but it doesn’t seem like she’s relaxed at all – if anything, she seems more tense than before, and she moves a few inches further away. He stops massaging her and she doesn’t say a word, apparently no longer minding if he stops touching her, and he draws back in response, feeling almost crushed by her coldness. Only a minute ago he felt so close to her, and now they’re so far apart.
All of a sudden, he can’t hold it in any more. “Are you ever -” he stumbles, stopping. No, scared isn’t the right word. “Do you ever feel helpless?”

Even though that word’s better, he feels ashamed as soon as he asks it. Milady is tougher than him, stronger in some ways – she’s never helpless. There’s always an angle, always a plan. And even if she ever did feel helpless, she wouldn’t admit it, wouldn’t show a single sign, especially not to him –

“Yes.”

It takes him a moment to realise what she’s said. “Oh.”

She rolls over to her back. It looks like a struggle, what with how large and ungainly she is right now – not ungainly compared to other people, of course, but compared to her normal sinuous grace. “Look at me, Athos,” she says, gesturing at her swollen belly. “Of course I feel helpless.”

“That’s not – that’s not exactly what I meant. I don’t mean feeling physically incapable.”

“Oh. The other kind of – yes. Yes, I do.”

She looks away, a signal this conversation is over, shutting down, but he cups her face in his hand and draws her attention back to him. “Please,” he says, “Please tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I will if you will,” she says, almost angrily, face twisting into a scowl.

That’s what wants to do, more than anything, so he nods despite his reservations. It’s selfish, he thinks. He wants so badly to know what’s on her mind, and to share what’s on his, that he’s almost trembling at the prospect. He’s sick to death of trying to be strong when he’s terrified. He doesn’t usually confide in his brothers when it comes to emotions, but lately he hasn’t even had the option – d’Artagnan’s dislike of Milady makes it difficult to talk to him, Aramis might understand but even bringing it up with him would be cruel, and Porthos tries but is preoccupied by his own familial issues. And he doesn’t want to talk to them about it, he wants to talk to her, the one person in the world who seems to truly understand him.

She studies him for a moment, and then gives a slow nod of her own, angling herself in the bed so her head is right by his, like they’re whispering secrets to each other. Perhaps they are. “Yes, I feel helpless. All the time. Deciding to keep this child was like jumping off a cliff. There’s no way to change my mind now. All I can do is hope I survive the fall. I don’t regret it,” she adds hurriedly, as if him thinking this is a serious concern. “I’m just not entirely… prepared. I never expected to have to deal with childbirth.”

“You keep telling me how strong the child is. How strong you are.”

“And we are. I just don’t know if that matters. This isn’t a battle I know how to fight. Normally I have weapons, tricks, plans, an escape route. Here, I won’t have any options at all. I’ll be truly helpless.” She shakes her head. “I hate the thought of it. I don’t like pain, but I can deal with that – it’s not having any way to take control of the situation I can’t stand. And what if it all goes wrong? What if I can’t do this? What if the child – what if our child -” She breaks off, shaking her head again, as if even the thought of it’s too much to deal with. She presses her hands to her stomach as if to reassure herself the child is still there.

He’s not exactly pleased she’s scared too, but to his surprise, a wave of relief goes through him. He’s not alone. She’s worried too. Perhaps she doesn’t express it in the same ways he does, but he’s not the only one lost in this morass of fear and uncertainty. He moves his hand to rest on her
stomach too. For once, the babe is still.

“You’ll still be doing something. Whereas I’ll be completely useless, standing outside, pacing…” He gives a bitter smile. “If something happens…”

She hesitates. “Could you… I know it’s not done. But could you stay with me?”

“If you want me there, I won’t leave,” he promises, although he’s not sure what use he’ll be. A part of him recoils from the request, truthfully. If something goes wrong, it would be torture to be waiting outside and pacing while it happened, but he can’t imagine being there during it either. The idea of sitting beside her and holding her hand as she screams in agony, bleeding and thrashing, the child positioned badly or coming out wrong or already dead, watching as the midwife’s face starts to fill with worry and then with pity… but if she wants him there, there’s nowhere else he can be.

It’s bizarre to him to think that he could be a comfort to her. He will never stop being amazed that she wants him near her at all, amazed that she stayed and took a chance on the man who murdered her.

“That’s not all I’m scared of,” she admits, and it sounds like the admission is a painful one. “Really, very few women die in childbirth, and the babe seems strong enough. But then… what about… what about after?”

He nods, well aware what she means. Their gazes meet in perfect understanding. “There’s just so much… Illness, accidents. Or even attacks. We’ve enemies enough between us.”

“The whole of France, I should think. Half of them your enemies and the other half mine.” She reaches up and smooths a strand of hair out of his face. “I’m always scared of my past coming back to destroy the present. That’s a constant fear for me. After all…” she trails off, and doesn’t finish it, but he hears the end of her sentence anyway and swallows hard. She tends to avoid the subject of their past together, now that they’re trying again, and he can never tell if it’s for his benefit or her own.

“Why didn’t you tell me you felt like that?”

“He didn’t want me there,” she counters. “You’re already worried, all the time. Was I supposed to make it worse? You already look at me like you think I’ll smash our lives to pieces.”

“You didn’t do that last time, I did,” Athos says heavily, but she starts to get that mulish, closed-off look that she always does when he brings that up, so he stops. Instead, he says, “You’re wrong, I don’t think you’ll ruin anything. But sometimes… sometimes I think fate will.”

She tilts her head as if confused.

“This is so much more than what I ever thought I’d have, and I can’t help assuming fate, or destiny, or even God, will even the books someday,” he explains as best he can, voice scratching his throat as he forces the words out. “I try and stop it by staying vigilant, but there’s no way to ever be vigilant enough. It feels like I can’t protect you or the child from anything.”

She swallows, and her voice is small when she says it. “Enemies, sickness, accidents… yes, I’m scared of all of them too, now that I have something to lose. But… do you ever worry about hurting the child in other ways?”

“Other ways?” he asks, and then he understands, seeing the momentary flash of self-loathing that passes over her face. “No. You’ll be a wonderful mother.”
“I doubt it. I don’t know how to be a mother.”

“I don’t know how to be a father, either.”

She scoffs. Having started talking, she doesn’t seem able to stop. “That’s different. Oh, maybe you’ve little experience with children, but you’ve had a family, you have friends. You have a pattern to follow. I don’t.”

“My father was distant, my mother died when I was young. The younger brother I helped raise grew up to be a monster,” he says flatly. “And my attitude towards my friends is hardly paternal. I can’t be a comrade-in-arms or a captain to my child. No, you’ll be the better parent by far, I have no doubt about that.”

“No. I won’t. I’m not… warm, or soft…”

“You feel warm and soft to me.” He leans forward and presses a very light kiss to her collarbone, a small gesture of comfort and love.

“I’m not maternal,” she amends. “I’ve already put the child in danger, and it’s not even out of me yet. I’m better at destroying than nurturing.”

“So am I.”

She doesn’t say anything in response. She doesn’t utter denials the way his friends would, doesn’t reassure him, doesn’t argue the point. She just places her hand on top of his where it rests on her belly, and rubs her thumb across his knuckles over and over again. It’s both hypnotic and soothing.

He clears his throat. “Porthos says… Porthos says trying is what matters. That so long as we try, we’ll be good parents.”

“That’s what you asked me for,” she reminds him. “Time and effort and trying, you said. And it seems to be working for us so far. Perhaps it will work with our child as well.”

Of course, that does nothing to erase other threats. Trying is not enough when a failure means a death.

They haven’t settled anything, haven’t come up with any solutions. Childbirth, accidents, illness, enemies, their own worries about parenthood… they didn’t fix anything. Athos should, if anything, feel even worse than he did before this conversation. But to his surprise, that’s not the case.

Perhaps they’re scared, and lost, and uncertain. But they’re scared and lost and uncertain together, openly and honestly, and that makes all the difference. Saying his fears out loud seems to have sapped some of the potency from them. Knowing she shares his worries lifts a weight he barely realised he was carrying. He feels better than he has in weeks.

From the look of the smile she gives him, he’s not alone in that.

“I love you,” she says quietly, into his ear.

Athos feels the child move beneath his hand, the press of a tiny limb, and Milady groans at it waking again. He feels a smile bloom on his face, unstoppable.

Afraid, but not alone: it’s enough, he thinks. More than enough.

“I love you too.”
“We need to give Aramis more time,” Athos says.

“It’s been weeks! What is he doing?”

“Gaining her trust, Your Majesty.” Although actually, he already has it – the plan is for Athos, Porthos, and d’Artagnan to go out to her encampment later today and bring Emilie to Paris, promising her a meeting with His Majesty. But in general, it’s better not to keep the King informed about what they’re doing.

“I still think I should see this prophetess.” The King’s face is set in a mulish expression. “She says the King of Spain is the antichrist, doesn’t she? And that I’m destined to defeat him. Perhaps it’s the truth. She’s gathered thousands of people to my cause, loyal citizens of France bringing the fight to our enemies… I should at least grant her an audience, don’t you think?”

Athos and Treville exchange a fleeting glance. Seeing the King is exactly what Emilie wants, and under different circumstances, it might be the ideal way to calm the situation. Judging by Aramis’s reports, she might be willing to listen to the King, if he called for calm.

Unfortunately, the King is not inclined to call for calm.

“Perhaps, Your Majesty,” Treville says diplomatically. “In the meantime, though, I would like to send the Red Guard and Musketeers into the streets to calm the people.”

Young Captain Chaput of the Red Guards, who has been standing quietly in the background, comes to attention at this, expression brightening. His eagerness to do whatever it takes to help is palpable. But then, it always is. Chaput’s only contribution to the conversation so far has been to ‘helpfully’ give the King more details about Emilie’s prophecies, details Athos and Treville were planning not to share with their monarch. That’s what happens when you choose an honest man for the post, Athos supposes sourly – you get an honest man. He hasn’t tried to advise the King in any way, though, and that’s something. The last thing they need is another Red Guard Captain trying to play chess-master.

Louis sighs in exasperation, and Chaput wilts slightly. “Oh, don’t be silly. Leave it be. They’ll wear themselves out throwing rocks sooner or later.”

Athos and Treville exchange another glance, this one shared with the Queen as well. No, the people won’t burn out their anger, at least not easily. Having the Red Guards and Musketeers patrol is standard procedure when there’s rioting. In the early stages they don’t suppress the riots, and certainly don’t get violent, but they’re a visible reminder that the King disapproves and that he has the power to stop them. Not sending out their men will be seen as a different message, one of approval… which is not so far from the truth, Athos supposes. Leaving the rioters to their own devices will let them build up their courage and progress to worse acts, and the size of the mob will build, enthusiasm and viciousness growing by the day, more and more men taking part. If His Majesty doesn’t let them send out the men soon, then when he finally does, quelling them will be considerably more challenging.

“They’re killing anyone Spanish,” the Queen protests. “We can’t just leave them to it.”

“Well, they’re Spanish, they probably have it coming,” the King says peevishly. The Queen’s flinch is barely noticeable, but he must realise a second later how the comment sounds, because he
flaps his hand in a motion that shows as much irritation as apology. “Oh, you know what I mean! You’re French now… more or less. But your brother’s behaviour -”

“Sending Rochefort as a spy was unacceptable,” Treville says. “But we cannot win a war with Spain, sire. You know that.”

“Well, according to this prophetess, God doesn’t know that,” the King says snidely. He glares at Treville, who remains unmoved. “No, leave the people be. They can shout about how much they hate the Spanish all they like.”

Treville’s mouth presses into a flat, displeased line, but he nods obedience. The First Minister serves the will of the King – one of many reasons Treville is somewhat dissatisfied with the position.

“In regards to Aramis -” Athos starts to say quietly.

“Oh, fine, we’ll give him more time. Just deal with this quickly, will you, Captain?” He snorts. “I’m the only one who should lead my armies, after all, not some peasant girl.”

A peasant girl who, according to Aramis and Constance’s new friend Lemay, is being drugged. The plan is for Athos to wean her off the drug, with Constance’s assistance as nursemaid. He does have some experience in these matters, and it’s not like he’ll be busy commanding his men – they’re sitting idle, instead of discouraging the mob like they should be. Unfortunately, getting the drug out of her system will take days.

Days where he won’t get to see his wife, or if he does, it will be for very short intervals before he rushes back to a sickroom. The midwife has told them with absolute confidence that the amount of time it took the pregnancy to show and the child to move means it will be equally as tardy in entering the world, and estimates she won’t be due for two or three more weeks at least, but even if the birth itself isn’t imminent, he still doesn’t like it. He’s loath to leave her alone for even a couple of days while she’s so heavily pregnant. But the truth is, he’s the best one for the job. Aramis says once Emilie knows she’s been lied to, he thinks she’ll do the right thing, and send her ‘soldiers’ home. Hopefully then the mobs will also disperse.

No, they can sort out this issue. He’s just not sure what to do about the bigger issue – the King’s mood.

Lately, it seems as if everything dissatisfies him. The problem started even before the birth of the Dauphin, but it’s only grown worse since. His son appears to be the only thing he finds any pleasure in. His wife is too boring, too opinionated, too Spanish. His position is too restrictive. His advisors are difficult and disagreeable. His people are ungrateful. His enemies are plotting against him. According to the King, the world is just not measuring up to his expectations, and he takes out his annoyance about that on everyone in his vicinity.

It’s as if he wants something, but doesn’t even know what that is – freedom, victory, adventure, normality, friendship, revenge. He’s sulky, distractible, and unhappy, and that mood is interspersed with attacks of paranoia and anxiety which seem to worsen it. The leader of a country shouldn’t be prey to petty temper tantrums and sudden impulses, but he is, and so Athos, Treville and Her Majesty have to spend all their time trying to keep him on task and sensible. It’s exhausting.

Athos was describing it to Milady only yesterday, not the first time he’s spoken of the King with her. Unfulfilled, he described the man as – Milady, being Milady, promptly recommended taking him to the nearest brothel and telling them to sort that out. Given the King’s basic temperament, Athos wonders if she might have a point. Shallow, momentary pleasures are generally enough to
broaden the King’s mood and his outlook on life. Of course, the Queen probably wouldn’t approve.

Perhaps a war with Spain is inevitable. It’s certainly starting to seem so, with both His Majesty and King Philip spoiling for a fight. But if war does come, he would prefer it not to be due to Louis throwing a tantrum.

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“My lady, I’m very sorry,” the nurse says weakly and tearfully, looking like she’s confessing to having stolen the silver and eloped with the footman instead of having a mild fever. “If you will allow me to take some time to rest today, I will make up for my ignored duties tomorrow -”

Since the ‘duties’ in question are sewing clothing for a baby who is not due to be born for at least two weeks, and who already has a large chest full of clothes in various sizes, Milady waves her hand carelessly. “Go rest, before you get everyone else sick,” she says, dismissing the woman.

The older woman bows her head gratefully, and all but stagers away. There’s been a fever going around their area that’s almost more destructive than the rioters looking for Spaniards, and Milady’s barely surprised her nurse has come down with it too – last week it was the maid, a week and a half ago, the footman. She has no fear for herself, though. Illness almost never strikes her.

The woman’s not a wet-nurse, just the regular kind. Milady’s decision about whether to feed the child herself had been a long and surprisingly difficult one. At first, it had seemed obvious that she should get a wet-nurse. After all, anyone who’s anyone in Paris sends their children off to a wet-nurse these days – not just nobility, not just well-off merchants, but any respectable family who can afford the price of one. Feeding your own child is considered almost a social taboo. Instead, the babe is sent off to the countryside for a couple of years, to be dealt with by another woman, leaving the mother free to produce another child instead of having their fertility hampered by breastfeeding. She’s not sure if she wants another child (can barely comprehend having a child), and certainly doesn’t want one that soon, but otherwise, that plan seemed ideal. She’s easily able to afford one of those wet-nurses. She would have a couple of years before her worries about her lack of motherliness would be relevant. It would give her and Athos time to sort themselves out and figure out how to be together again without being distracted by parenting.

Then she actually imagined doing it, and felt her whole body revolt at the idea. She already cares fiercely about the tiny creature within her, and the idea of handing it off to another person without some kind of guarantee of its safety is abhorrent to her. How does anyone have the absurd level of trust in another that it would take to do that? The child would be miles away from her, a day’s journey at least, so keeping an eye on it constantly would be impossible. The wet-nurse could do almost anything to the child, and she wouldn’t know. She isn’t built to have that much faith in another person. Looking into the matter further proved her lack of faith right – more than half of the babes sent to the country return only as tiny corpses for their well-off families to bury, neglected and underfed by wet-nurses with half a dozen charges.

And… if she did that, her child would be miles from her. That’s nearly as objectionable as sending Athos away from her. She doesn’t want the few people in this world she cares about to be any distance from her, she wants them as close as possible – not just for her peace of mind, although that’s a factor, but because not having them close makes her unhappy. The child is a part of her – it has been since the moment she knew of its existence, and will be long after it leaves her body, whether it survives or not. If she sent it off she would lose some of herself. She would feel empty, bereaved, stripped of something vital. Just as she felt in those long five years when her only contact with Athos was brief glimpses as she hid in dark alleyways, that hollowness always palpable
beneath the desperate heat of her rage.

The option of hiring a wet-nurse to live with her also crossed her mind, of course. That way she wouldn’t have to feed the babe herself, but she could always be close by, ensuring that no one would dare mistreat or ignore it. But her feelings towards her unborn child contain more than affection – they include an almost vicious level of possessiveness, only worsened by her awareness of her lack of maternal abilities. Her body has nurtured this child so far, and it seems healthy and strong, insofar as she can tell. Even as lumbering, uncomfortable, clumsy and overemotional as she feels at this late stage of pregnancy, she still seems healthier and more active than most women this close to giving birth. She has always been able to excel at anything physical, whether it’s fighting, dancing, climbing, picking pockets, bedroom activities, withstanding pain, or surviving the diseases that regularly decimated the slums. What if this is the only part of motherhood she can manage? The bodily parts: carrying it, giving birth, feeding it. If this is all she can do, she cannot give any of that up to another. If she can feed it, she will feed it.

So eventually, she hired a regular nurse, instead of a wet-nurse. She couldn’t stand the thought of her child seeing another woman as its mother (felt a pang of furious jealousy at even the thought of it), but she’s also aware of her limitations – she cannot care for the child on her own, or even just with Athos’s assistance in those hours he can spare. Look at her now, ready to burst and still spending several days alone as he struggles with some new threat facing France. She will need other help, experienced help. And while she can imagine spending a few months of her time caring for a child, she doesn’t think she can do so for years. Having a nurse will give her some freedom, especially after the child is no longer at the breast.

Milady doesn’t know if other expecting woman worry about their children loving other people better, but she does. She doesn’t think the child will come to see the nurse as its mother, though. For one thing, she has no plans to hand off her child for every waking hour of the day, and will probably spend as much time or more with it as the nurse does. (While, no doubt, that nurse is busy cleaning soiled baby clothes and bedding, ensuring the nursery is clean and warm, organising food, and all the other background manual tasks – for which she’ll be well-compensated, of course). For another, the woman she hired seems to consider her primarily role to be menial support, rather than surrogate mother, and will keep a slight, respectful distance as the child grows up instead of encouraging it to see her as more than that. She’s an older woman, as well – a pleasant-faced, simple, and plump middle-aged woman, who Milady hopes her child will see as a grandparent rather than a mother, if it does come to see its carer as family.

Despite the nurse’s deferential distance and practical focus, though, she’s not the kind of woman who would ever mistreat a child. Milady has had many people in her life who thought she owed them her gratitude, her service, her favours, or even her love simply because they weren’t as abusive as other people around her were. She has no intention of treating her child like that – she would never hire a cold, cruel or harsh nurse purely so that she seemed more loveable by comparison. Her highest priority was finding someone who would treat her child like the beautiful, fragile miracle Milady can’t help thinking of it as. Judging by the nurse’s general personality, she seems like she will. All of Milady’s searching was unable to turn up a single person that said anything bad about the woman except that she was a bit slow, and Milady checked very thoroughly. Besides, she needs this job, as a middle-aged widow with no resources and no pension, and would never risk it by endangering the child in any way. She seems very knowledgeable about the practicals of childcare, and is warm and comforting, traits Milady knows she herself lacks, and when the child is older Milady will hire tutors and governesses to make up for the lack of intellect the woman has.

But all that is far off, now. She needs to get through the birth first, after all. It’s fascinating how many plans she’s made for her child, plans lasting years and even decades. She’s never planned
that far ahead for herself, not ever. But for her child, she can’t help but think long-term, even as she fears that she’s somehow jinxing it.

“My lady?” It’s the footman, having returned from an errand to get more firewood. He bows deeply. She thinks he’s rather scared of her – but then, as young as he is, most women seem to frighten him, with the exception of the maid. “Celeste said you wanted me?”

“Ah, yes.” She smiles to herself, roused from her thoughts. “I have a message for you to take.”

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Aramis marches in, apparently bored of waiting for the footman to let him inside – a good decision, because the footman’s working in the kitchen right now. Agatha the cook went to visit family this morning and has yet to return, no doubt trapped by the increasingly-violent mobs all over town. They’re getting more dangerous by the hour. Between Agatha being away and the nurse’s fever, Milady’s feeling very short-staffed – it’s amazing how quickly you can grow accustomed to having four people whose lives revolve around making your own easier.

“I got the message. Where’s Athos?” Aramis says shortly, twisting his hat in his hand with barely concealed anger. “And why is he here? We’re supposed to be taking Emilie back to her flock right now.”

“The message was from me, actually,” Milady says, with as much brightness as she can manage right now. She’s in a continuous state of discomfort, her back aching so horribly the pain radiates through her entire body, but the chance to annoy one of her husband’s friends does add something to her day. That it’s the friend who’s stuck him in a basement somewhere for the past three days, leaving her bored, lonely, and unable even to go outside thanks to all the chaos, makes it even better.

“You -” he looks like he wants to curse. Instead, he says with a kind of strained, deliberate calmness, “The streets are choked up with rioters right now, attacking anyone that looks remotely Spanish. It took me hours to get here. Is there a reason you wasted my time and pretended Athos needed to see me?”

Milady shrugs. “You’ve been avoiding this place for weeks.” And she’s bored, admittedly, and oddly anxious, and could use a distraction. “Athos is going to start wondering why. I assume the avoidance is because you’re still seeing the governess?”

She blinks, suddenly distracted. There’s a feeling going through her, like a ripple through her body, a strange squeezing sensation. It’s not painful, exactly, just uncomfortable, but – no, now that’s pain, pressing on her like a boulder to her back, moving forward. She’s had a stomach ache and a fierce pain in her lower back for hours, worsening occasionally, but she figured at this point, what’s one more ache in her overtaxed body? This feels different, though, more somehow. But it’s too early. She must be mistaken.

“I know, all right?” Aramis says, with barely contained savagery, not noticing the way she leans against the wall to steady herself. “I know that what I’m doing to her is wrong, and dishonest, and selfish -”

“What?” She frowns at him, drawn back into the conversation and trying to disregard the strange feeling. “Aramis, as much as I enjoy watching you implode with guilt, I’m hardly in a position to critique you for entering into an affair for selfish reasons. In my experience, nearly all relationships are based on deception and ulterior motives.”
“An attitude that I’m sure has led to a plethora of healthy relationships for you.”

“Luckily, you only need to get it right once.” She feels immediately more vulnerable as she says it, as if she’s given something away with the softness to her tone, and wishes she’d said anything else – called healthy relationships boring, perhaps. She clears her throat and tries to paste her mask back on, lets her voice become cool and amused as she continues, “I assume you’re not planning to slide a knife between her ribs, so by my standards you have nothing to feel guilty about. If people are stupid enough to let themselves be used, then someone will end up using them.”

And if they’re someone worthwhile, someone fierce and funny and kind and impossible not to love, then any attempt to use them will end up failing anyway, because lie will turn to truth before the deceiver is even aware of it. No matter how good a web you weave, you’re not immune to being caught in it yourself. She rather doubts Aramis’s warm feelings towards his governess extend so far, though.

“So you don’t feel any sympathy for her?” He raises an eyebrow, as if doubtful of this, which just goes to show he doesn’t understand people as well as he thinks.

“Unless you’ve promised her marriage and eternal devotion, you’re being fairly honest. She gets a wild affair with a handsome Musketeer before she enters some boring marriage. You’re doing her a favour.” She scowls at him. “It’s not her I’m worried about. I’m annoyed from an entirely selfish vantage point – I prefer my husband’s body not broken on the rack, thank you very much.”

There’s a long pause where he blinks at her. “Did you… did you just call me handsome?”

She’s regretting that already, but she rolls her eyes at him anyway. “Of course. You’re prettier than half the prostitutes I know. And you’d probably be quite successful at that profession, but you seem to be too weighed down by conscience for the less honest and more lucrative alternatives.”

“Thank you? I think?”

“My point is, I’m not judging you for your affair,” she says. “I hardly think you’d care if I did. You’re judging yourself, and you don’t like what you see. You’re angry at me for knowing something you find shameful.”

“I just… can’t see any other way,” he admits. “I want to know my child.”

There’s that strange squeezing sensation again, the sharp pain through her back and stomach, but this time it forces something out of her. Her skirts are suddenly damp, and she bends over and leans against the wall again, panic starting to beckon. “How coincidental you’d bring that up right now,” she gasps out, as he starts forward in concern. “Because I think we may be about to meet mine.”

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“I feel much better now,” Emilie says softly.

“You should, after all that sleep.” Constance helps her stand up, supporting her with an arm. Athos is incredibly grateful for her help over the past few days, though he’ll admit he’s confused about why she’s being so helpful, to the point of giving up several days of her life to help Emilie through withdrawal. It seems that she’s trying to stay as involved in d’Artagnan’s life as possible, in the guise of being ‘friends’, a pretence Athos doubts will last indefinitely. Still, it’s not his place to judge, and she has been very useful, comforting and supporting Emilie, introducing them to her doctor friend, and keeping the Queen informed of their plans so she can help steer the King in the right directions.
Emilie takes a deep breath and straightens. “I’m ready to go. But where’s Aramis?”

“Be here soon, I’m sure,” Porthos assures her, then draws Athos aside to mutter in an undertone. “Where the bloody hell is Aramis?”

“I don’t know, but we can’t wait for him.” Athos looks out at the city. He thinks he can see smoke in the distance, and feels a moment’s concern those idiots are going to set the city ablaze. Still, from a selfish perspective, at least it’s nowhere near his wife’s house. He hates leaving the city even briefly when there are mobs rampaging all around the place. Milady doesn’t sound, look or dress remotely Spanish, of course, but the worse it gets the less that matters. “Treville thinks he’s persuaded His Majesty to let the Musketeers and Red Guards manage the streets if we can get Emilie’s followers to disband.”

“At this stage, it’ll be dangerous.”

“Less dangerous than leaving them to it,” d’Artagnan points out.

“You know what I mean. The mob will tear them apart if they blink.”

“Then I’ll make sure no one blinks,” Athos says grimly. “Anyway, this is all an issue for later. It will take us hours to get Emilie back, with how the streets are right now. We need to get moving. Forget about Aramis. I’m sure he can look after himself.”

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She’s concentrating on breathing steadily when Aramis bursts in again, this time with her midwife. The woman bears her usual expression of calm competence, and it makes Milady immediately feel better.

“So once we timed the gap between her contractions and saw how close they were, it definitely seemed like time to call you in,” Aramis is in the middle of explaining. He looks disordered, eyes wide and hair mussed, slightly out of his depth with this situation. She was glad to have him here, though – the midwife does look somewhat Spanish, and would no doubt have had much more difficulty getting through the streets unmolested if accompanied only by her young footman.

“Are all Musketeers so interested in women’s matters?” the woman asks Milady, shaking her head slightly in disbelief.

“I think most of them are just interested in women,” Milady says. She’s leaning against the wall, and lets her fingers dig into it as the pain comes again. She breathes through it, then after it passes, adds, “But I know all the strangest ones.”

“Strange indeed, but he’ll do,” the midwife says practically.

“He will?” Milady has no idea what she’s talking about.

“My usual assistant is down with the sickness that’s going around,” the woman informs her. “I’ve set your footman to manning the pump outside, and your maid to boiling the water and tearing sheets, but I prefer having someone in here to help. They’re both too young and useless for this, anyway. But this one seems to have some knowledge -”

“Of battlefield medicine,” Aramis protests, suddenly appalled at where his interest has led him. “Stitching wounds, that sort of thing.”

“Well, she may need stitches by the end of it -” the midwife starts to say.
Aramis winces, interrupting her, “I didn’t want to hear that.”

“Whereas I was thrilled at the suggestion,” Milady mutters sarcastically, leaning against the wall again. The pain goes through her in a wave, but it’s manageable – she’s experienced much worse before. Even so, the midwife’s words make her flinch.

“I need to go fetch Athos,” Aramis says. It had taken some convincing to get him to go for the midwife first, but Milady doesn’t regret it – as desperately as she wants Athos here, emotional support seems less of a priority here than medical help. Still, Athos is definitely her next priority.

Milady turns to the midwife. “I’m sure you’ve managed with less people before. I mean, not all of your clients have servants, surely.”

“No. Most of them have rooms full of family, friends and neighbours instead,” the midwife says bluntly but without judgement. “Mothers and aunts who’ve given birth and know how to be of use. Older friends who’ve gone through it recently. All you’ve got is a maid who can’t be more than fifteen, a footman who’s all thumbs and terrified of women, and this Musketeer. I use what I have.”

“I need to go fetch Athos,” Aramis repeats stubbornly.

Milady tries to think. After a few moments, she sighs and looks at Aramis. “If you were telling the truth earlier, he’ll have given up waiting for you and headed out of Paris by now anyway,” she says reasonably, giving in. “You won’t be able to catch him. But he’ll probably rush over here the second he’s back, and I’m told this takes a while.”

Aramis hesitates, then nods. “Most likely. He’s been going stir-crazy without you these past days. Should I send the footman to leave a message for him at the Garrison?”

“Good idea. Don’t say exactly what’s happening, though. I don’t want him in a panic.”

“If that’s all sorted, it’s best I check how you’re progressing,” the midwife says calmly. “It’s easier if you lie down -”

Pregnancy has allowed Milady entry to a whole new world – one of indignities, embarrassments, and discomforts she didn’t even know existed. She accepted that childbirth was going to be more of the same, but she imagined only Athos and her midwife there. Athos has already seen her at her worst, and the midwife’s interest in her and knowledge of her is primarily confined to the contents of her coin-purse, so she was able to accept that with tolerable equanimity.

Having Aramis here changes that equation somewhat.

He doesn’t seem thrilled about it either, despite his general enthusiasm for pregnancy and babies. “Do you think Athos is likely to challenge me to a duel for this?” he asks with a rueful smile, although his hands are firm and confident as he follows the midwife’s orders and helps Milady position herself, skirts drawn up for the midwife to investigate her, unfortunately giving him a fair eyeful as well.

Milady rolls her eyes at him. “I think my husband’s capable of telling the difference between a wild night of passion and childbirth, thank you. In fact, I’m a little concerned that you aren’t. Perhaps if you -” Pain hits her again and she breaks off with a hiss.

“There, there,” the midwife says briskly.

Aramis leans in to her slightly, lowering his voice as if Milady won’t be able to hear him anyway. “I understand that this is earlier than expected?”
“Only because I thought it would be a late one,” she says dismissively, seeming so utterly unconcerned by this that Milady’s worry about a too-early birth subsides immediately. Apparently the midwife’s guess of the babe being late was just that – a guess, not a requirement. After all, if Milady thinks to count, it’s already been more than nine months since their brief time in Pinon, and her (not at all expert) understanding is that pregnancy rarely lasts longer than ten. “I suppose the little mite didn’t want to miss all this excitement.”

At first, it’s easy, if undignified and occasionally a little disgusting. She walks when the midwife tells her to, squats, lies down, and always breathes, breathes, breathes. She grows used to being stared at inappropriately and impersonal hands where they generally shouldn’t be. The pains get worse. She feels strangely dizzy, overheated – the exertion, probably. Every contraction wracks her body, leaving her barely able to stand.

Strangely, it’s more boring than it is anything else, at least in the beginning. She feels tired already, though, more worn than she feels like she should be. That annoys her. A lot of things annoy her. She’s quite happy to take them out on Aramis, who bears with perfect equanimity her cutting remarks about his honour, appearance, family name, intelligence, common sense, skills, humour, and usefulness. The midwife looks rather impressed, though – at the eloquence of her insults, if nothing else. Besides, any man who’s foolish enough to try and calm a woman in labour by soothingly telling her to find comfort in prayer deserves to have his head bitten off. She nearly shoves his cross down his throat when he generously offers to lend it to her – it’s a necklace, not some kind of talisman of safety and peace, for all that he treats it as one. The brief flash of memory – of longing – for a locket containing dried flowers, a necklace that does feel like a talisman, only makes her refusal more caustic.

She doesn’t need God. She doesn’t need talismans. She’s a survivor. Nooses, knives, bullets, starvation and sickness have all failed to take her. This won’t be her end. She swears it grimly, sweat pouring down her face and every breath feeling like it burns her lungs. This won’t be her end.

She wishes for Athos, desperately, wretchedly. She wishes for him with every beat of her heart, every throb of her body, every drawn-out minute.

Hours pass, walking and breathing, lying and breathing, living through pain after pain after pain. And then boredom starts to change to something else. The pains grow worse, the midwife a little less calm. Anne can no longer find the breath or brainpower to come up with sharp comments, too distracted by what’s happening. Her belly is felt and massaged with hard fingers. She can barely stand anymore, her legs going so numb with each contraction that rages through her until she thinks she might fall. Aramis wipes her brow with something cool, but it feels too cold, and she flinches from it. He doesn’t notice, too preoccupied by the midwife’s words. They’re nearly there. It’s a fast labour, and as neat a one as the midwife’s ever seen, and they’re nearly there.

She can barely understand her. Everything seems too hot, too painful, too exhausting. She closes her eyes, ignoring the midwife’s urgent words, ignoring the agonising squeezing feeling that seems to have no end as another contraction takes hold of her, ignoring the urgent hands on her.

All she can concentrate on is the question in her mind – where’s Athos? Where on earth is Athos? Why isn’t he here yet?

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Athos is already barking orders almost before he dismounts. The visit to Emilie’s followers took far longer than planned – the mobs made leaving and re-entering Paris an ordeal, d’Artagnan’s horse was hit by a thrown rock and panicked, and it took Emilie a while to work up the courage to
enter the encampment and admit the truth. She wanted Aramis beside her, and there was no Aramis – if he doesn’t have a good excuse for his absence, Athos is going to have words with him.

And then the King took more persuading than Treville expected to send out men to discourage the rioters. Eventually, the Queen and Treville had worked together to do it, the Queen returning from a brief coach ride pretending to be distraught and claiming people had thrown rocks at her, and Treville subtly planting the fear of what they might have done if the Dauphin was there as well into the King’s head. The thought of his young son dead of a badly-thrown rock had horrified the King, especially so soon after the boy’s near-death by fever, and so he’d ordered them out to stop the rioters immediately. It was impressively manipulative of Treville – he seems to be learning how to influence the King more by the day, now he no longer has the Cardinal’s or Rochefort’s help (however ill-intentioned) to persuade His Majesty into better choices.

“You have a message, Captain,” one of the men tells him, lips twitching into a grin. “Milady de Winter wants you to know she needs you. When you can spare the time to see to her, that is.” He puts enough insinuation into the relatively innocuous message to make it sound like the bawdiest proposition imaginable, and several of the surrounding men laugh. One gives a whistle. It’s probably a way of breaking the tension – everyone’s been on edge the past few days, as the riots grow worse, as they’re forced to stand by and watch the city grow more and more unsafe.

Nevertheless, Athos’s purposeful stride slows. “I beg your pardon?” he enunciates silkily, every syllable dripping with absolute fury. “I’m certain I misheard you.”

He knows his relationship with Milady is a constant source of ribald gossip and speculation in the Garrison – after all his years of avoiding women, the sudden acquisition of a rich, beautiful, and heavily pregnant mistress had surprised them. They’ve made a lot of false assumptions about the nature of the relationship, probably based on their own amorous exploits, which couldn’t be farther from the truth of it. Musketeer affairs, after all, tend to be both trifling and tawdry, more attention given to the story and the accomplishment than to the partner involved – madcap schemes of seduction, secret assignations, wild nights of romance that are bragged of and then forgotten. Money changes hands as often as not, whether from affluent ladies providing clandestine support to their impoverished Musketeer lovers, or Musketeers spending their coin on the favours of pretty streetwalkers.

So of course, they try and fit his own relationship into a framework they understand – conquests and patronage, strutting pride and lewd stories. He’s heard the ends of little jokes about how wild Milady must be for him to have been arrested at his request, to move to Paris just to be close to him, to lend him a fortune and risk her life for a recent Musketeer mission, to require his company every moment he’s not at the Garrison, to demand his absolute and complete fidelity to the point he never even looks at another. Perhaps the jokes are meant as a compliment to his manliness or virility. He despises them.

This is the first time someone’s dared speak like this to his face, though. He stares at the Musketeer until the man swallows hard and steps back, cringing away from the cold fury on Athos’s face. “My apologies, sir,” he says, face paling. “I didn’t mean – I just – I’ll start again. Milady de Winter sent a message, says she wants to see you when you can spare a moment.”

“I see.” Athos turns away, effectively dismissing the man as unimportant, and he wilts in relief.

For a second, desire wars with duty. Athos desperately wants to see his wife, and from the sound of it, she’s been missing him too – it’s unlike her to leave a message like that. But the riots have to be his main concern, little as he likes that. Now the King is finally letting them deal with the mob, they don’t have a moment to spare. He’s the Captain. He can’t delegate this, not even for Milady.
Checking on her, though…

“Porthos, d’Artagnan?” he says.

Porthos quirks an eyebrow. “Want us to go tell the missus you’ll be late today?”

“Something like that. Just make sure she’s all right, will you?” If the mob’s reached her neighbourhood… if they’ve set more fires… but there’s nothing he could do there that Porthos and d’Artagnan cannot, he reminds himself quickly, to try and stem his sudden anxiety. If Anne’s in trouble, they’ll get her out of there and to the Garrison; if not, they’ll catch up with him and ease his mind. Her message didn’t seem to imply any urgency. She’s probably fine.

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She’s so tired, so hot, so cold, so uncomfortable. Great squeezing pains tear through her body continually. Aramis’s face and the midwife’s blurs. Everything blurs. There’s bloody water and sheets, but the midwife seems unconcerned by them. Normal, normal, normal, she chirps when Milady asks, over and over again, sounding like a bird. Pinon had birds, and Milady closes her eyes and goes to Pinon, only to be shaken awake again by another pain and by Aramis’s hands on her shoulders.

Push. She’s supposed to push. It hurts. She would like this to stop now, she thinks. She’s exhausted and uncomfortable and in pain and she would like it to stop. Why did she choose this in the first place? She might be crying. Why is she crying? Why is she so hot? Everything aches, and everything’s confused, her mind jumbled and wrong. The only real thing is the pain, coming again and again. She tries to squirm away from it but it’s always there. She’s long since forgotten dignity – even when she was hung from the branch of a tree, she had dignity, but right now the idea is arcane and mystifying, and people stare at her and prod at her and all she does is close her eyes and wonder where Athos is and why she’s so tired.

She shouldn’t be. She’s dimly aware of that. Some labours go for days and women manage that. She has been here for hours only, and she slept well last night – or at least as well as she’s been able to sleep lately – but she’s so exhausted she feels like she could go to sleep despite the wrenching pains. How very shameful, she thinks wryly in one of the now-very-brief pauses between contractions – she’s always thought herself stronger than most, and to find herself weaker is an unpleasant shock.

She’s heard many things of labour, asked many things, but no one ever mentioned shivering as if chilled, and she finds she is even as she burns with heat. No one mentioned seeing things, either, and sometimes even when her eyes are open she feels like she’s somewhere else. Everyone focused on the pain, but not on that. Neither Aramis nor the midwife seems concerned by it, though, so perhaps she’s simply demonstrating her ignorance again. All she knows about childbirth is what she’s been told.

She wants Athos to be here. She wants to hold his hand. She wants to cry.

And then they’re both yelling at her again, and the pain is there, and she push-push-pushes like they’re screaming at her to, and there’s something different about this time. Her body arches half-off the bed, and hard hands are holding her legs, and someone else is reaching between them. She collapses back, sweaty and gasping and exhausted, and the midwife is smiling and Aramis is crying and then something is deposited on her chest.

“What?” she says blankly, too exhausted to think or comprehend, but then her vision sharpens and she sees it. Small and bloody and wrinkled and disgusting, yet somehow perfect, every tiny detail of
the little face beautiful. “Is it… my God, is it all right?” The child seems too small, and its head is
shaped wrongly, surely, and it’s colour is off and there’s blood on it –

“Perfect,” Aramis says, and yes, he really is crying a little, but grinning as well. “He’s perfect.”

“He,” she echoes, still lying against the pillows exhausted, staring at it. Staring at him. “A son. I
have a son. Athos… I need to…” She’s crying as well, she’s sure of it now, but smiling too. “When
he gets here, I can tell him we have a son. I did it. He’s… he’s all right. We have a son.”

“A bit more to deal with,” the midwife mutters, and then she and Aramis are absorbed doing other
things again, dealing with the afterbirth and the cord and such details, but they leave her son
propped against her and Milady ignores them even as she mindlessly obeys every order she’s
given. She barely notices the effort and discomfort of delivering the afterbirth, the mix of blood and
other disgusting fluids soaking the bed, the pain between her legs, the way her body arches again.
She is completely distracted by her son. She reaches out a finger and touches the child’s impossibly
delicate cheek. Her arm shakes with the effort, but she needs to touch him. He opens his mouth, as
if trying to bite her even without teeth, and she laughs. She is suddenly and absurdly charmed by
him.

“The neatest birth I’ve attended to in years,” the midwife says, with a certain degree of smugness,
like she personally spoke to God and organised that. “Easy and quick.”

“A son,” Aramis says, appearing at her head again, still grinning like a loon. “Athos is going to be
delighted, you know. Over the moon. He’s going to -” He cuts himself off, smile disappearing with
horrifying suddenness. “Milady? Are you alright?”

She’s shivering again, even more fiercely than before. She hadn’t even realised it until he noticed.

“Is this – is she going into shock?” Aramis looks on the edge of panic. He presses his hand against
her forehead and flinches. “Is she supposed to be so hot?”

The midwife’s small smile disappears entirely as well, and she moves up, pressing her hand where
Aramis’s just was. “No,” she says. “No, this isn’t possible, it’s much too soon.”

“Much too soon for what?”

The midwife ignores him, checking Milady’s eyes, her temperature, inside her mouth. She presses
the bottom of a nearby ewer of water against her cheek and Milady flinches from the cold. Then the
midwife closes her eyes, looking distressed.

A powerful wave of vertigo hits Milady, accompanied by the strange sight of colours running, as if
the whole world is a painting and it is starting to drip away. She closes her eyes again, even
though it means that she can’t stare at her beautiful, perfect child. She’s so confused. What’s
happening now?

“It’s childbed fever,” the midwife says. “But that normally takes at least a day to show itself after
the birth. I didn’t think…” She cuts herself off, shaking her head. The look she turns on Aramis is
apologetic. “I’m sorry, Musketeer. There’s nothing I can do here now – unless you count watching
her waste away.”
The words echo around the suddenly silent room. All Milady can hear is her own heartbeat in her ears, and it seems to echo strangely as well, quickening as if it wants to get in as many beats as possible.

“So I’m dying, then,” she says, with a strange sort of calm. She looks back down at her son.

“If you can’t help, I’ll go get a doctor.” Aramis ignores her in favour of the midwife, voice harsh and expression angry. He looks ready to storm off and do just that.

“If you wish, but all anyone can do now is try and make her comfortable.” The midwife’s voice is matter-of-fact, dry and clinical instead of argumentative. “There is no curing childbed fever. She’ll die, sure as anything. Today, tomorrow, later this week… the fever always kills. She’ll cook alive in her own body. And I’ve never seen someone get it so soon before, so I can’t imagine it’ll be long.” She pats Milady’s leg, as if just remembering the person they’re talking about is present, and gives her the same sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, dear. You did well,” she says gently, and then she scoops up the child in her arms. Milady wants to protest – he’s hers, her child, her son, she wants him – but she’s too dizzy and tired to manage it. “Sometimes God just steps in anyway. I’ll put the maid on caring for the boy. I doubt we’ll find a wet-nurse on such short notice, but goat’s milk will keep him healthy enough, for a while at least.”

She bustles out of the room as if this is a totally ordinary thing to say, which for her Milady supposes it must be. Childbed fever is common. How many deaths must the midwife have casually predicted?

If she wasn’t in shock before, Milady thinks she may be now. The world still seems strange. Too hot and too cold at once, her skin tight. Fever, yes, that makes sense. She’d written it off as some strange unmentioned symptom of childbirth, but it seems she was wrong. She didn’t know you could get the fever even as you gave birth, though.

Milady has sat and waited for her own death before. Locked in a tiny, airless room, praying to a God she no longer believes in or at least no longer worships. That time she schemed and planned and fought for her survival, working towards deliverance even as she begged uselessly for it. But who can she fight now? Who can she beg?

She closes her eyes. The world is too confusing with them open, things spinning about, coming in and out of focus. She suddenly feels utterly hollow, her child gone, her husband nowhere to be found, her life apparently slipping away. Will she die without ever seeing either of them again? The thought is incomprehensible, unsupportable. She fights against the urge to order Aramis to bring her son back into the room – if this fever’s a death sentence, she won’t risk passing it to him, although she doesn’t even know if childbed fever is catching.

“Tell Athos -” she starts slowly, not sure how to finish that statement. She wants to see her husband so desperately she can barely comprehend it. Behind all the pain, confusion, dizziness, and terrible fear, she can feel the need in her chest, like a rope wrapped around her heart that pulls in his direction. It’s been there so long that she rarely notices it consciously – the ache of yearning for him has become a part of her.

“Tell him yourself,” Aramis snaps. “I’ve seen men survive wounds that should have killed them before. Nothing’s impossible.”
“You’re pigheaded,” she notes tiredly.

“I have faith. There’s a difference.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, just this once, make an exception.” Aramis’s voice is hard, and when she forces her eyes open to look at him, his expression is even harder. “What do you think it will do to Athos if you die? Do you think he can survive that? And what about your son? And you yourself, for that matter, don’t you want to live for you? You’re a fighter. So fight.”

She almost smiles, but it’s too much effort. “Alright then. Do you know anything about bloodletting?”

“No, not enough, and I’m not about to start slicing into you and hoping I hit the right humour. But there’s a few other things I can do.”

He stalks out, shouting orders to the maid – the only person left in the house right now, with the footman escorting the midwife home. She’s to leave the child alone to sleep, for the moment, and spend her time pumping up more cold water and wetting whatever remaining cloths they have. He comes back in with another pitcher and a cup and pours her some.

“We’ll keep you as cold as we can,” he says grimly, holding it to her lips.

She swallows it down. She feels too tired even to drink, but he’s right, she would prefer to go down fighting, even if this is the only version of fighting she’s capable of. Once she’s finished, she says, “A stop-gap at best.”

“I know. As soon as the footman returns I can send him for Doctor Lemay, though. And surely Athos will get here any moment.”

‘Any moment’ seems a long time, but she ceases to be able to tell quite quickly. Time seems to lose all meaning. Reality itself is quite hazy too. Aramis puts wet clothes on her face, on her limbs. They’re cold. At first she remembers why, but with each successive set of newly-wet cloths, she forgets, she tries to shake them off. They’re cold and uncomfortable and she’s shivering. She forgets why he’s forcing water down her throat as well. She would scramble away, but her body is heavy and unresponsive – already wracked by the birth, it’s barely able to comprehend this new and sudden attack. The bed is too hard, the sheets too rough, her body aches, there is no right temperature. Her teeth chatter. She’s bleeding from giving birth, still, bleeding and sweating and hurting, and the heavy, inescapable hot ache of the fever winds around the bright and still-sharp agony of the birth until it becomes one shrieking symphony of discomfort, until getting lost in her feverish mind is as enticing as it is unavoidable. Reality is too painful. She forgets what’s happening to her. She forgets who Aramis is sometimes too – he’s hard to make out, and she thinks dizzily he must not be real, because so little of what she sees is real. She struggles to get away from him, but he pins her down, talks urgently to her. The words make no sense.

She closes her eyes and she’s in the slums. Rich-looking carriages drive past on the main thoroughway nearby. There are colours there, bright colours in the cloth and on the painted coaches, and she’s never owned anything bright in her life. Coins are bright as well, shiny and wonderful, and she wants greedily to be able to keep one. To own something that beautiful would be the greatest thing in the world, surely, but she has never managed to save one for more than a day, because she needs food more than beautiful things. Even if she kept one, she knows another child (or even an adult) would beat her and take it. But they’re so shiny. She wishes she could just stare at one for hours, angling it to catch the light, pretty as jewellery. It’s hypnotic.
She opens her eyes and a strange man forces water down her throat. It’s cold and she’s full and everything hurts. She retches, but he keeps at it. What is he doing to her? Aramis, she thinks, it’s Aramis – she doesn’t trust him like she trusts Athos, but even that link to Athos is enough to bring her some of the way back. Her skin is cold, but that’s right, it should be. Where is Athos? She needs him.

“What’s going on?” A voice says.

She knows that voice too. The cadence of someone else who grew up in the slums, someone who talks like she does… did. Like she did. She doesn’t talk like that anymore. No man treats a girl born in the street as anything but that, not ever, so she had to be something else.

“Thank Christ. I need all the help I can get. Where’s Athos?”

“Somewhere in the streets, directing the men. Is she in labour?”

“That’s done. Now we have bigger problems. I don’t have time to explain. She’s dying. D’Artagnan, I need you to fetch Athos, wherever he is. Get him here now. Porthos, go for Lemay. I have no idea what I’m doing. If you can grab Constance at the same time, do it – I have the maid wetting cloths and I’m busy in here so the baby’s basically being ignored right now.”

“Aramis. She’s trying to -”

“I know! She’s delirious.”

Hard hands hold her down, interrupting her attempt to get up and go report to the Cardinal. Pain goes through her, her abused body telegraphing its disapproval at her attempt to move. She’s dimly aware that this isn’t the first time that’s happened, dimly aware that this man has held her down before.

“Anne,” he says, in what is probably meant to be a soothing voice. “Anne, just stay down. Stop struggling, please. You’re dislodging the cloths. I need you to stay calm.”

She opens her eyes and screams. He has dark hair and pale skin, he’s calling her Anne, telling her not to struggle, holding her down. Her confused mind makes the connection. “I’ll kill you,” she says, or thinks she says. It’s too confusing to tell, words and worlds blurring together. “Thomas, if you touch me again, I’ll kill you. Get away from me!”

She struggles harder and harder, sobbing despite the pain it causes and despite how exhausting it is even to breathe, but his hands are firm. “Milady,” he says. “Milady, Milady. I’m not who you think. Please. Look at me. I’m not who you think.”

He isn’t, thank God, he can’t be. Thomas doesn’t call her Milady, that was after – or was it before? Time has no meaning. But he called her Anne… no, whoever called her Anne must have left. “Keep him away from me,” she murmurs, subsiding, letting her eyes slide shut again. “He’s a monster. Tell Athos…” Tell Athos what? He’ll never believe her, and Thomas knows too much. She sinks back into the soft mattress, overwhelmed by her exhaustion and by the futility of it all, and allows another world to take over.

This one is beautiful. Green grass and blue skies. Her own laughter ringing in her ears. And Athos, of course. She rolls over and over in the grass with him, shrieking with laughter. They’re playing like children, the way she never played when she was an actual child, and it’s glorious. He pins her down, and she’s been pinned down before but this is so very different, this is wonderful, she’s never felt so safe or so happy in her life, and she looks up at his handsome laughing face and thinks
I could love you, and then, with surprise, I do love you. She stills, because she’s said it to him half a dozen times but it never occurred to her to mean it before. It feels like cutting open her own chest and presenting him with her still-beating heart, and he could crush it with slightest flex of his fingers. That’s what people do – if you open up, if you show them your weakest points, that’s where they strike, right into the heart and soul and self of you. She is so terribly, horribly, painfully vulnerable before him, and that should check her, but his smile contains the whole world and she is incapable of doing anything but opening her heart up to him like a flower. What? he asks, and nothing, she replies, but it is in fact everything.

But then he disappears, and she’s reaching for air.

“Where’s Athos?” she wonders out loud.

“God,” Aramis says with feeling, “I wish I knew.”

X_X_X_X_X

It’s a blur to Athos – from the moment he sees d’Artagnan’s face to him slamming open the door of Milady’s house, it’s all a blur. He doesn’t go around the gatherings of rioters, doesn’t try and quiet them. He draws his sword and has every intention of going through them if they try and check his progress for as much as a second. They take one look at his face and flee.

“Anne,” he says helplessly as he staggers through the door. He feels cut off at the knees.

Constance is standing there, which is as surreal as everything else. She despises and fears Milady. Why is she here? But when she looks up from the little bundle in her arms at him, her gaze is sympathetic and warm. “Bedroom,” she says, not bothering to add reassurances or anything else extraneous. She knows Athos pretty well.

At another time he would be entirely distracted by the child she’s holding. He’s dimly aware that it’s his child, but the thought holds no power right now, not when Milady may be dying only feet away.

The moment he’s in there he falls to his knees beside the bed, no longer able to stand. His Anne looks ridiculous, draped and wrapped in wet strips of fabric like an Egyptian mummy, and perhaps in other circumstances it would be comical but right now everything is tinged with horror. Her eyes are open but glassy, and even as he says her name she doesn’t look at him. He grips her hand in both of his – it’s hot and clammy and shaking, all at the same time.

“Hold her arm steady,” someone says to someone else, and Athos pulls his gaze away from Milady to see what’s happening. It’s Lemay, and he’s talking to an exhausted-looking Aramis, who nods and holds Milady’s other arm out. Athos winces as Lemay slices deep into tender flesh, adjusting the bowl he’s holding to catch the blood that streams from the wound.

“What are you doing?” he says, in a cracked voice. “What happened, Aramis?”

“The midwife thinks she has childbed fever,” Aramis says, with an anguished look at him. “I’ve been keeping her as cool as I can, but she said it was always deadly -”

“It is,” Lemay says absently, focused on his task, not noticing the way all the colour leaves Athos’s face. “I studied it for a time in England, with a group of other doctors. My methods were particularly effective in preventing it, I must say, but they didn’t really catch on, and frankly once the woman has the fever it’s only a matter of time -”

“So she’ll die,” Athos says. He sounds empty. He feels empty. She’s died before, sucking every
spark of life from his heart and mind and marrow, leaving him lost and shattered. A self-inflicted pain, because it was he who killed her. He had self-hatred and guilt and rage to keep him alive through it, and that was all he had, and now he has nothing.

Lemay glances at him. “Oh! Sorry. I shouldn’t have – Captain, I don’t think this is childbed fever.”

“You… what?”

“It’s far too soon, and escalated too rapidly, and childbed fever has a few other symptoms she’s not showing, such as pus,” Lemay informs him. “I think it’s the fever that’s been going around this part of the city. It probably hit her especially hard because her body was weakened from giving birth.”

Athos closes his eyes, absolute relief flooding him. “So you can fix this. She’ll be fine?”

“I don’t know,” Lemay says, gentling his voice. “I really don’t, Captain. Fevers such as this can be dangerous. She has a better chance than with childbed fever, but that’s not saying much. And even if she survives… well, sometimes fever can cook the mind, and this is a bad one. She may not be as you remember her. She may not even be able to talk, or stand, or think.”

The relief dies. He’s squeezing Anne’s hand so hard he can’t feel his own, and she shifts and lets out a whimper of discomfort. There’s blood on the sheets, and other horrifying-looking fluids, and the steep curve of her belly has yet to go down. It looks nearly exactly like his nightmares, he thinks distantly, exactly like what he pictured when he thought of her dying in childbirth, except that she’s silent instead of screaming in agony. He shifts so that his nose is almost pressed to her sweaty, tangled hair, so that his lips are by her ear.

“Anne,” Athos whispers, as if he could call her back to him by that. “Anne, Anne, Anne.” She has a hectic red flush to her cheeks, he notices – even the blood dripping down her arm and into Lemay’s bowl doesn’t seem to be removing it, although she does seem paler elsewhere.

“That’s good,” Lemay encourages. “Try and keep her calm. If she thrashes about -”

“I’ve been having to hold her down sometimes,” Aramis admits. “I didn’t want to tie her because I thought it would make her panic more, but -”

“No, you did well,” Lemay says to Aramis. “You also did very well keeping her cold. I wouldn’t have tried it, but it seems to have had a positive effect – I’ll have to look into it later, test if -” At a look from Aramis, he blinks and returns to the subject at hand. “I have some medicine that can help, as well, in my bag, if you could fetch it -”

Athos ignores them, barely conscious of their existence. He croons his wife’s name into her ear.

“Anne, Anne. Please. Please come back. Anne…”

She jerks suddenly, worsening the blood flow from her arm, twisting her head to look at him. “Athos?” Her voice is cracked and thready, as if worn out – perhaps from screaming, he thinks with a lurch to his stomach.

“Yes, yes, it’s me -” She’s awake and she knows him, thank God. “Anne, it’s me. I’m so sorry I didn’t come earlier. I love you.”

“Athos, please,” she says, and suddenly she’s crying – again, judging by the tearstains already on her face. “Don’t do this, don’t. I love you.” He pulls back slightly, appalled, as she babbles on, distraught and begging, even more emotional and wrecked than she allowed herself to be in reality. “He left me no choice. Please, you have to believe me. I love you. You have to -”
Athos backs away from her so fast that he nearly falls to the ground, but then he staggers upright and strides blindly from the room, ignoring Lemay and Aramis’s cries of surprise. Of course he can’t be a comfort to her, of course. He’s mad to have thought for as much as a single moment that his presence might help her.

He’s past Constance and out the door before she can stop him, but then as he heads down the street a hand reaches out and grabs his arm. “Athos?” Something in Porthos’s face relaxes. “Thank God you’re finally here. They send you out to grab some more water?”

He’s at the water-pump filling buckets, Athos realises. Cold water, for the wet cloths, to keep Milady cool. But more than that, a way Athos can help but not have to be there in the room. Sanity returns. Where was he going? There’s nowhere to go. But he can stay out here, at least. “I’ll… I’ll take over here.”

“What? No you won’t.” Porthos expression twists to one of concern. “Athos, what’s going on?”

“I – I just – I can’t be in there.” Athos shakes his head wildly. “She saw me, and she thought…” He can’t finish it. She thought he was there to condemn her to death again. He may as well have been, the way he feels right now.

He never was capable of watching her die. Capable of killing her, yes, but not of watching it happen, watching those bright green eyes turn dull and vacant, watching the sharp character fall away from her fine-boned face, watching her body slump as the fierce force of her personality flees her form – all that love and wit and anger and beauty and unexpected warmth lost forever. Because watching it means facing it. Facing what he’s done, yes, but also facing the impossibility of a world without her. **Coward.**

“Yeah, and half an hour ago she freaked out and called me ‘Sarazin’, whoever that is,” Porthos says sharply. His tone gentles somewhat at Athos’s expression. “Fever make you jump to the worst stuff in your memory, sometimes.”

“And I’m the worst memories she has.”

“And the best, probably,” Porthos says. “You remember what I said? Family stays. Even when it’s bad, and I know it’s bad, Athos, I know, but you can’t leave. You want to tell your kid someday that you left his mother to die alone?”

It hits him solidly in the gut, more painful than words should be able to be. *I can’t*, he wants to say, *I can’t*, but all his breath is gone and he can’t manage to speak at all.

Instead, he steadies himself. It takes a little while, but he can already feel that immediate guilty panic subsiding. As it drains away, he can feel her pull replace it again. **Anne.** If she only has hours left, he wants to be there for those hours. Porthos is right. This is something he can’t run from.

He gives him a nod. “Thank you,” he croaks out, and then turns and re-enters the house.

Constance is still inside, talking intently to d’Artagnan as he looks down at her with one hand resting comfortingly on her shoulder, but she breaks off when she sees Athos. He goes to walk past them but she says, “Wait! Just a moment,” and then she’s moving her arms so they’re tilted out from her and Athos sees his son properly for the first time. “Look at him. He’s beautiful.”

He knows what Constance is trying to do. She’s trying to give him comfort, to say that even if Milady dies, at least something wondrous came out of it, at least her child is still healthy and well. “Fever?” he asks. She tries to pass him his son, and after a moment’s resistance, he positions his
arms better and allows her to, feeling horribly unnatural.

“Not a sign of it.”

That should be comfort, it should. Athos stares down at the little face. The babe has hair, which he didn’t expect, albeit not much of it, and he has tiny fists that move with little jerks occasionally as if he’s trying to hit out at the world. His small eyes are shut tight right now, his mouth slightly open. He’s quite perfect, insofar as Athos can tell with a baby, although it’s impossible to detect Milady or himself in his features. Perfect, and little, and lovely...

The thought is like a kraken rising from the deeps, monstrous and unstoppable. *If I had to lose one, couldn’t it have been the child?*

He takes a step back and almost thrusts the boy at Constance, horrified by his own dark thought. It’s not an angry thought, or at least the anger isn’t directed at the child – at God, instead, or the world, or fate, or something like that. He doesn’t blame the child for not having a fever, that’s absurd. But he can’t appreciate his son right now – he’s incapable of feeling some overwhelming wave of paternal love go through him while Milady is in there dying. His emotions are all bound up in terror for Milady, grief, anger, heartbreak. He can’t think the way Constance clearly wants him to, can’t find a silver lining to this cloud, can’t be grateful for the gift of a child when the cost is the woman he loves.

“I need to go,” he mutters as Constance takes his son back, guilty at his thoughts, guilty that his heart isn’t big enough right now to contain fatherly love and pride when it is shrivelled with absolute fear.

Aramis glances up from bandaging Milady’s arm when he enters, and gives him a crooked smile. “She kept the medicine down,” he reports. “So that’s something.”

Another thing his heart has no space for – the absolute gratitude he knows he should feel towards his friend right now. Aramis has gone above and beyond what can be expected of anyone, working himself to shreds trying to keep Milady alive. The gratitude will come to him later, perhaps, when his fear is gone – unless Milady dies. If Milady dies, he won’t be capable of anything but grief. If Milady dies, he doesn’t know how he can be friend, father, or Captain. He barely survived her death once, and what he did back then could not be called living. If Milady dies, he will have nothing to offer anyone, he will be too destroyed to ever piece himself back together.

“Athos?” Milady says weakly, as if she can somehow sense his presence. Or perhaps she’s been saying that regularly since he left. He doesn’t know.

He takes her hand, kisses her hot, cracked lips, and then sits beside her – someone has brought in a chair for him. He’s almost amused at the thought his comfort could matter right now. “It’s me, Anne.”

“Good.” For a moment, she seems completely lucid, eyes flickering open as she smiles. “Did you meet him?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. He’s beautiful.” It’s true, he is.

“Mmm.” She hums to herself, eyes shuttering again, voice starting to slur slightly. “Gets that from me. Don’t leave again?”

“Never. I promise.”

“Good...”
She stops talking. When he calls her name again, she whimpers. It seems the period of lucidity is over – she’s back to struggling and crying out and seeing things that aren’t there. Or rather, things that haven’t been there for a long time. She’s back to a dead man on the floor, and her husband refusing to hear her pleas, and a noose being placed around her neck.

Nevertheless, he stays.

X_X_X_X_X

She’s tired. She’s so very tired. She swims endlessly in a strange world, floating in a sea of colours and lights and garbled memories, and it seems like it would be so easy to let herself slip beneath the surface. Sometimes she does, for a moment, catching glimpses of dirty slums and bright ballrooms and grassy fields, the Cardinal’s narrowed eyes and Sarazin’s wild grin and Rochefort’s flat lizard-like stare.

And him. Always, always him.

One of her names – the name she gave herself when she first learned what hope was, the name a priest intoned as she entered into matrimony, the name she wore with a necklace of rope and a posy of forget-me-nots – echoes in her mind over and over again, a tuneless song. His voice, calling for her. The way he called for her as they chased each other through grassy fields, as they rode together through the woods laughing, as they turned towards each other in sun-drenched sheets and found exactly what they were looking for. The way he says her name when he enters her room now, sparking warmth in her veins by his presence, happiness spreading through her system like wine.

Anne, he calls her. Anne, my wife, my darling, my love. Anne. Endearments from him are rare – the way he says her name always seems endearment enough – but now they spill out like gems from an upturned jewel box, vivid and varied.

Even when she hated him and he hated her – when he spat her name as a drunken curse in squalid taverns, when he sighed it in a burning house with her knife at his throat, when he listed her aliases in a voice thick with hatred – there was always a part of her that wanted to go to him when he called.

And he’s calling her now. The depths call to her too – they offer darkness, rest, sleep, peace. It’s tempting. She’s exhausted, and she’s fought too long. She’s been fighting her whole life, scrabbling to survive, forcing herself to do anything, however distasteful or destructive, to last out the day and get to the next, only to have to do it all over again. Endlessly struggling up a steep hill, hands and feet bloodied by rocks, not even sure what she’s struggling for or what waits at the top. Scorned, kicked, spat on, beaten, hurt, broken, betrayed, lost, fighting tooth and nail for nothing more than scraps and then being shamed for what she did to get them. The thought of finally stopping is undeniably attractive, inasmuch as she is capable of forming a real thought at all in this strange scattered half-world.

But there is no siren’s lure that could ever be as powerful as the sound of her husband’s voice saying her name. If there is anything at the top of this particular mountain waiting for her, it’s him – the man who offers more than scraps, who offers everything, the man who she loves. His voice is husky, and pleading, and it cracks on her name.

She chases the sound upwards.

X_X_X_X_X
Milady wakes slowly, her memory disjointed and strange. There was… a child, wasn’t there? She can hear it crying now, little shrill wails. But she has nothing to do with children. The bed she’s in is very soft, so for a minute she thinks she must be in her little hidden room at the Palais Cardinal, but then she remembers the Cardinal is dead and gone. Where is she now?

Her eyelids are impossibly heavy, but she knows she’ll have to try and lift them. It takes a real effort. She vaguely remembers being covered in sweat, being too hot and too cold at the same time somehow. Now she is clean and feels, if not good, at least not actively terrible. Exhausted, though. Exhausted right to her bones. She would like to close her eyes again and sleep for a week. She aches, as well, all her muscles and bones hurting even while she’s still, but the ache is distant and softened somehow. Her breasts hurt more fiercely, though, swollen and uncomfortable.

Her memory comes back to her much more as she glances around the room. This is her home. Not her usual bedroom, one of the other ones – someone must have put her in clean clothes and moved her away from the wet, blood and birth-stained bed, and placed her here instead. But still her home. And the child crying… that’s her child. Hers and Athos’s.

Athos is next to the bed, head resting heavily on her hand, which he holds grasped in two of his own. For a second she thinks he fell asleep like that, but then she sees he is shaking just enough to be noticeable.

“Athos?” She manages to lift her other hand – it feels like it weighs a tonne – and rests it on his head. Moving it hurts, but she’s never been able to resist the urge to give him comfort when he needs it.

He jerks upright. He has, she realises with a faint sense of surprise, been quietly crying for some time, judging by the look of his face. His eyes are bloodshot and his face sallow, but her heart still turns over at the sight of him. “Anne?”

“What time is it?”

“You’re… you can talk. You don’t seem confused, or to be lacking your wits.”

She narrows her eyes at him, even though that aches too. You wouldn’t think eyelids could hurt, but apparently anything can. “Do I usually?”

“Lemay thought… after your temperature being so high, for so long,” Athos explains painfully, “He thought that you might not wake up again, even after the fever broke. Or if you did, you’d be… different.”

“Well, whoever Lemay is, he’s clearly wrong. How long have I been…”

“I don’t know,” Athos says, looking faintly confused, as if he’s really trying to figure it out. “I haven’t… I haven’t been outside. A few days, perhaps?”

“Our… our son.” The word sounds strange in her mouth. “Is he all right?”

“Fine. Strong.” He manages something that looks almost like a smile, but it trembles. “Constance has been staying, caring for him. He’s on goat’s milk for now, and seems able to keep most of it down. I’ll go get Constance, have her…”

“No!” She grips his hand tightly. “Wait just a moment.”

It is a strange thought, to think they’ll never really be alone again. Of course, if you think of it in those terms, they were never alone to start with – back in Pinon they had his father, Thomas,
Catherine, now in Paris they have Porthos, Aramis, d’Artagnan, Treville, even Constance. A positive crowd of people, even if, once again, everyone in the crowd is Athos’s and not hers. Still, she wants a minute without the crowd, a minute just with him.

It is, for the most part, a silent minute. He presses his forehead to hers and she holds him there, closing her eyes and just breathing in and out.

Then he says, very quietly. “I thought you were going to die.” He swallows hard. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“I’m sorry.” He’s not a man who apologises often or easily, her husband, but now the words seem almost to erupt from him. “I was dealing with other things, and I didn’t know, and I got here so late…”

“It’s fine.”

It doesn’t seem to be fine, though, not to him. Still, he accepts her comfort and her kiss, before disappearing out the door. He looks back at the last moment, a kind of fear on his face as he does so, as if he’s Orpheus and looking back at his Eurydice will doom her, cause her to be lost to him forever. But she lets her lips curve into that quiet, private smile that is only for him, and he relaxes.

She lays back against her pillows, still weary. She’s surprised to find herself still alive. She thought for sure she would die. It felt like she was dying. She’s still a little woozy and confused, but she can feel the relief flooding her body as she really starts to understand she’s safe now. Mixed with anticipation – her son. Athos is going to come back with her son. How is she meant to know how to hold him, to feed him, to care for him? It’s a terrifying thought, but an amazing one to think she’ll have the chance to find out. That’s why her breasts hurt, she realises – milk. It’s as bizarre a consideration as everything else.

Of course, the whole lot of them follow Athos. She can’t believe they’re all still here. Constance, holding the child. Aramis, looking as tired as she feels. Porthos, with a huge grin on his face. Even d’Artagnan.

She has eyes for only one of them besides Athos.

He feels impossibly small and fragile in her arms as Constance carefully passes him over – strangely, there seems to be no hostility between them at all. Perhaps there’s no room for it right now. The baby blinks his eyes open to look at his mother. “Hello,” she says, feeling simultaneously foolish and completely choked up. “Hello, you.” She looks up at Athos, aware she’s beaming like an idiot. “He has blue eyes.”

“They might change,” Constance warns, stepping comfortably into the role of expert despite being childless. “Nearly all babies have blue eyes when they’re born. They might end up green like yours in a few months.”

“Well, they’re blue for now, anyway. And just look at him.” Of course, they’ve all spent a few days looking at him, while she’s been sick and then unconscious – she feels unreasonably jealous of that. He’s her child, after all. She should be the one holding him, caring for him, feeding him, loving him. Her and Athos.

Athos smiles slowly, eyes crinkling, and looks down at their son as well, shifting so that he’s sitting beside her in the overlarge bed. He wraps an arm around her and lets her lean her head on
his shoulder, still staring down at the small, perfect being they’ve created. It seems utterly impossible they could have anything to do with something so pure and untouched by life.

Somewhere deep down, she didn’t really believe they’d get to have this. They almost didn’t.

She glances up sharply as something crosses her mind, stare pinning Aramis to the wall. “So it seems I owe you my life.”

Aramis shrugs. “I doubt it, Milady. I tried to help, and then so did Lemay, but at the end of the day, I think if you owe anyone your gratitude, it’s probably God.”

Well, that’s much worse. She’d far rather owe Aramis than God. “Nevertheless,” she says, making it sound final.

She doesn’t like owing anyone, she admits, but in this case the debt exists and there’s little point denying it. It’s one thing to have someone’s back in a swordfight or give them covering fire with a musket, risking your life in the heat of the moment. She could easily repay that, and besides, it’s understood that when you’re fighting beside someone you’ll do your best to keep them from death, even if only from selfish and practical reasons. This is different, somehow.

Not least because of some of the memories that are starting to surface.

“While I was delirious… the things I said…” she begins.

“You mostly just mumbled,” Aramis says casually. He’s a half-decent liar when he’s prepared for the question, but the way the skin around his eyes tightens for just a moment is a giveaway. Yes, she certainly revealed a few bits of her life that she would rather not have shared. She’s too tired right now to feel much about that, though. She’ll deal with the ramifications later.

The baby yawns and stretches, and immediately gains both her and Athos’s entire attention.

“I can’t believe you’re all right,” Athos says, sounding disbelieving. His arm tightens around her, drawing her even closer, and although she’s stiff and sore she allows it. She feels she’s surrounded by him, and their child is surrounded by both of them, and it’s so amazing she can barely believe it herself. It’s so much more than she ever thought she could have.

“Perhaps we should give you all some time alone,” Porthos says, clearing his throat. To Milady’s amazement he’s smiling at them mistily, clearly on the edge of tears just from watching her and Athos with their child – much more willing to show his emotions than the rest of the Musketeers, like always.

D’Artagnan, meanwhile, looks like he has no idea why he’s here, but like he’s unwillingly charmed by the sight before him despite that. “We have work to do, anyway.”

“And he’ll want to feed soon,” Constance says practically, and after that comment the rest of them can’t get out fast enough.

They’re alone, then. All three of them.

Milady relaxes into Athos’s arms, leaning against him. The child weighs hardly anything in her grasp. She marvels at it, wonders how something so tiny can move and breathe and cry.

Athos, of course, feels the need to ruin the moment. “While you were feverish, you said some things to me as well.” He speaks quietly, but misery is etched into his words as well as his face. She knows what he’s talking about immediately, and would turn away if she could, coldness
stealing through her. “It was like you were reliving what happened all over again. Pleading with me – telling me -”

“I can guess,” she says, a little sharply, before forcing herself to calm down and stop lashing out, biting her lip. “We don’t need to talk about it. That part of our life is over.”

And it is, it is. She looks down at her son, and promises herself again that he’ll never know any of it. That has always been her plan – that her child not know her past. Originally, it was also her plan that he not know his father, and she’s glad Athos persuaded her otherwise, but the rest is something no child should know. Perhaps he’ll be told she has some history in trading information, but she will allow him to think that she never seduced, or killed, or committed treason. The scar on her throat will be from an accident.

They shouldn’t be focusing on pain, or on the past. Only on the future. Only on their son.

Athos hesitates, but then gives way, kissing her forehead. “Alright.”

She feels relieved, but also strangely guilty for stopping him when he clearly wants to talk about it. He still looks ashen, wrecked, his eyes darkened with pain – this has taken a toll on him, it’s clear, in some ways perhaps more of one than it took on her. Minds and hearts heal much less quickly than bodies. But it will pass, she’s sure, and it will pass all the quicker if they avoid opening old wounds – whether hers or his. The trial, the tree, the noose… it’s all long over now.

“We’ll have to come up with a name,” Athos notes, changing the subject to her relief.

Milady pauses as something occurs to her.

She hates being indebted. Where she grew up, when you owed people, they always forced you to pay, and it was always more than you could afford. You were bound to them by your debts.

She knows that Athos and his friends don’t work like that. To them, there is no careful accounting of credits and debits, no back alley ledger of favours that must be repaid. To them, friendship means that you will always do everything you can for the other person, and you won’t count the coin that takes. Even strangers and enemies deserve consideration, according to the Musketeers. People aren’t assets or liabilities, they’re just people, and if helping them is the right thing to do then you help them. It’s not even charity – it’s generosity, it’s kindness, it’s honour.

But she’s not that kind of person. To her, an unpaid debt will always itch, and she knows she will come to resent freely-given kindness just as she resents the gratitude it forces from her.

Better to repay her debts quickly, then, and be free of them.

She clears her throat. “How about René?”

“René?” Athos repeats. He leaves a long silence, looking down at her. “You know that’s Aramis’s real first name, don’t you?”

“Why would I know something like that?” She makes her disdain for the question clear. “But despite that little flaw, I quite like the name. Maybe our son could wear it better than he does.”

“I see,” Athos says, and she thinks that he probably does. The corners of his eyes crinkle in a shy, secret smile as he looks down at their son. “René it is, then.”

“René d’Athos,” she says, letting the syllables trip off her tongue. She likes it. They can settle middle names later, perhaps. For now, this is good.
René d’Athos.
The crying is so shrill it feels like it slices right through Athos’s skull, but it’s not that which makes him flinch away – it’s Milady trying to hand René to him so she can deal with something else. Still, he reaches out his arms and takes the child, already moving towards the nurse to pass him on. The woman accepts the boy with a smile – she doesn’t have much in the way of intellect, but the nurse Milady hired loves children with a simple joy, never irritated with their bawling or bored with their company.

As always, having the baby in his arms even for a second takes him right back to the first time he held his son – looking down at a beautiful, perfect child, and thinking dark and ugly thoughts. Thinking that if he could, he would trade away his child for Milady’s life. Who looked at a child, their own child, and thought of their death, even for a moment? Just more proof he’s unsuited to being a father.

He stops by continually, trying to help out as best he can, but he tries to avoid directly interacting with his son as much as possible. Milady, despite all her fears, seems to be a natural. It took her only a week of total exhaustion and stress before she handled the baby as casually and competently as she handles a blade. She even takes the constant crying as some kind of proof that it’s really her son, as if only her offspring could ever be this difficult.

Athos, meanwhile, is spiralling. He can’t help it. His thoughts the first time he held René… breaking his promise to be there for the birth… nearly fleeing the place when it seemed Anne was dying… these messages that won’t stop coming… surely, all these things are proof he’s barely changed at all from the cruel, cowardly man who ordered his own wife strung from a tree. René cries every time he’s placed in Athos’s arms, as if he can sense he’s not safe there. Milady rarely presses the matter, and since his third refusal has given up even trying to persuade him to move into the house. He wonders if she gave up because she realised what a poor idea it was, or if she thinks he’s avoiding living with a newborn. The truth is he’s avoiding dealing with this. He’s unable to comfort his child, clueless as to how to help his wife, and painfully aware that he cannot be the man he should be. He can’t fit into the comfortable, happy life they seem to be winding their way towards. He’s not a loving husband, not a good father. He is a competent Musketeer, though, and that makes the Garrison the easier place to be. He knows how to do that. It was always simple to be a soldier. It’s everything else that comes hard.

He can’t stop himself from coming by every day – he needs to see Milady, needs to hold her and be sure she’s alright, needs to gaze at his son, needs to help out and be useful – but at the same time he’s horribly aware that he shouldn’t be there. He leaves as soon as he can. He never sleeps there now.

He knows his thoughts to be quite illogical, knows that if he shares them with Milady she’ll reassure him, tell him that the past is completely behind them and he’s not that man anymore, remind him that they’re getting better every day. Somehow, he also knows that won’t help. He doesn’t know what will. The past isn’t fixable. Perhaps he isn’t either. He’s tried to bring it up with her a few times, talk about it, but while Milady’s more than willing to discuss fears or insecurities, there’s nothing that will persuade her to talk about their pasts. As far as she’s concerned, they’ve shut the door on that, they’ve moved on.

“That boy-Musketeer of yours dropped off some more correspondence,” Milady says, idly shuffling the papers before she passes them over to him but not really reading them. He has no idea if she means one of the young recruits or d’Artagnan – really, it’s even odds – but it doesn’t really
His hands are trembling as he takes them. If she notices, she doesn’t say a word.

Sure enough, the bundle contains another one of them. A Captain can’t avoid his mail the way a simple Musketeer can, so he always goes through every piece of it, and he’d accidentally opened the first that arrived. But he’d jerked away when he saw who it was addressed to (my lord comte, damn them), and crushed it in his fist barely a paragraph in, throwing it in the fire.

His time in Pinon is over, it’s done. He can remember every time he’s left with horrifying clarity. His wife choking to death on a rope. His house burning to the ground as she fled on horseback. His chest aching more from heartbreak than from a bullet after she abandoned him. Every time, he thinks he’s done for good. Every time, he’s dragged back there, to the horrors of the past and his own darkness.

Right now, somehow, the idea seems even worse. He has the mad thought that if he goes there he’ll realise that this, all of this, is simply some elaborate denial. Anne can’t really be alive. There’s no way she could love him. And how can they have a child? It’s madness, all of it, and he fears Pinon just as he fears his own darkness, and for much the same reason – if he faces the past head-on, it will destroy him. He can’t afford to be destroyed, not now. He has too much to lose.

After the second letter, he tried to tell Milady about it, but it went as well as any attempt to discuss the past. Since they decided to raise the child she was expecting together all those months ago, she’s been completely unwilling to discuss old events. The moment he mentioned Pinon and the old days, she shut him down, not even hearing him out long enough for him to explain why he was bringing it up. Their child will never know about what happened back then, she says, as if that can somehow erase it all from Athos’s memory as well. This is a new start, she claims: they’ve moved on, they’re fine now. But he’s not fine, and he’s been even less fine since he sat with her through her delirium, listening to her cry and beg him to believe her, to save her, to help her. She seems to have magically packaged up rage, fear, guilt and grief from those days and left them behind her easily, at least when lucid. He can’t.

It’s too much, all of it together. René’s cries rise in volume. Milady lifts him back into her arms, shushing him. Together they make a perfect picture, something out of his old fantasies of what life could be. Everything he wants. Too much.

“I’m due to meet the others at the tavern,” he says abruptly. It’s a lie. He has no idea what his friends are doing tonight. But he can get drunk by himself, and he remembers when that used to help – perhaps it will give him a reprieve from his thoughts tonight as well. It’s been a while since he had more than a few drinks in a row, but right now he feels the need for total oblivion. So long as he goes to the Garrison at the end of the night instead of here, what harm can it do?

He stuffs the papers in the nearby desk Milady got to allow him to do his paperwork here – he’ll look at them tomorrow. “If that’s alright with you, of course.” He knows his voice is unfairly sharp, cutting over their son’s wailing.

She hesitates, bending her tired, thoughtful gaze on him like she wants to ask him what’s really going on. But eventually she shrugs, setting him free. “Say hello to the idiots from me.”

X_X_X_X_X_X

It’s probably not fair to blame whoever’s knocking on her front door for her son waking up and starting to wail, she knows. After all, sooner or later something would have set him off. He’s colicky, according to the midwife, and it will fade in time. The nurse prefers to just call him a
difficult baby, although always with a faintly soppy smile, as if this is a good thing. She claims it means he’ll be strong and stubborn as an adult, too, but given his parentage, Milady prefers to think that was always going to be the case.

She leaves the bed and stands, making her way to the crib. As always, even through the haze of fatigue she’s been in since the birth, looking at her little son sends a surge of emotion through her, so fierce it’s almost frightening. She feels like she could hold him close to her, clapping him with the full force of her wonder, her possessiveness, and her protectiveness, squeezing so tightly he is destroyed by the intensity of her love. It’s the same feeling she gets sometimes when she wakes beside Athos – gratitude, joy and love so overwhelming it feels unsafe. It feels like more than her heart or her body should be able to contain, and certainly more than the recipients of it are able to withstand – but Athos, at least, has always been capable of meeting the full force of everything she feels for him, and returning it with his own overwhelming emotion. He alone understands what a gift it is, to still have each other after everything. Small wonder that some mornings they used to cling to each other like survivors from a shipwreck, fearing that to let go would be to let the other slip below the surface and be lost forever.

Not that she’s been waking beside Athos lately, she thinks a little sourly, although even her sourness is blunted by tiredness these days. She picks their son up, pressing her lips briefly against the impossibly smooth skin of his tiny head. He ignores her, continuing to bawl his lungs out. It doesn’t bother her as much as it should.

She’s afraid of the future, of when their son will be old enough to speak, when he will need more from her than this – or no, not more, but different things. Instead of physical things like feeding him, cleaning him and holding him, which she can do, she will need to know how to teach him, comfort him, advise him, encourage him, raise him. She never really had a childhood, and she has no idea how to give someone else one. There are so many contradictions. Is she supposed to trust him or set boundaries on him? Let him out in the world or keep him safe at home? Train him to protect himself or promise they will always protect him? She suspects some combination of all of those. She worries she won’t know how to talk to him at all – without the protections of sarcasm, wit, seduction, cruelty, manipulation or threats, she finds it difficult to communicate with most people. Being genuine is the hardest thing in the world for her, a vulnerability she finds it near-impossible to show, even with Athos.

She thought she’d have his help with that part of raising a child, but given how strange and distant he’s been lately, even while physically present, she’s starting to question that. And if she has to do it on her own… she isn’t good at providing emotional support, or demonstrating affection, or forming real relationships, or knowing how normal and healthy people should behave. How can she give their son all the love and help and support he deserves? But this – this she can do. It’s exhausting and frustrating, but simple. She almost enjoys it, as a result.

“My lady?” The footmen sticks his head in. “A Musketeer here to see you.”

She’s surprised when the footman leads in d’Artagnan.

The others visit more often than he does. Aramis, of course, is beyond delighted with René, calling him his namesake, and spends his visits beaming at him and singing to him. Porthos likes to make faces and blow raspberries whenever he’s handed the baby, which is one of the few things that can fascinate René into silence for longer than a few moments. Treville looks in on the boy briefly whenever he’s here to discuss important matters with Athos, talking to the baby stiffly and self-consciously, but still always smiling by the end. Even Constance stops by, giving Milady tight smiles and avoiding any subject except the baby and his health, but softening the second she looks
at him. Milady supposes she shouldn’t be surprised – René’s the first (acknowledged) child any of
the Inseparables have had, so he’s a novelty as much as a family member to them. The ability to
hand off the baby to her or the nurse the moment the child gets too annoying probably helps a bit
too.

To her surprise, she doesn’t resent it. She’s still unsure about their relationship to her – she has a
worrying feeling that Aramis and even Porthos might consider her one of their friends, a position
she knows herself to be too unsuited and inexperienced for. But she has no doubts about their
feelings for her and Athos’s son, the nephew and godson they already adore just based on their
love for his father. She’s used to thinking of people’s feelings for her as an advantage, something
that turns them into an asset she can use, and she’s decided to think of all the people who love her
son the same way. There are worse people for a child to have on their side than the best fighters in
the country, France’s First Minister, and the Queen’s closest friend. Her son will never be
defenceless with their assistance to call on, and since that’s what she wants more than anything,
she’s decided to be pleased about their interest. Her instincts might cry out for her not to let anyone
close to her child, because people use you and hurt you and no one can be trusted, but for the most
part common sense prevails.

D’Artagnan doesn’t visit, though. She’s not sure if it’s because children hold no interest for him, or
if he’s aware spending any time with the baby will force him to spend time with her as well.

“D’Artagnan,” she says, drawing out his name the way she always does, turning it into half a taunt
just by tone alone. Even talking at twice her normal volume to be heard above her son’s cries, she
can always manage to be provocative. It’s a gift. “What a surprise.”

“Is it?” he asks cryptically. She tilts her head, making a show of her confusion, and then he sighs
and says bluntly, “Where’s Athos?”

Milady almost says at the Garrison automatically, because this time of day that’s always where he
is, but if he was there would be no need for d’Artagnan to come see her. “Have you lost my
husband?” she enquires instead, keeping her voice mild despite the anger already rising. “First your
King, now your Captain… quite the year you’re having.”

“He didn’t show up this morning. He’s been like clockwork these past months, always on time, but
this morning… nothing. And he’s not in his room there.” He doesn’t say anything spiteful in
return, which is when she realises he’s really worried, because normally he takes every opportunity
he can. “So if he’s not here either… When did you last see him?”

“Yesterday evening. He didn’t come back here after going out with you lot, if that’s what
you’re…” She trails off at his expression, rocking René in her arms to persuade him to quiet down
slightly. Again, it has no effect. “What?”

“We didn’t see Athos last night. We didn’t even have plans to.”

“I must have misunderstood,” she says, because she’s damned if she’s going to admit her husband
lied to her to d’Artagnan of all people. But panic is already spiking through her.

He left, a dark little voice in the back of her mind whispers, of course he left. Who would stay with
you?. She ignores it to the best of her ability. She knows Athos better than anyone on this earth,
and he wouldn’t leave her, and certainly not like this. But he has seemed troubled lately. Especially
last night. She tries to remember exactly what led to him claiming he needed to meet the others –
had she said anything? Done anything? It can’t be coincidence he lied about where he was going
and has now disappeared. But surely he wouldn’t walk into something dangerous without back-up.
He’s not a fool.
The letters. She gave him his letters, and he took one look at them, and said he was going out with his friends. It’s not the first time she’s caught him wincing at his mail like it personally offends him, but since he’s never liked dealing with correspondence, she didn’t think much of it.

She places her still-bawling son carefully back in his little bassinet, then stalks over to the desk and grabs the letters out of it. “Read these,” she orders d’Artagnan, stuffing half into his hands. He accepts them without question, not even making a token protest about her reading potentially sensitive information about the Musketeers, and the room is silent as they scan through letter after letter.

Then d’Artagnan groans. “Pinon,” he says, even the word making Milady flinch slightly. “They’ve asked for Athos to return. This is from the innkeeper there. He says they’re in desperate need of their Comte’s protection. Apparently this isn’t the first letter, either.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snaps. “Athos wouldn’t go back there.”

“He wouldn’t just disappear without a word to anyone, either,” d’Artagnan says. “But apparently he has.”

Their eyes meet, for once in total understanding of each other. No, Athos wouldn’t go to Pinon unless it was life or death – and even in that case, it generally has to be life and death for someone he cares about. A politely worded request wouldn’t cut it. But he’s gone out, and he hasn’t come back, and this is the best lead they have.

“I’ll get the others and head to Pinon,” d’Artagnan says, still speaking loudly to be heard over the baby’s crying. “It’s only a day’s ride away. I’ll get him back.”

“He’ll need me,” she says.

“He’ll have us,” d’Artagnan says, tone making it clear he considers the Musketeers of far more value to Athos than her. It puts her hackles up immediately. D’Artagnan has never bothered to hide that he considers Athos’s feelings for her little better than another addiction, compared to the healthy trust and comradery he shares with his brothers, and it never fails to infuriate her.

“I’m coming too,” she says, fighting to keep her tone even instead of shredding d’Artagnan to pieces.

“With a baby?” He gives her a slightly-too-triumphant look.

She pauses. René is still at the breast, of course, excepting the occasional bit of goat’s milk when necessary (she doesn’t seem to produce quite enough for him, perhaps due to a lifetime dotted with irregular periods of starvation). Not only does that mean she can’t get more than a couple of hours sleep in a row even when she lets the nurse deal with his screaming, it means she needs to keep him with her. But there’s no choice here – she can’t let Athos be in Pinon alone. She can’t. There’s nothing she wants less than to return there, but Pinon sucks the life from Athos, and she can’t let that happen again. She can go there and get him back as quickly as possible, limit the damage.

“I’ll get a carriage,” she says. It’s safer than riding with a newborn, and while she feels partly recovered from the birth, she’s not sure she’d like to start riding again by spending most of a day in the saddle. And with a coach, she can even bring the nurse – while she’s capable of handling her son alone, it can be exhausting, and if there’s any kind of fight waiting she has no intention of sitting it out with her child.

D’Artagnan hesitates. “It could be dangerous, from the sound of it. I don’t know if Athos would
want you to go,” he says, starting to slip into a lecturing tone. “And with his child as well. Whatever risks you take yourself, you have no business -”

She feels a flash of annoyance go through her. He has no right to dictate or judge her actions. They’ve gotten through this conversation relatively cordially, so far, but she’s abruptly sick of pretending he has any say in what she does.

“I decide what my business is,” she says coldly. “And I’m Athos’s wife, for all you think you’d be better suited to the position. Whatever you like to pretend to yourself, d’Artagnan, you are not the expert on my husband.”

He flushes – she’s scored a hit there. “At least I’m capable of considering what he wants,” d’Artagnan says lowly. “Instead of following only my own selfish impulses.”

“How touching,” she says, making no effort to sound sincere. “But since what he wants is me, perhaps you should start considering coming to terms with that.”

René chooses this moment to let out a particularly loud scream, making them both wince and d’Artagnan take a step back. Milady half-turns away, abandoning the letters in favour of her child, trying to soothe him, bending over slightly so her hair dangles around her face.

“You shouldn’t put the baby at risk,” d’Artagnan says stiffly.

“Perhaps not, but I have to go,” she says, trying to keep her voice level. There’s a giveaway wobble there, though, as she looks down at René. She’s tired and overemotional, she knows, but she can’t stand the thought of Athos in Pinon alone. The last time they were in Pinon, she got him shot, drugged him, and abandoned him. The time before, she set his home on fire and nearly slit his throat. She needs to help. She needs to remind him that they’re not those people anymore. That those aren’t their lives anymore.

She blinks and looks away, suddenly actually close to tears, and d’Artagnan edges away, looking faintly unnerved as he sees that. It’s unlike her to be emotional – or at least unlike her to be emotional in this specific way – but her emotions have been a confused cocktail since before the birth, and they haven’t quite subsided yet. She’s been told they will return to normal, as her body recovers and she starts to get more sleep, and she looks forward to being entirely herself again soon, but for the moment that’s no help.

“I’m going,” she says again.

After a long pause, d’Artagnan finally nods reluctantly, capitulating. Probably terrified that if he doesn’t, she’ll start wailing or something similarly horrific. “All right. A compromise. What if Aramis and I go ahead, riding as fast as I can, and I send Porthos with you? He’s a decent coachman and he’ll give you some protection.”

“That sounds… acceptable.” She doesn’t want to seem grateful to him.

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“You all right?” Porthos asks.

“Of course,” Milady says loftily as they wind their way through the countryside. She’s taking a spell sitting outside with him, even though it’s not really the done thing for a lady – enjoying the sunshine, enjoying the conversation. The nurse is inside with René, who so far – miracle of miracles – has slept nearly the whole way. Even when he’s not asleep, though, he still hasn’t been crying. She’s checked six times already if he’s still breathing, it’s so unlike him to be quiet for an
extended period of time (meaning, longer than a quarter hour).

Porthos gives her a disbelieving look. None of the Musketeers are very good at hiding their thoughts or feelings, but she thinks Porthos is the worst at it – not because he’s a poor liar, but because most of the time he doesn’t see any need to dissemble. There’s a straightforwardness to him that the others lack. It doesn’t make him stupid or simple, but it does mean that when she talks to him, she often feels she’s stepped out onto a stair and found only air between her feet. She doesn’t know how to do conversation that’s so honest and open. Still, there’s something comforting about not having to second-guess what she says or what she hears. There’s few people she can do that with.

She lets her guard down just a little, sighing. “I’m just not especially enamoured of our destination, that’s all. How is it we keep ending up back there?”

“Thought you’d want to be a comtesse again.” It comes out teasing.

“You would, wouldn’t you? But I don’t want to have any part of the past with me. Everyone around here knows what happened to the Comtesse de la Fere. Keeping the name, the title, the land, that means keeping the rest of it too. Can you imagine René growing up with that? Knowing what happened between us, what we did to each other?” She shudders at the thought. “No. We left this behind us for a reason.”

“That’s stupid,” he says, with his typical bluntness. “It doesn’t make it any less a part of you. Pretending the past didn’t happen is pointless.”

“Look at you, getting all wise,” she mocks him.

“It’s true, though. This is your kid’s legacy. You can try and give him one made of lies, but even if he believes them, somewhere deep down he’ll know it’s not the truth. He’ll sense it.” Porthos shrugs. “All you’ll do is confuse him and hurt him by lying, and someday he’ll find out anyway.”

“You don’t know that.” She should add, and you can keep your opinions to yourself, but for some reason she doesn’t.

“Maybe not. But look at Treville and me – I’m livid at him for not telling me what he knows about my father. Maybe it’s his story, but it’s part of mine as well, and how dare he keep it from me? Yeah, maybe it’s bad. But the bad bits are part of me too. Whether or not he tells me the truth, I lived the consequences of that truth. Not knowing what happened just means I don’t know why I lived it. A nice lie is still a lie, and lies don’t last.”

They sit there in silence after that. She’s not sure what to say. On the one hand, she can see his point – she and Athos can pretend they had a simple, sweet little past, but no matter how hard they try, someday their son will feel the undercurrents between them, hear the falseness to the stories, notice the pauses in the conversations when he’s around. Their pasts formed them, and since they’re his parents, they will be part of what forms him. Without the truth, he’ll get it all without context – her trust issues, Athos’s guilt, their shared fears and overprotectiveness, the desperate way they cling to each other.

But on the other hand – she never wants him to know she was a thief, a liar, a killer. She never wants to see the horror in her little boy’s eyes when he hears about her being hung without a trial, when he realises what the red line on her throat is from, when he knows about the vendetta and the hatred and the betrayal. She never wants their child to look at them with fear, disgust, shame, or loathing. If they never talk about it, if they allow it to fade away completely, then perhaps it will never affect him. Perhaps her son will grow up seeing Athos as a hero, and seeing her as a good
woman, honest, sweet and simple.
The woman Athos saw her as, once.
The thought is a shock, but she does her best to ignore it.

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“Athos? Athos?”

The voice is familiar, and when he swims his way to consciousness, he finds d’Artagnan looking
down at him. He’s sitting in a chair by the bed Athos is in. “Where am I?” he asks groggily. “What
time is it?”

D’Artagnan gives him a too-bright smile and skips over the first question. “Mid-afternoon. We got
worried when you didn’t turn up at the Garrison this morning. You’ve been so prompt lately that
we knew something had to be wrong. The others will be here soon, Aramis and I are just the…
advance party, I suppose.”

Athos blinks, still dazed, and looks around. It seems he’s in an inn of some kind. His head aches
worse than it has in a long time. “How much did I drink last night?”

“Far too much,” a young woman says sharply from the doorway. There’s something familiar about
her, but Athos can’t quite place her face. “It made it quite easy to drug you. Of course, if you’d
honoured the responsibilities of your family to begin with we wouldn’t have needed to, but I
suppose you can’t expect a drunk to understand something like duty.”

D’Artagnan sighs and rubs at his face with the palm of his hand, frustrated. “Jeanne, could you
just… give us a moment? I haven’t forgotten you had him tied up in the back of a wagon when we
catched up. I’m sure he’ll help you once he understands what’s going on, but you did kidnap him,
and you need to ease off a bit.”

She huffs, but turns and leaves them to it.

“Jeanne,” Athos says slowly, his memory jogged by the name as much as by how familiar she
looks. The unanswered question from before about their location, the comment about kidnapping
and a wagon, and all those letters begging him to return are leading him to an unwelcome
conclusion. He tries to ignore it. “That was Jeanne, the daughter of Bertrand, the innkeeper at
Pinon. Where are we, d’Artagnan?”

Of course, he already knows the answer.

“Pinon.”

That doesn’t stop him from going to storm out the second d’Artagnan admits it, though. He’s out
the door and down the stairs without a word. He finds Aramis downstairs, having his drink refilled
by a respectful Bertrand, who immediately bows and says, “My lord.”

“Good to see you’re awake,” Aramis says, twisting around to see him and giving him a cheerful
smile. “Has d’Artagnan had a chance to explain the situation yet?”

“I was kidnapped and dragged back to a life I left long ago.” Athos all but spits the words. “What
else is there to explain? I hope you brought my horse with you, because we’re leaving now.”

“We can’t,” Aramis says, at his most reasonable, although he does have the grace to look
apologetic. “I have a fair idea what roads the others are taking, but it’s not like we planned it out exactly. It would be terrible if we missed the coach on the way back. They’d get here and have no idea what was going on.”

“Well, we can just leave a message with -” He pauses. “Wait. The others. Plural. Who’s with Porthos, Aramis?”

“Uh…” Aramis’s smile remains, but now it has a slightly fixed look to it. “Athos, she insisted. We couldn’t exactly chain her to the wall, could we? But she has Porthos with her and they’re travelling quite slowly.”

Athos grits his teeth, trying to force himself back to calm. “No, you couldn’t tie her up. But you seem to have no problem with me being tied up. Or kidnapped, for that matter.”

Aramis lets the smile drop entirely. “They were desperate, Athos,” he says, and now there’s something like sympathy in his voice. Behind him, Bertrand nods assent, still looking ferociously contrite. “But they knew it was the wrong move. I honestly think they would have let you go anyway once you woke up, even if d’Artagnan and I hadn’t caught up first and made them untie you.”

“And the drugs?” His head still pounds.

“Relatively harmless ones. I’ve been steeping local medicinal flowers in water and giving you a dose every few hours to encourage them to pass through your system quicker.”

Athos just looks at him. “Flowers,” he says flatly. All he can see in his mind’s eye is forget-me-nots, brilliant blue, like a carpet across the ground; still and unchanging in his locket; in a little vase swept to the floor and forgotten; gripped in his wife’s pale hand as the noose was tied. It’s harder to remember the more recent ones, the posies of them he brings her, the embroidered patterns on the clothes she wears, the ones she left in his saddlebag to tell him they weren’t done. Being here makes the past too prominent for the present to feel real.

“Yes, Lemay was so impressed by my skills the other month that he lent me a few of his medical books,” Aramis says, looking rather pleased about this. “You know I’m not much of a reader, apart from the odd bit of poetry, heroic tales, and the Bible of course, but it’s fascinating. Detailed dissections of the human body, the theory of four humours, medicinal herbs and flowers…”

Normally, he would remind Aramis to focus. Instead, he just stares at him, feeling somewhere between hollowed out and furious.

Aramis remembers what they were actually discussing, and clears his throat. “- well, anyway. Even if I hadn’t been here, the drug wouldn’t have harmed you. I considered letting you sleep it off – but as much as it looks like you need the rest, I didn’t fancy the idea of trying to hold back Milady if you were still unconscious when she got here. Pinon would be a ghost town by the time -” Aramis cuts himself off again.

Remembering, no doubt, that to Athos Pinon is already a ghost town. It’s full of them, every path, every meadow, every nook and cranny. Ironically, though, the ghost that haunts him the most is the one who still lives. The woman he loves.

Discovering that she’d survived, realising that she hadn’t become the monster he thought, knowing that she loves him… none of that is enough to entirely heal the wounds left by what happened then. After all, her being alive does not change the fact he cruelly sought her death, her becoming a better person doesn’t erase the bloody aftermath of her time as the Cardinal’s creature, and at the
end of the day, her love for him makes his actions back then worse, because they had no justification at all. When he hanged her that day, he destroyed them both, and no matter how strongly they’ve rebuilt now, that tree will always haunt his nightmares. This will always be the place the Comte and Comtesse de la Fere died, slaughtered by his own hand.

How dare they bring him back here.

“Are you through with your tantrum?” It’s Jeanne, coming to stand in front of him again, hands on her hips. “Ready to listen now?”

“Forgive my Jeanne, my lord -” Bertrand starts to say, but Athos ignores him to focus on his unimpressed-looking daughter.

“Goddamn you, I left here for a reason,” he growls.

“And you’ve done well for yourself, by all accounts. Captaincy, powerful friends, even a rich mistress,” Jeanne says. “Did you spare a thought for us, monsieur le Comte de le Fere? You neglect your lands. You neglect your people -”

“You don’t need a lord to tell you how to work the fields. You’ve always done it.”

“One of your neighbours has apparently been interfering with that,” d’Artagnan says. He’s at the bottom of the stairs, leaning against the wall, arms crossed. “Baron Renard. He’s been destroying their crops, starving them out. Since they don’t have a lord to protect them…”

Athos stares at him, then Jeanne, then Aramis. Then he closes his eyes for a moment. “Fine,” he growls. “I’ll speak to the Baron, but then we leave, understood?”

“Apparently he did his daily ride-through to terrorise the town-folk just before we got here today,” Aramis says, accepting this without any complaint. “So are we waiting until tomorrow, or seeing him tonight?”

Athos tries to think. “When will the others be here?”

“It’s what, fifteen hours by coach?” D’Artagnan leans so he can look out the window. “So a few hours after nightfall, probably. We left the moment we realised you were missing.”

“Then we’ll see him now, before they get here,” Athos says. That means they can’t take Porthos with them, so they’ll be one man down, but it also means that they won’t have to spend a moment more in Pinon than absolutely necessary. Although he’s resigned to the fact they’ll probably have to spend the night. Hopefully it will be comfortable enough for Milady and – “Wait, is René with them?”

Aramis coughs. “Yes, yes he is. She couldn’t exactly leave him behind.”

She absolutely could have, and could have left herself behind as well, but he admits that he desperately wants to see his wife and son right now. Even with d’Artagnan and Aramis by his side, standing in Pinon makes him feel like he imagined most of the last year. Anne is a corpse, a ghost, a horrifically painful memory, and a core part of him knows that’s all she is or ever could be – it is an effort to force himself past that and remember she is a real, living and breathing woman, his wife, the mother of his child.

Of course, his mind immediately starts going through possible threats. While he feels protective of Milady, he’s at least sensible enough to recognise she can protect herself well enough, most of the time – his son can’t. At least the three of them should be able to keep Baron Renard occupied, just
in case he’s a threat.

“Lady Catherine de Garouville,” he says to Jeanne, who’s been trying to follow the conversation but just looks confused by it. He has no interest in enlightening her, although he will probably have to fill them in on a few details once Milady gets here. “Is she still in these parts?”

Jeanne shakes her head. “I used to see her around – hunting, trading – but she disappeared almost a year ago. Stole a horse and rode right out of town. We think she went to Paris.”

Well, that’s a relief in the short-term, although he notes down her being in Paris under ‘deeply concerning’ and ‘something to worry about later’.

He looks at d’Artagnan and Aramis. “All right. Perhaps it will only take a conversation, but just in case, we should make a plan.”
It’s a couple of years since Milady has been to Pinon. The last time she came to the area, technically as Athos’s prisoner, they’d stayed entirely at the estate. The time before, though, she went into Pinon in the dead of night, wearing a cloak that hid her face, to murder Remi the blacksmith. She’s not sure how she feels about the memory now – guilty, perhaps, because he had been a good man once, more or less; but not as guilty as she thinks she should feel, because he had also been drinking himself to death from guilt and probably wouldn’t have lasted out the year with or without her intervention. And he had been a threat to her, on the edge of revealing her survival to Athos – but of course, she’d revealed that herself that same night, so it hardly mattered. She decides not to think too much about it. That’s her preferred method of dealing with the past these days.

Porthos helps her out of the coach like the polite coachman he definitely isn’t, and then her nurse too. René is fast asleep in the carrier the nurse is holding. To her absolute surprise, he appears to find long journeys in a jolting coach very soothing, and he slept almost the whole way. It’s not just the longest he’s ever been quiet, it’s probably five times as long as the previous record. Maybe she should buy a coach and hire a coachman just to keep him in that happy state. If he always reacts like this…

Porthos frowns suddenly, turning his head sharply. Then Milady hears it too. “Take René, and get inside,” she orders the nurse, gesturing at the nearby door to the inn. “Immediately.”

Another echoing gunshot sounds, this one seeming closer. There’s the sound of hooves. The nurse nods, eyes wide, and scurries over to the door quickly, then knocks in a quick, frantic sort of movement. “Please,” she says in a high, wavering voice. “Please, let me in.”

A woman Milady vaguely remembers opens the door. She turns her face towards the noise too, concern visible on her face thanks to the inn’s flickering lamplight, and then urges the woman inside. “Father,” she calls upstairs. “Father, looks my lord Comte might not be as good at negotiation as he thinks.” Then she looks over at Porthos and Milady, squinting to see them in the darkness but able to hear the coach, and says, “So you’re the ‘others’ he promised, I assume? You’ve all got rooms here, assuming the inn is still standing by then.”

The noise of horses are deafening by now, and then Aramis, d’Artagnan and Athos gallop into the square, dismounting as quickly as possible. “Guns,” d’Artagnan says breathlessly to Jeanne, “We need guns. Quickly.” He’s bleeding from a gash on his forehead, but otherwise looks fine. “Good thing we got some, then,” Porthos says, stepping into the light and distributing them. “You lost yours?”

“Taken. Baron Renard is disinclined to agree to my request,” Athos says, also a little breathless, but with a bruise on his face instead of a cut. He looks at Milady, and she can tell he’s itching to tell her to get herself inside to safety, but he doesn’t. He also doesn’t embrace her, but it seems that’s because they don’t have the time. Instead, he gives her a shadow of a smile, more pained and weary than it should be. “It’s less than a quarter of his men, though. With weapons…”

“We can see them off,” Aramis finishes, already loading his musket. “For now, at least.”

By now, Milady is also busy getting out a gun from beneath her voluminous skirts. She has two on her, as well as several knives, but they’re all well-hidden – she didn’t want to go scaring off her nurse, although it did make the journey slightly less comfortable then it would have been if she’d
been able to wear them openly. She melts into the darkness, slipping into what probably counts as an alleyway in Pinon. Aramis might like guns, Athos swords, and Porthos his fists, but her favourite weapon will always be surprise. She has no idea what d’Artagnan’s weapon of choice is. Self-righteousness, probably. He certainly wields it enough.

“Then what?” Jeanne says sharply. “They’ll come back tomorrow and kill us all.”

“Consider that a problem for tomorrow,” Aramis advises. “That building over there looks like a good sighting position. Anyone you know live there?”

“What? Of course I -”

“Excellent, then let’s go wake him up. It’s too dark to pick any off from a distance, but I should be able to get close enough to make them think twice. Porthos, there’s a stack of barrels over there that has a pretty good line of sight too.”

The fight is very short, and ends with most of the enemy fleeing. Milady ducks out of her alleyway and gets one in the arm as he rides through the little town, yelling threats, but he doesn’t fall from the horse and it’s probably not a killing shot. She’s decided not to even try engaging anyone with a blade – even a month on from it, her body has still not recovered entirely from the twin ordeals of childbirth and nearly dying, and her general exhaustion doesn’t help matters.

One of Porthos’s shots takes a man down, though, and d’Artagnan stabs a rider through the leg deeply enough that ten to one he’ll bleed out, so it’s not a complete loss.

She makes her way to the open inn door ahead of the others, weapon already stowed, and steps in. She needs to check on René, make sure he’s all right. Sure enough, he’s crying again, held protectively in the nurse’s arms at the back of the room, but is otherwise unharmed – if the attackers had gone anywhere near the door to the inn, she and the Musketeers would have killed them all, she’s sure of that.

It takes a moment for her to register the absolute silence.

“My lady?” Jeanne says, colour leeching from her face. She scrabbles for the poker she just put down. Her father tries to corral her behind him, choking out the Lord’s Prayer at ten times the usual speed. The nurse looks absolutely confused by this.

Oh. Right. She’d forgotten they thought she was dead.

Athos follows her in, taking off his hat as he enters, although she can’t imagine why he bothered wearing it at night. Even with his face creased in exhaustion and his eyes tinged red, she loses her breath a little at the sight of him. It’s the tousled hair she itches to bury her hands in, the tall, lean, muscular frame, the impossible fluid grace he moves with, the strong, stubborn and yet aristocratic lines of his face, the dextrous hands, and the quirk of his lips into a secret smile intended just for her. When you add in the drawling voice, the wry and clever wit, the flashes of unexpected sweetness, the single-minded fierceness, and the passion that pulls them both down like an undertow whenever they touch, is it any wonder she fell? She falls again at every glance. She wishes she was in more of a condition to act on that, but right now, even the desire she feels for him cannot overcome the soreness of her body and the tiredness of her mind.

She’ll go to him anyway in a second, but for now she reaches out and takes René from the nurse’s arms and starts to rock him, shushing his cries, although from experience she knows they aren’t stopping anytime soon. Athos saves her the trip, coming over and resting his hand on the nape of her neck, leaning over her shoulder to look down at their son.
“I’m sorry,” he murmurs into her ear, so quietly and brokenly she can barely hear him. She doesn’t know if he’s apologising for lying to her, for getting kidnapped, for being the reason they’re back here – or for so much more than that. In the scheme of things, though, it hardly matters. All that matters is he’s sorry, and she relaxes into his touch and forgives him immediately.

“My lord,” Bertrand cries out, interrupting his own prayer. “Get back – get back, she’s -”

“Alive,” Jeanne says with a sigh, lowering the poker. Not as much of a fool as her immediate panic made her seem, she reaches out to lay a single finger on Milady’s arm, checking for warmth. “Well, that’s a relief. On several fronts, really. Pinon has enough problems without restless spirits coming to kill us all.”

The others pile in as well, and Milady twirls her head to look Jeanne in the eye. She remembers the girl – not as well as Athos does, no doubt, but while some of the villagers had treated their Comte’s wife like the interloper she was, Jeanne had treated her just as respectfully as she had any member of the nobility. Which was not very respectfully, come to think of it, but at least it was consistent of her.

“Yes, it looks like you can manage to die en masse all by yourselves. Would anyone care to explain what’s going on?” She has to speak loudly to be heard above her son’s cries. The others are already wincing.

Athos glances at Jeanne for a moment, then his eyes flick to Bertrand, then at the door. Picturing Pinon beyond it, perhaps. Remembering. Regretting.

“There’s no need to fill you in on anything,” Athos says finally, returning his gaze to her. His face is set. “We’re returning home first thing tomorrow. I promised to speak to Renard, and I did. We’re done here.”

“Athos,” d’Artagnan protests, looking scandalised.

“Yes, that is my final word on the subject,” Athos says to d’Artagnan, his voice iron, and follows her.

The argument starts poorly, and gets worse. The Musketeers pull out all of their favourite concepts – honour, justice, duty, innocent lives. None of it seems to have much effect. Aramis tries to keep it light, and Porthos is all but silent, but d’Artagnan refuses to let up for as much as a moment. He points out that these people have no one but them, that Musketeers defend the helpless, that it’s selfish to leave them to fight alone.

He even calls him a coward. She winces at that.

“Leave him be,” she says to d’Artagnan, because she can’t stand the look on Athos’s face. Athos moves away from them both, shaking his head blindly, walking towards his horse.
He was a wreck all last night, no matter how he tried to hide it, clinging to her with his face buried in her hair. She has bruises on her arms from how he gripped her in his nightmares, but she’ll never tell him that. And when he wasn’t having night terrors, he woke thrashing in a panic repeatedly, lighting candles to double-check it was her in his arms, making sure that she was breathing, that René was, that they were both still there and alive. He panicked every time she got up to feed René as well, as if he expected her to take their son and flee, never to be seen again. This place haunts her, as well, but she can neatly compartmentalise her emotions about it, stuffing them away with her other terrible memories – he doesn’t seem able to do that.

“Athos…” she says soothingly, but he keeps walking away. She shifts René in her arms, but carefully, because he’s only just fallen asleep again after about four hours of continuous crying – Jeanne is probably already regretting putting them up.

“If you let him abandon them,” d’Artagnan says sharply, turning to Milady as if he needs a new target. “Then their blood is on your hands as well. But I suppose you don’t care about that.”

Athos stiffens for a second like he’s going to turn at that, come back and defend her, but instead he mounts his horse and rides away as if he has no intention of returning. They watch his back as he gallops off, not even looking back. Milady can’t help but feel stung by that.

“Well done,” she says to d’Artagnan snidely.

“Oh, really? That was my fault?”

“Who else’s?”

“You could have stepped in, instead of standing there silently backing him up. You could have helped change his mind.”

“And why would I do that? You can see what this place is doing to him,” she snaps. “Being back here is bad for him. He’s not the same when he’s in Pinon. He’s hurting.”

“When isn’t he hurting?” d’Artagnan snaps back. “Lately he’s been a mess. That’s not something unique to being here. But you don’t care, just like you don’t care about these people, because so long as you get what you want.”

Porthos clears his throat loudly. “I’m going to go start getting ready for a fight,” he says, to no one in particular, talking over d’Artagnan’s rant. “Athos will come back, or he won’t. We can only decide for ourselves.”

“Well said,” Aramis says, and follows.

That leaves d’Artagnan, Milady, and René, asleep in her arms. Strangely, the lack of an audience seems to defuse the tension somewhat, the raw anger fading away. After a long moment, Milady sits down, and d’Artagnan takes a seat a slight distance away. They sit in silence.

She’s been trying to tell herself that Athos’s dark mood recently and his unwillingness to stay at her house has some shallow or stupid motivation. Perhaps he cannot handle the noise of their son crying, she tells herself – after all, some men can’t stand to be around infants. Or perhaps he sees no point sharing a bed with her when she’s too exhausted from caring for the baby and sore from the birth to do anything with him. Maybe he feels ignored and unimportant to her since all her energy goes towards their child, and is sulking about that.

But all of those do him a disservice, she knows. She’s known Athos too long and too well to believe any of those reasons. She just wishes one of them was the problem – then she could think
of him as immature or selfish, and ignore his behaviour, simply wait for him to get over it.

She’s the one to speak first, looking down at René as she does so. “Of course I care that Athos is in pain. I can’t imagine why you’d think otherwise. What has he said to you?” She makes her voice as brisk and uncaring as she can, as if to compensate for the words she’s saying.

“Nothing. Not a word.” D’Artagnan gives a slightly-bitter half-smile, and echoes her words, “I can’t imagine why you’d think otherwise.”

“If he was going to confide in anyone, it would be you.”

“Perhaps that was true once. Not anymore.” He seems more resigned than regretful about this. “Has he told you what’s making him so depressed and moody lately?”

“No. No, he hasn’t.” Which isn’t the same thing as saying she doesn’t know. She could certainly make an educated guess, at least, and she suspects he’s tried to talk to her about it a few times. She feels another unpleasant surge of guilt go through her at the thought. But they can’t keep going over the past. Moving on means leaving what happened behind them, not dwelling on it the way Athos wants to lately. Wallowing in old mistakes will get them nowhere.

“Perhaps this will help. Being back here, protecting these people. Perhaps it will make him feel better.”

“This place is poison,” Milady says flatly. She knows it’s not quite true, but it feels true enough to her.

“It’s just a place. I understand that some bad things happened here – to both of you,” he adds, to her absolute surprise. It’s unlike him to show any sympathy to her. “But that’s not the villagers’ fault. They’re good people. How can you not want to help them?”

Ah. And there’s the judgement again. “It’s not about them.”

“Well, it should be. Or if it is about Athos, the way you claim, it should be about what’s actually better for him, not just what he thinks he wants now. If he lets these people die, he’ll carry that forever.”

Another twinge of guilt. She hates it when d’Artagnan is right – and, despite how over-eager he is to proclaim that fact, he is often right. They sit in stubborn silence for a long time, neither of them willing to break it this time.

She looks over at d’Artagnan. His gaze is fixed on the child in her lap, and all of a sudden she feels exasperated. “Come on,” she says commandingly. “Like this. Put your left arm up a little… and your right… yes, that’s perfect.” Carefully, very carefully, she shifts her little son into d’Artagnan’s arms.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You have to learn to hold a baby sometime. Madame Bonacieux can thank me someday.”

He flinches at that last comment – is she supposed to be blind to the fact they’re clearly still in love with each other? She has eyes – but doesn’t object. She thinks maybe he’s been wanting to hold Athos’s son all along, but has been too stubborn to say so. “But really. You hate me. Why are you handing me your child?”

“Two reasons. The first is that I don’t actually hate you. Far too much effort.” It’s the truth.
“You’re the one who hates me.”

“Well, yes, at least until recently,” he admits after a pause, a bit defensively. He glances down at the baby and his face softens slightly, almost against his will. “You used me. You made me a fool and a traitor to my friends. And before that…”

“Before that?”

There’s an even longer pause, and then he admits, shamefaced, “Before that, I actually liked you.”

“I kind of figured,” she says dryly.

“Oh, you know what I mean. You were interesting. Mysterious. It was like this grand adventure.” He smiles, a little ruefully. “Murders, romance, last-minute rescues, passion, cryptic conversations, intrigue… I was fascinated. It was like… it was my story, and I was the hero. And then all of a sudden I found out I wasn’t the hero, I was a pawn, and my gullibility and arrogance led to Athos getting hurt, Treville in disgrace, and the woman I love being kidnapped. It was… it was a bit of a blow. To my pride, if nothing else. My sense of who I was.”

She snorts, although she’s somewhat surprised at his cold evaluation of his motivations. Self-awareness is not a trait she’s previously associated with him. “A blow to your pride? What about mine? I never got you to betray your friends, not once. If you were gullible, I was blind. I wanted so badly to hurt Athos….”

“And now you want so badly to stop him hurting. Just like how I hunted him down to try and kill him, and now he’s my closest friend. Ironic, isn’t it?” He bends his head a little over René, and carefully shifts his weight so he’s holding the boy closer, in a position that probably feels more secure. He holds the baby like Milady did for the first few days, like a loaded musket with a hair trigger, liable to go off at any moment; stiff arms and stiffer pose, all movements made cautiously and slightly jerkily.

She remembers, suddenly, that while she’d never exactly liked d’Artagnan back then, she hadn’t been completely indifferent to the boy. He amused her, and sometimes even impressed her. Her feelings for him had never been romantic – proprietary, perhaps, but really it was more of an interest in his potential usefulness than anything else – but he had at least interested her. He reminded her of Athos, a little, and he had his own kind of reckless honesty and stubborn charm. And like all the Inseparables, there’s that sense of unstoppable about him – it’s what makes them capable of fighting their way through armies, a sort of pure pigheaded commitment to what’s right. Seas part before them, walls fall, mountains are ground to nothing by their certainty.

Athos has that as well, of course, but he has so much more than just that. If seas part before the others, they boil to nothing in response to his fury. He has a thousand emotions raging just beneath that stoic surface, any one of which would overwhelm a normal man, barely held in check by his iron will. She can feel them beneath the skin when she touches him, and feel the answering call of her own rage and love and need and viciousness, just as poorly leashed. All men are capable of both kindness and cruelty, but Athos has greatness in him, and so he is capable of greater extremes in each than anyone she has ever known. His love is fierce and unconditional, his hatred dark and undying, his passion overpowering and irresistible. If most people are candles, he is a conflagration, and sometimes she worries the flames will devour everything, including himself. He feels everything too deeply.

But then, so does she, when it comes to him. She has never been able to hold back. We’ll take this slow, we’ll be careful, she told him months ago, and then almost immediately discarded that, wanting him with her every moment he could spare, wanting him to share every part of himself
with her. Except one, of course. The part of Athos that was capable of the worst cruelty of all – the man who killed her. Just like she wants to forget the worst of her, the monster that she became in response to that. The darkest parts of their past need to be left behind.

But can you really cut away just one part of a person, a single chapter of their story, and keep the rest?

“Ironic,” she echoes, returning her attention to d’Artagnan with a force of will.

He smiles crookedly at her, the previous hostility nearly entirely gone.

Well, well. Perhaps they can learn to get along, at least enough to make Athos happy. He’s too young, bull-headed and righteous to ever understand her, but just because they can’t understand each other doesn’t mean they don’t share aims – Athos’s safety and happiness foremost among them. Allies, not friends, but allies are far more use anyway.

“Wait.” He’s processing something from before, arms still full of her child. “You said the first reason was that you didn’t hate me. What was the second reason you handed me the baby?”

“Because I’m about to go talk to Athos.” Because she thinks now she knows what to say.

X_X_X_X_X

The tree is so scenic if you don’t know the history of it, spreading and beautiful, watching over the meadow. He and Thomas climbed it as children. He and Anne picnicked under it as newlyweds. Athos stands stock still and lets himself get lost in memories. But of course, there is only one memory that matters, the one that blots out all of the rest. He squeezes the locket so tightly in his hand that it’s a miracle it doesn’t break – but then, if it was going to do so, it would have broken long ago.

He doesn’t hear the horse arrive, but when she clears her throat, he turns his head to look at her. He’s incapable of speaking, though. His throat is choked with guilt, regret, and grief.

She isn’t looking at him. She’s staring at the tree. As he watches, she dismounts and runs a hand down the trunk. “The hanging was the first event in my life I couldn’t just leave behind me.,” she says, and her tone is almost conversational. “Well, no, that’s not quite true. It was you I couldn’t let go of. Everything and everyone else in my life before you was disposable, more or less. It had to be. When something was over, it was over, it was finished. I shed what I’d done and who I’d been like a snake sheds its skin and never thought of any of it again. When you live like I did, you can’t afford to carry your past with you. It weighs too much. It slows you down.”

She slowly turns to face him again. “You’re not like that, though. The past is so present for you. You can never just leave it behind you.”

“I’m trying,” he whispers through a dry mouth. “I swear, Anne, I’m trying.”

“What?” she frowns at him. “No. That wasn’t – I’m trying to apologise, Athos.” She shakes her head. “I… I wanted to be a new person. I wanted to leave that behind, like I leave everything painful behind. But you can’t keep half a thing. I can’t be the girl who ran through meadows but not be the woman who killed Thomas. They’re one and the same. When we admitted we loved each other, when we tried to make amends, I told myself it wiped away everything that came before. But it didn’t, did it?”

“No. Not for me.”
“And not for me, however much I tried. I’m sorry for making you pretend otherwise.”

This is surreal, he thinks distantly. His wife is standing below the tree he hung her from and apologising to him. That her apology is for not letting him whine and mope about his murder of her only adds to the utter absurdity.

“Maybe it’s time to admit that this isn’t something we can move past,” she says softly.

And that’s that, he supposes. The surge of agonising grief and loss that tears through him is so intense he almost collapses from the pain of it, and she must see it in his eyes, because she reaches out and cups his cheek, trying to steady him. He presses his face into her palm, desperate for her touch, desperate for whatever of her he can get.

“It’s something we’ll have to carry with us,” she says, stepping even closer, and she’s still saying us, and he can breathe again. “A part of us.”

“It’s what broke us. Everything was perfect, and then one hour, one day, one terrible, cruel decision made in anger and hurt…”

“It wasn’t perfect, or it wouldn’t have been so easy to break,” she says. “Maybe we needed to be those people so we could be the ones we are now. Stronger ones. Better ones. Now we understand what we have to lose, and we will do whatever it takes to keep it. Now we know each other in a way we couldn’t before.”

“Is that really how you think of it?”

She closes her eyes and swallows hard. “I’m trying to.” Her voice cracks as she says it, hand dropping from his face.

He pulls her close, pressing his lips to the top of her head, powerless to do anything but comfort her.

It’s a while before she pulls away, and when she does, it’s only far enough to kiss him. A strand of hair falls into her face and he moves it back behind her ear. She tries to smile, but it comes out broken and tearful.

“So,” she says. “Do you want to talk about it? I know you’ve been trying. When I nearly died, I know it brought up old fears and old regrets.”

He stands still for a moment, trying to martial his thoughts, trying to get to the core of it. It’s not that he fled the room and abandoned her. It’s not that he looked down at his son and thought he’d trade him for his wife. He knows those were just… reactions. Not his best moments, but nothing unforgivable, just dark impulses driven by terror, guilt and grief. He doesn’t blame himself for the fever, either – some things are outside his control. But sitting there watching her die brought him right back to the day he was too cowardly to watch. And the things she said to him… the heartbeat in her voice as she pleaded with him…

“When you were sick,” he says finally, voice thick. “You kept going back to here. Again and again. I think you knew you were dying, and this was death to you. I was death to you. I don’t understand how I can ever be anything else.”

“And yet you are,” she says, her tone not nearly as flippant as the comment seems. “You’ve given me more than pain, Athos. Love and happiness and hope… everything in my world that’s good came from you.”
“Like our son?” He shakes his head. “You said once that he’d be better without us, without the combination of us. You said no child should have to grow up with that. You say we need to carry it with us, but if we do, he will grow up with it.”

“Maybe I was wrong. Maybe our past – what we’ve done to each other, what we’ve done because of each other – maybe that’s something he’ll have to grow up with whether we admit to it or not.” Her face twists at even the thought.

“You want our child to know the worst of us? Tell him he has a murderer, a drunk and a coward for a father?” He doesn’t list what René will have for a mother. She never flinched when he threw the words at her in the past, but that doesn’t mean they don’t draw blood, and he’s sick of wounding her. Besides, he created the woman who did those things. His cruelty was the shot that started that war.

She looks up at the tree again. He wonders if it haunts her nightmares like it haunts his. “It’s the worst of us,” she acknowledges quietly. “You deciding I was a monster and sentencing me to death. Me choosing to become what you thought I was, lying, cheating and killing, seeking bloody vengeance on you. But isn’t it also the best of us?”

“My God, I hope not.”

“You know what I mean. That we can love each other like this after the things we’ve done… that’s more powerful than if there’d never been anything to forgive, if we’d always been perfect. We burnt to ashes, but we also rose from them. Perhaps that’s what we’ll tell René someday, when we tell him this.”

She’s trying so hard to help him, to comfort him. He feels a surge of love for her – his love for her is a constant, the strongest force in the universe, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t sometimes struck by just how complete and overwhelming it is.

He clears his throat, and tries to help too. “Perhaps it is,” he says. “And perhaps… I don’t know what paths our son will take in life. I hope all his choices will be good ones. But if they’re not… he’ll know that it’s never too late to find his way back. That no matter how terrible his mistakes are, his life is not over, and he’s not alone.”

Because he can love his wife even though she lied to him, hated him, betrayed him, and tried to kill him. Because his wife can love him even though he did worse. Because they still loved each other even when they hated each other, and that love led them to a second chance. Living with regret and guilt doesn’t crush you so long as you have someone to help you carry them.

He hopes someday these wounds heal. But even when they do, maybe they can be honest about the scars. Will that make them easier to bear? No way to tell. But ignoring them has not been working, at least not for him.

They stand there for a long time, just holding each other.

X_X_X_X_X

D’Artagnan looks up from the gun he’s cleaning to give Athos a smile as they ride in. “I knew you’d come back.”

“I almost didn’t.”

Milady dismounts with easy grace and passes d’Artagnan the reins, apparently assuming that he’ll act as groom for her because it’s his horse. “René?”
“With his nurse. Thank you for talking Athos around.” To Athos’s surprise, his friend’s gratitude seems genuine, and there’s none of d’Artagnan’s usual resentment in his tone when he speak to Milady.

“That’s what you think I was doing?” She raises an eyebrow, sounding light and playful instead of just mocking – Athos doesn’t know why, but they seem to have temporarily lost the edge that always accompanies their encounters. “I’m flattered by your high opinion of me. I didn’t say a word on the subject, as it happens, but I’m always happy to take praise, however undeserved.”

He is surprised to find jealousy slash through him. It’s only momentary, but it leaves him breathless. It occurs to him that on one level, he likes the vitriol between his wife and his friend – their clear disdain for each other makes it easier to pretend that nothing ever happened between them. He knows nothing will ever happen between them again – his brothers are loyal to the ends of the earth, d’Artagnan’s interest in Milady had only ever been shallow, and Milady’s matching interest had been primarily a manipulation. But that doesn’t change the fact that something did.

None of her long line of seductions can quite count as betrayals, he knows. She was desperate, she was surviving, she was obeying orders. She had every right to do so. He has the right to be angry about her lies, her thefts, and her murders, but he doesn’t have the right to condemn her for infidelity, not after what he did to her. And yet, it’s the only part of her actions that still really bothers him. He can forgive the rest easily – too easily, he thinks. But what they have when they’re together is pure, irresistible, utterly incomparable, the greatest pleasure he’s ever known – he can’t imagine sharing that perfect, impossible passion with another woman, and it hurts that she could share any part of it with another man. Even if what she did was a pathetic caricature of what they shared, a subpar imitation that she used only to manipulate and murder, it still feels like she took something wondrous and befouled it. When he thinks of it, it bothers him.

Still. He knows, rationally, how unfair that is. When it comes to her, rationality is not usually his forte, but sometimes he’s wise enough to heed it. He cannot hold the past against her. After all, she works so hard not to hold it against him.

Milady gives Athos a quick kiss on the cheek, but then turns to leave, presumably to go feed René – it’s been a few hours, and as far as Athos can tell, their son is permanently hungry, as well as permanently loud. He yanks her back by her wrist into an embrace, though, and holds her close for a moment, body to body. She melts into him instantly, which does a lot to allay his jealousy, but then eventually pushes him away with a sly comment about inappropriate public behaviour, mimicking a speech his father gave them both long ago. When she glances back at him, her expression is all flushed cheeks and bright eyes, mischievous grin flashing the gap between her teeth, and she could be the girl he ran through meadows with all those years ago – but she’s not. She’s so much more. Or at least so much more than he knew she was back then.

“Is that true?” d’Artagnan asks. His complete unconcern about their embrace and the way neither he or Milady so much as glance at each other as she goes douses the rest of the foolish jealousy, and Athos is pleased to see it go. It’s such a stupid thing to feel, when he just stood with his wife beneath the tree he hung her from, expressions broken and words raw, and for the first time really believed he could survive the guilt of what he’d done.

It takes Athos a moment to remember what they were talking about. “Yes. But I’m staying, nonetheless.” Milady hadn’t talked him into returning. He’s not even sure she wanted to return. She’d said it was his decision, and that as long as this story ended with them riding out of Pinon and never returning, she’d be satisfied with whatever that decision was.

He’s relieved to hear it. He had some unspoken worry that her talk of accepting the past also meant
she thought he should reclaim his position here. Land and a title for their son to inherit, giving him the security Milady herself never had – he can understand the appeal, but after what’s happened here, it would feel like leaving his child a curse.

Renard called this place Athos’s birthright. He spoke of his family name, his heritage, his legacy. Once upon a time all of that was vitally important to Athos, but not anymore. Renard would probably say being the Comte de la Fere is René’s birthright as well, and if that’s the case, it’s wrong of Athos to keep it from him. What he should do is return here and manage his son’s inheritance until René is old enough to take over. He could fix up the manor, build up the estate’s profitability, make alliances with neighbours like Renard. He could order the villagers to undertake backbreaking work for his own profit, telling them to be grateful their lives aren’t worse, and pretending he’s their protector instead of their oppressor.

But he would rather leave his son a different legacy. A legacy not of power, privilege, arrogance and superiority. He is a Musketeer, first and foremost. He would like to leave his son a legacy of compassion. Helping people who need to be helped. Seeking justice. Protecting the weak. A better legacy than an inflated sense of your own consequence and a title could ever be.

And that’s why he came back. He knows what he wants to do with the estate now.

“Thank you,” he says to d’Artagnan. “You were right. I should’ve been listening. It just took a little while to sink in. This place, these people, they’re not to blame. Giving up on being a comte is one thing. Giving up on helping people…”

“None of us thought for a second that’s what you were doing,” d’Artagnan says, with a smile. “Or that you were gone for good.”

“Well. Anyway. I’m back now. And I need to talk to the villagers.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Give them something to fight for.”

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It’s so very Athos to give away everything he owns, Milady thinks, not sure if she’s amused by it, warmed by it, or simply exasperated. The most pragmatic part of her thinks he could simply have sold land and title – in her personal opinion, you can never have too much money. But judging by the expressions on the peasants’ faces, they’ll fight like tigers for their new territory, so at least he’s achieved his goal.

It’s always something of a shock to remember that Athos has a history with Pinon going back before she was there, before she even knew it existed. Before she even knew he existed. She suspects he has as much trouble remembering the boy he was before her as she does recalling the girl she was before him – all the memories are there, but it’s like thinking of a stranger, someone whose motives and interests and dreams are nonsensical to the version of her that exists now. That girl lived in a world with no depth, no colour, no light; a petty, vulgar and grasping little existence; thinking of nothing but another score, another meal, another day of safety, feeling no stronger emotion than hunger or fear. Not believing there were stronger emotions than hunger or fear. She would have scorned the idea of love, found it completely incomprehensible, even alien – it was so far outside her experience of life and people.

And then one day, she met him, and it wasn’t. She remembers that – she could never forget it. The moment it all started. It’s almost impossible to imagine that there was a time before then, a time
when he didn’t matter to her – or, to be more precise, a time before she knew he mattered. She was picking pockets on the streets of Paris, utterly unaware of his existence, and he was out here in the countryside, still mattering, but mattering in a way she wasn’t yet able to understand, his absence creating a chasm in her chest and a knife’s edge to her laughter. She’d been lonely for him and hadn’t even realised. Half of her very soul had been completely unknown to her. And then she’d found him and realised, slowly and with a sort of incredulous joy, that all along, everything she never knew she needed had been waiting for her, and he’d felt the same, and then – well. It was all a long time ago, now, but perhaps there are some parts of the past worth dwelling on, after all.

Jeanne is nearby, trying to explain how to work the gun in his hand to an ancient old man. Judging by how she’s yelling, his hearing isn’t very good. Still, at least that means the noise won’t distract him.

Milady doesn’t bother to try and help train them. Yes, she knows weaponry better than everyone here except the Musketeers, but whenever she goes near a villager they shy away in something like terror. Apparently she’s been a local ghost for the past seven years, a wandering spirit they tell tales about – the lying, murderous comtesse who was killed by her husband’s order, then rose from the grave to walk the fields crying out for vengeance. (She’s not sure if that last is a total fabrication, or if someone spotted her after her hanging.) Remi’s ‘suicide’ two years ago ended up being wound into the tale too, as her ghost driving him to madness, and the house burning to the ground that same night didn’t help. More practical people blame both on Athos’s return, but the credulous enjoy ghost stories. A man drunkenly setting his house alight is far less interesting than a spirit doing so. She supposes she does make a half-decent urban legend, but it makes her helping with the training impossible. Oh well, it’s their loss, and she doubts she’d be a good teacher anyway, so perhaps it’s not much of one.

Milady drifts closer to Jeanne, looking at the gun, and raises her eyebrows. “Good quality. From the family vault?”

“Monsieur Aramis let us into it. I’m afraid we cleared it out.” Jeanne leaves the man to it to come and talk to her, pushing a strand of sweaty hair back into her bun.

“Weapons are meant to be used,” Milady says blithely. She knows Athos has hopes of her not being part of defending the place, but in this case, he’s doomed to disappointment. He wants to be sure René has one surviving parent, but Milady doesn’t accept half measures – she’d rather make sure he have two.

The old man turns his head to see why Jeanne has stepped away, and his gaze travels to Milady. It takes him a moment, but they can both see his face make the journey – from a vague sense of recognition to confusion, to realisation, and from there to absolute horror.

He staggers backwards, dropping the gun, gaping at her. “You… you…”

“This place is doing nothing for my self-esteem,” Milady says, turning away from this in exasperation to look at Jeanne. “How is it they all remember me?”

“You’re memorable,” Jeanne tells her, with a faint smile. “Maybe go find something else to do. It makes people uneasy when they’re being watched by the undead.”

“Surely they all know I’m really alive by now. Whatever happened to the village gossips?”

“They’re somewhat distracted by all of this. I’m sure the news is going around, though – Maurice is just a bit deaf.” Jeanne pauses. Then she asks, quiet and direct, “If you’re alive, if he didn’t kill you, then why did my lord leave? Grief for Master Thomas? Shame at sparing you? What was it
that made him abandon us?”

After a moment, Anne reaches up and pulls her choker down, just a finger’s-width, showing the edge of her scar. “I spared myself,” she says quietly. She’s not sure why. Perhaps this is part of not hiding from the truth anymore. If there’s anywhere she can reveal the story without worry for the consequences, it’s in Pinon. They’ll never be back here, she’s sure of that. “Athos thought I was dead, until we encountered each other a bit over a year ago. He’s still… dealing with it. So am I.”

“I can’t imagine how anyone deals with something like that.”

“One day at a time, I suppose.”

Jeanne considers this, then seems to accept it. If she judges Athos for remaining married to the convicted killer of his brother, or Milady for having a child with the man who had her hanged, it doesn’t show. “Well, I’m glad you’re alive,” she says instead, business-like. “Partly because it’s an extra person defending this place, of course. And partly because no one should die for killing a man like Thomas.”

To her own surprise, Milady laughs.

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The battle itself seems far easier than the rest of the journey, to Athos. He knows how to shoot and stab, after all, and the knowledge that he is no longer tied to this place legally makes him feel light as a feather. He doesn’t have to be bound by what happened anymore, but he doesn’t have to hide from it either. Free and honest, both at once. There is a feeling of peace that comes from knowing you’re doing the right thing, and right now, he has that.

The fighting is vicious. Several villagers die. Athos kills Renard’s son. Aramis is injured. It’s a bloody, chaotic mess, but the villagers acquit themselves well, the Musketeers and Milady slice and shoot through the enemy easily, and there is no doubt who the victors are.

And then, as fast as it starts, it ends.

The world calms. The priest arrives to see to the dead. Renard grieves loudly and Athos knows he will not attack again. Aramis acquires a sling for his left arm and looks dashing. Milady retrieves and comforts René. Jeanne pours everyone a drink in celebration, although given how well she fought, Athos thinks she deserves it more than they do.

Porthos readies the carriage as d’Artagnan and Aramis saddle their horses. He’s cheerfully agreed to play at being carriage driver again, and Athos has asked for a place inside, at least for some of the journey. There’s enough space.

He gets in, and Milady’s not there yet, but the nurse is. René is in her arms, not quite shrieking yet, but well on the way to it, his face red with the effort.

“He wants me?” he asks, and the nurse looks surprised, but passes René over immediately.

He’s never asked to hold his son before. He’s always passed him over as soon as possible, miserably aware he doesn’t know what he’s doing and can’t be the father his child deserves. He normally feels awkward, useless, out of place. He basically wished his son dead the first time he really looked at him, and normally he wallows in the guilt of that, and in a hundred other regrets that existed long before René but that will still affect the course of his life. He’s stiff and unhappy when he holds René, usually, and the child responds by screaming harder, almost fighting against his father’s grip.
This time, though, none of that happens. René’s wails start to increase in volume, but he holds the child close and upright, patting him the way Milady does. He talks quietly to him, speaking constantly but saying nothing at all, telling him his mother will be here soon, that they’re heading back to Paris now, that he’s such a brave boy, and that someday they’ll tell him all about the big battle that he completely slept through.

Someday they’ll tell him everything, more or less, and Athos knows he won’t understand it, but hopefully he’ll understand one thing – that his father and mother have always loved each other with an impossible fierceness, whatever mistakes they’ve made, and that they love him that much as well.

Athos remembers sitting next to his wife’s bedside. Watching her toss and turn. The last lucid words she said before sinking back into her delirium, and his reply: Don’t leave again? Never. I promise. It’s what Porthos said as well – good parents stay. Good parents try. It’s what he asked Anne for as well. He can do no less. For the first time, he faces that fully, and acknowledges that there’s more than one way to leave – he will never abandon his wife or child, he knows that to his core. But he needs to do better than simply being physically present. He can’t step back from them emotionally, either. It’s one thing to take a moment to think, to breathe, to get some air and space, to let tempers cool and hurts dull. It’s quite another to turn away the way he has been. It’s an automatic response he has, to withdraw from situations and emotions he can’t deal with, but that’s no excuse. In one way, he’s left Anne alone since the fever, even if he’s been right there – and he can’t do that anymore. Not ever again. She deserves better than that from him, and so does their son.

René starts to settle, starts to quiet, but he doesn’t sleep. He reaches out a tiny hand, grabbing up determinedly, and Athos realises what he’s trying to do. He shifts so that one arm is cradling his son, and then he takes hold of the chain with his free hand and jerks it slightly, making the locket bounce and dance in front of his fascinated son, the sunshine gleaming off it and making it shine. René watches wide-eyed, no longer trying to grab it, mouth slightly open. The twisting, glinting piece of jewellery is clearly the most amazing thing he’s ever seen.

Milady swings into the carriage. “I hate this place,” she says grumpily.

“I know,” Athos says, unable to prevent himself from being quietly amused at her annoyed expression. “Why are you wet?

“The priest threw holy water on me,” she informs him, exasperated, tired and damp. “The last time he saw me he was reading my last rites, and he ‘doesn’t indulge in gossip’, so I was a bit of a surprise. Can we go home now?”

There’s nothing he wants more.

“Right away,” he promises her.

He could look out of the carriage window as they set off, and see Pinon one last time, but he’s too absorbed in rocking his son to sleep.
Athos isn’t sure if this is the most uneasy and impatient he’s been in his life, but if there’s a worse occasion, it’s thankfully been lost in the mists of time. Everyone at court seems fascinated, but the movement of planets holds no interest for him. He can sense that something is wrong – they all can. He can feel tension and nerves humming through him.

Technically, he’s here in a social capacity, as Captain of the Musketeers. He should be oohing and aahing at the pretty display below. But he can’t concentrate. Even when he tries to block out his strange anxiety, he can’t bring himself to think about planets. He’s preoccupied with other things, real things – his wife, namely, and the evening he’s supposed to spend with her.

He spends every night at Milady’s now, every morning, every midday meal, every moment he can spare from his duties. His little room at the Garrison has become a place he stops by to change clothes and rearm, nothing more. There are only two things remaining for the relocation to be official – moving his residual belongings from the Garrison to her house, and before that, making sure she still wants him to move in.

She hasn’t suggested it for a while, perhaps giving him time to become comfortable with the idea, but at this point he’s not sure why he’s holding back. At first, he didn’t want to push her too far, and then he was held back by his own fears, but these past weeks have been almost perfect. Even René has stopped crying so much – the nurse says that he must be growing out of his colic. Milady seems much more rested and happier as a result. Athos loves going home to her every night, loves helping her and the nurse care for their son, loves doing his deskwork while she reads or writes or feeds the babe across the room, loves talking quietly with her in their bed before slipping into sleep intertwined with her.

Tonight is the perfect time to bring it up. She’s suggested once he returns from Marmion’s estate that they have a quiet, romantic dinner together, with the nurse and René in another part of the house so they’re undisturbed.

Speaking of being disturbed. He feels another wave of unease go through him as Marmion keeps monologuing about fate and the stars. If anything, it’s stronger for being completely baseless.

“Something’s wrong here,” he mutters again, as he heads past Porthos, who is also pacing the place. Although at least Porthos has an excuse – he’s supposed to be guarding them right now. Athos is just being antisocial and overanxious.

“Yeah,” Porthos agrees. “I went and looked outside and I can’t see anything, though. And who would attack us? This is a fort. We could hold off an army here.”

“Check the place again,” Athos says.

“Not the whole place, surely?” Treville says. He must have seen their quiet conversation and come over to find out what’s going on – he looks like he senses the same thing as they do. He’s tensed and ready for battle. “You should stay close, just in case.”

Treville tends to forget he’s no longer Captain of the Musketeers – but since Athos often forgets that as well, it doesn’t bother him. “His Majesty told us not to hover,” he informs Treville.

“I see. You keep checking the place, then. I won’t leave his side.” Treville gives a decisive nod.

“And if he tells you not to hover?” Porthos wants to know.
“That shouldn’t be an issue. His Majesty likes to have me close to him for social events,” Treville says dryly. “The novelty of an honest man, he says.”

Porthos snorts, showing what he thinks of that, and Treville reddens slightly.

Since the last thing he wants is to be involved in this argument, which has been going on since de Foix’s rescue and shows no sign of being settled, Athos walks away.

He doesn’t go back to the crowd, though. Instead he strides around, checking the hallways briefly, going up a level to see what’s there. Something is wrong. He needs to know what.

And then in a moment, formless suspicion changes to a real attack. There’s a sudden, sharp scream, followed by a loud gunshot. The eclipse stops being what everyone’s focused on – instead, it’s the army of well-trained men with plague masks and aggressive intentions.

The Musketeers burst into a whirl of action. The clash of blades echoes throughout the rooms, the report of guns, the screams and yells. There seem to be an endless amount of them, but they’re not Musketeers, and he and his friends have a definite advantage. Treville takes on two of them, and is making a decent showing too. Up above on the balcony, Athos is outnumbered, but holding them off despite that.

Unfortunately, Marmion has all the leverage he needs. “One more step, and the King dies.”

Athos hesitates, and projecting his voice so that everyone on the floor below can hear, says forcefully, “Stand down.” The command echoes. Everyone stills, and Marmion looks vaguely approving.

“Good, good.”

Athos looks around for some angle to use, while Treville takes control of negotiation. What he wouldn’t give for his wife to miraculously burst out of another tapestry and stab the person holding the King hostage, like she did last time – and from the way the King looks briefly behind him, he’s thinking the same thing.

Treville tries reason, giving up on compassion as useless immediately. He takes Marmion through the options. If he harms the King, he’s dead whatever – if Louis lives, he’ll kill him, and if he dies, the first thing any new monarch or regent will do is execute the murderer of the previous one. But there are ways out of this. There’s ways to survive. He can stop now and ask the King for clemency. Or he could barricade them in the fort and run, get a head start – if no one’s been harmed, the hunt for him won’t be too thorough. He can go overseas, start a new life –

Marmion laughs, pretends to consider it, talks archly about his grand plans, his entertainment, his games. He sounds like a mad poet. He clearly doesn’t plan to let anyone go.

From up above, Athos looks at the infuriated King, trying to judge if he’s going to do anything foolish. He finds his gaze is drawn to the Dauphin, though, like a magnet. Only a few months older than his own son, small and helpless, held closely and yet not at all protected from this situation.

One of the men in plague doctor’s masks has a sword held half a foot away from the child, as part of the cluster of swords against His Majesty.

Athos feels his stomach lurch.

He wonders if this ever happens to Aramis, to other parents, if they can’t help projecting some of the fierce love and protectiveness they have for their own child onto other children they see. Thinking, what would I feel like if my child was in this danger? and being unable to stop
themselves from getting too involved in the situation.

So when Treville starts to give up, Athos takes over. He can’t stop himself. He can recognise the madness in Marmion’s eyes – this man has no intention of letting any of them go. For that matter, he has no intention of letting them live. It’s all right there in his eyes. But most of the people here are adults, able to fend for themselves to an extent, able to flee or fight when the situation sours – the Dauphin is not. And the way he yawns and reaches out, little fingers curling into his blanket, reminds Athos of his own tiny son.

“This is dishonourable,” Athos says. Somehow he knows it’s futile even as he says it. But he has to try. “At least allow someone to leave with the Dauphin, to take him to safety. Do you really want a child’s life on your conscience?”

So far, Marmion has been playing along, smiling smugly and making the occasion sardonic remark. But at the last comment something in his eyes changes, control breaking like the snap of a twig. “On my conscience?!?”

There’s a gesture from Marmion, a violent movement from one of the masked men, a heavy thud of pain in Athos’s chest, the noise of glass shattering, a feeling of falling, and then… nothing.

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Milady’s fairly sure she hasn’t worn a dress this nice since she was going by the name Madame de la Chappelle, and maybe not even then. This would probably have been considered slightly inappropriate in a salon – even by her standards the bodice is too tight and low, the fabric a bit too thin. It shows off her body magnificently, though. Since that body finally looks nearly exactly the same as it did a year ago, that’s a good thing – oh, her chest will probably not return to normal until her son is weaned, and she has a mark or two she didn’t used to, but she no longer feels like every part of her body is bloated and uncomfortable. More importantly, she isn’t sore at all from the birth now, and she feels like herself again, at home in her own body. She missed that feeling. It’s been too long. This dress is perfect.

It’s silly, of course. Athos has seen her in a wide variety of dresses, and since her aim is for him to remove it before they make it halfway through the meal anyway (it has been far too long), it hardly matters what she wears. But she likes it anyway. She’s considered, over the past couple of weeks, simply rolling over to Athos’s side of the bed and whispering what she wants, but between his work and the baby and their shared exhaustion it’s never seemed quite the right moment. And it should be a moment, somehow, recognised and enjoyed, because she doesn’t want them to fade into routine and home life and give up on passion entirely.

Hence her shopping trip. Servants can handle things like food and candles, but she’d hardly trust one to buy her a dress. It’s still hours until dinner, though, and she can’t be bothered to lace herself into the complicated confection twice, and maybe she’s enjoying her own beauty too much to change back into the shapeless tent of her old maternity gown, so she leaves the shop wearing it. And wearing the matching over-robe, of course, because while she’s no stranger to male attention she’d rather not be mistaken for a courtesan right now.

This is the longest she’s spent away from René since his birth. She knows that should make her anxious, that she should rush back. And she does feel a little bereft at not having him with her, but truthfully, spending every hour of her day with an infant has started to feel a little claustrophobic, especially when she has no adult company besides that of her servants. Feeding René, cleaning him, comforting him and worrying about him has taken up all her time, as well as all her conversation and mental space. However much she loves her son, it feels like her world has revolved around him since before he was born, and it’s nice to reclaim some of that. He doesn’t cry
continually anymore, and they’ve started increasing the amount of goat’s milk in his diet, so Milady’s constant attendance is no longer required. The nurse is well able to handle him for the day.

Wandering through the markets, something else catches her eye. A display piece, she thinks at first, but then when she goes closer and examines it, she’s pleasantly surprised – well-balanced, well-made, well- everything. An excellent knife, quite aside from looks.

It’s not the kind of knife she prefers – it’s the sort used for parrying, with a rapier in the other hand. She rarely fights with a rapier, since they’re difficult to hide in skirts, and on the rare occasions she does she either has a gun in the other hand or nothing, since it’s faster. She doesn’t go in for drawn-out duels, testing her strength against people. Besides, she has more knives than she knows what to do with. But she thinks she knows someone who might like it. Athos’s Musketeer-issue main gauche is functional, as he proves repeatedly, but barely holds an edge anymore, has half a dozen dents, and doesn’t have the appearance of sleek lethality that attracted her attention to this one.

Suddenly, she stiffens. She’s not sure what it’s in response to, but every one of her instincts goes on alert – someone is watching her. She pretends to be examining another stall but actually sweeps the street with wary eyes. She doesn’t see anyone showing her undue interest. She keeps an eye out for a few more minutes, but there’s still nothing, and eventually she relaxes and feels almost foolish for her sudden paranoia. Why would anyone be following her? She’s not the Cardinal’s creature anymore, she’s just a wife and mother, wrapped up in a simple harmless life of domesticity: a quiet existence.

Perhaps a too-quiet existence, compared to her husband’s, she thinks a little guiltily. No wonder she’s imagining assassins and thieves in every corner.

She buys the knife, in the end. She has to pass the Garrison on the way back, so she decides to just drop by and leave it in Athos’s room there with the rest of his spare weaponry (as Captain, he now has a set of shiny ceremonial weaponry and armour, as well as the usual battle-worn ones). She may as well leave it there. Just because it’s easier than carrying it the whole way. Not at all because she’s hoping he’s coincidentally back already from that trip of his, and might be persuaded to take off the rest of the day and spend it with his wife, starting their evening together earlier than planned…

Of course, entirely in keeping with her luck, the place is deserted.

She stows the main gauche with the rest and sits on the bed with a sigh. Why can’t he be here? René is at home, being cared for by the nurse. She has the day free to spend as she likes. She’s wearing an amazing dress, she feels alive and full of anticipation, and she wants him with her.

Athos doesn’t seem to mind their recent lack of a physical relationship, content to share the occasional kiss and to drop off to sleep with her in his arms. Sometimes she worries that’s all he really wants – he always used to be wild for her, and she knows he still loves her, but she wonders if his feelings have shifted now, that he loves her in a quieter, older way. As if by becoming a mother she’s changed to being staid instead of seductive, homely instead of thrilling, reliable instead of challenging. Someone to be given forehead kisses and gentle embraces, to be comforted instead of swept away. As if they’ve left desire, adventure and excitement behind, settling into domesticity and child-raising instead.

It sounds absurd, even to herself, that Athos might not want her in the same way, that having a child could change his feelings that much. But she’s used to men being changeable, to their emotions and treatment of her morphing wildly as soon as they learn one extra fact – the fact that turns her from lady to whore, from innocent to thief, from saint to street slut. The moment his
friends knew of her pregnancy, their view of her experienced a massive swing, she remembers – from despised enemy to sweet expectant mother. Could Athos’s view have changed too, now they have a child?

She has always been almost otherworldly in his eyes, even though he knows she’s nothing more than human. In their early marriage, she was an angel to him – her joy lit up the world, her beauty stunned him, and the pleasure they gave each other was transcendental. He looked at her almost as some kind of goddess, glowing in the sun, everyday troubles and cares unable to touch her on her plane of pure happiness. Then later, she was something like a succubus, taunting him from alleyways and burning buildings, sliding into and out of the darkness like a shadow. Dangerous and deadly, but again, somehow above earthly cares – scorning effort, drudgery and exhaustion, untouched by the dirt and muck and mess of reality, burning with the fires of vengeance. Something more than human. Now, of course, he sees her exhausted and dragged down by the world every day, with bags under her eyes and hair askew, dressing only in unflatteringly loose uncorseted shifts, smelling of spit-up more than of perfume. Instead of spending her time on witty repartee, secret missions and passionate clinches, she spends it slogging through tedious chores and responsibilities. She spends it on the never-ending cycle of feeding her child, cleaning her child, and collapsing into sleep whenever she’s given the chance. Unglamorous, drab, even ugly.

He loves her still – he will always love her. She knows that, in some bone-deep way that overpowers sense and caution and insecurity. But she doubts anyone could see her as ethereal or extraordinary after witnessing her so dull, boring and colourless. Perhaps he no longer looks at her and feels that desperate, insane desire to have her, to be close to her. Perhaps now he loves her comfortably, with a dull sort of contentment, instead of with the uncontrollable fire they used to have.

Her feelings haven’t made that shift. She’s as wild for him as she ever was. She’s impatient to return to how they were before the birth, now that she’s recovered. Or even to earlier than that, back when she was lithe and limber and didn’t have to worry about a child inside her, when she wasn’t distracted by nausea or hormones or feeling overlarge. She can hand René off to the nurse sometimes, now, and return to being herself again instead of just a mother – part of which will involve figuring out exactly who ‘herself’ is. She knows what she feels for him is a part of it, though. She wants to go back to being lovers in addition to parents, to frenzied passion as well as love and closeness and support. She wants everything. She’s always been greedy in that way. She’s sick of platonic touches, weary practical discussions, and abstinence.

Though truthfully, abstinence only ever bothers her when the alternative is Athos. There are times in her life – before she met him, and while she worked for the Cardinal – when she would have chosen celibacy in a second if not for the material advantages using her body gave her. Unfortunately, seduction was as necessary to her work for the Cardinal as her knives were, and before she met Athos she took any offers that would keep her alive until the next day. Pleasure was quite irrelevant – at least, her pleasure. Except with Athos. With Athos, her pleasure is everything.

And now that she’s started thinking about that pleasure, thinking about the night ahead, thinking about him, what he’ll do, what she’ll do. She lets her eyes slip closed to imagine –

“What are you doing here?”

She blinks her eyes open again and finds Aramis leaning against the doorframe, staring at her.

“Just stopping by,” she says haughtily. She doesn’t blush, but that’s mostly because she’s trained herself to blush on command, and never by accident. It’s a useful skill.

“Nice of you. None of the others are here, though. Still at the great Marmion’s fort.”
She’s about to ask why he’s here instead of with the rest of them, when it occurs to her – Athos must still be enforcing the ban on Aramis being around the Queen. She thought he’d given up on it, but maybe not. “You weren’t allowed to go?”

“Interestingly enough, I was. Athos has relaxed a lot lately. But when he decided someone should be left in charge here, I volunteered.” He makes a face. “Things are a little… awkward… between Marguerite and I at present.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Ah.”

“It seemed much less sleazy and dishonest when I was the only one who knew. I just couldn’t do it anymore.” Aramis shrugs. “I ended it. She took it pretty well, I think. But I’ll miss… well, you know what I’ll miss.”

“I do.” She does feel some sympathy for him, despite not being a sympathetic sort of person, mainly because if someone told her she was never allowed to hold René again she’d tear their face off. And if they told her another woman was going to be his mother, she’d tear more than that.

She supposes this means she can stop asking the maids for rumours about the Dauphin’s governess, at least. She was hoping to find something blackmail-worthy, just in case Marguerite ever realised what was going on. But when the most scandalous things you can discover about someone are she once spilled a drink on herself at a dinner and her late mother was English, even Milady de Winter has to throw up her hands in frustration. In the end, the only blackmail she could think of was the affair, which half the Louvre already knows about. Aramis is the only interesting thing Lady Marguerite’s done in her life, as far as she can tell.

“Where’s your son, by the way?” Aramis asks. “Little René.” He can never miss an opportunity to draw out René’s name, teasing her. She’s fairly sure they all think Athos named their son out of gratitude to Aramis for his help at the birth and during the fever, possibly over her protests, and she’s glad to let them think so. Even though she knows the logic behind her choice, that it was repaying a debt, Aramis and the other idiots might not understand that. They might think it means she’s growing fond of them. God forbid.

“Stowed him under the bed. What, do you think that’s bad?” She rolls her eyes at him. “At home, with the nurse.”

“Shame. I always like seeing him.”

She could pretend to get offended that he’d prefer to see her son than her, but it seems like too much effort. “Does it help?”

“What, spending time with René?” He ponders the question for a moment. “Yes and no. He’s a joy, and I love him. But he doesn’t fill the gap. He’s not my son. I know that. And seeing him… sometimes it just reminds me of everything I’m missing. But I’m coping.”

“Aramis! Aramis!”

They both head out of the barracks, moving quickly, triggered by the note of panic in the parade-ground bark. And there’s Treville, looking muddy and furious and a bit the worse for wear, almost falling off his horse instead of dismounting. It’s not like him to be panicked or clumsy, and Milady feels some of his urgency seep into her.

“We need to ride for the old fort immediately,” Treville snaps, striding over to them. “Marmion and his men have taken the King hostage. He’s playing some fool game with flipping coins, the
“Madman.”

“How did you get out?”

Treville pauses, suddenly looking ten years older. “No one would play his game and guess,” he says, and the words come out pained. “But then I saw an opportunity, so I volunteered. I won, and he let me go. I abandoned the King after swearing I would stay by his side.”

God, can’t they do anything without feeling guilty about it?

“And I ignored his orders,” Treville says heavily, apparently determined to wring every ounce of regret out of this situation. “He commanded that I remain, but I knew this was the only chance to get help. If he dies…”

Then he’ll have an opportunity for even more guilt, Milady thinks. What fun that will be. It is interesting that he left the King, though, breaking his word and disobeying his monarch. For the greater good, of course, but in the past she thought of Treville as someone who generally chose honour above reason, like the rest of the Musketeers. It seems she was incorrect – or that she needs to adjust her view of him to the new Treville. This isn’t the first time that she’s noticed a difference in him since he became First Minister. It’s not a job for the quixotic.

“How about we concentrate on fixing the situation now, and worrying about all that later?” Aramis suggests reasonably, although his face is drawn. “How are the others?”

“D’Artagnan’s tied up in the main room, with the King and most of the court. Her Majesty and the Dauphin are in a room somewhere, I don’t know where. Porthos was taken to the cellar. Athos… Athos is… I’m sorry.”

The blood in her veins freezes. “What?” It feels like the question comes from a long way away. Everything fades slightly, colours discordant and wrong, sounds distant. She is in some other world, one where everything is cold and meaningless and empty, her body going so numb that the numbness is just another kind of pain, her mind dull with a strange childlike incomprehension. She is unable to move, to speak, to breathe, to be, unable to bear the words on Treville’s lips or the apology and grief in his eyes.

Athos can’t be dead, he can’t. He’s the centre her world spins around.

“He was thrown out one of the highest windows,” Treville says.

Aramis blinks, taken aback, but then says, “Well, it’s Athos. I’m sure he’s fine,” and Milady can breathe again, if painfully. “If you didn’t see a body…”

“True.” Treville manages to look marginally more cheerful at this thought.

Musketeers don’t die easily, Milady reminds herself, mind still slow with horror and fear – after all, she would know. And it’s Athos. It’s sounds absurd and selfish to say he wouldn’t do that to her, but he wouldn’t. She starts to come back to herself, starts to breathe again. Despite that thought, though, her heartbeat has quickened painfully, and every breath hurts her throat a little, and her hands are cold. What if he’s really dead? How can she live in a world without him?

She can’t, she thinks bleakly.

“We need to go back there. I can lead,” Treville says.

Aramis is already nodding. “I’ll go put a couple of men on saddling horses, and get everyone else
ready to ride. We should be able to go in minutes.”

A part of her wants to yell that they need to go now, they need to find Athos, they don’t have a moment to spare. It will take them time to ready the horses and all get going, time they don’t have. She can’t stand around doing nothing while Athos might in danger, waiting for these fools to sort themselves out. She can’t stand around when he might be dead, and he might be alive, and she doesn’t know.

She could take a horse herself and go ahead – but no, she can’t. She’d be walking into the unknown with no back-up, wearing a dress that’s near-impossible to fight in, using weapons she’s unfamiliar with, half-panicked and filled with rage and with no idea where she’s going. At best, she’d achieve nothing with her recklessness; at worst, she’d get herself killed, possibly leaving their son an orphan. She is strangely proud of herself for having a sensible thought, for managing to cling to it, when all she wants to do is find him.

“Fine, you do that,” she snaps, giving in with bad grace, and drawing their attention to her. She tries to still her trembling, the aftereffects of that one moment of pure fear still being felt. “I’m going to go find something to wear. Make sure they prepare a horse for me too, and some weapons.”

“You’re coming?”

“What do you think?”

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“Athos? Come on. Wake up.”

The voice is important, but Athos can’t obey it. It’s too difficult. Everything aches. Someone splashes water on his face, cold and unpleasant. Athos groans. He opens his eyes, which sting from the water, and tries to blink away the blurriness, before letting them slide closed again when it seems like the blurriness is incurable. Good. He needs to rest a while more.

“Athos, please.”

Now she sounds upset as well as annoyed, and that’s what jerks him to wakefulness. “Anne?” he says blearily. This time he manages to open his eyes and keep them open, and sure enough, there’s his wife leaning over him, beautiful face alive with fear and fury.

She relaxes as she sees he’s coming around, concerned lines on her face easing. “How do you feel?”

He heaves himself up into a sitting position. “Like one giant bruise. What are you wearing?” It’s amazing that he can be distracted by this even while perfectly aware that there’s more serious matters to worry about, but he is.

In his defence, it is very distracting, not least because he’s fairly sure that’s one of his coats, albeit one he hasn’t ever worn. It’s certainly more attractive on her, cinched tight around her waist with a belt. And she’s wearing trousers, and those certainly aren’t his, because they mould closely to her legs, and, judging by what he can see with the coat slightly rucked up due to her kneeling, the rest of her as well. One of his scarves around her neck, heavy boots on her feet, and standard Musketeer-issue weaponry complete the picture.

She looks simultaneously like the unspeakably gorgeous woman she is, and like one of his recruits. He must be more perverse than he thought because he enjoys it far too much. He likes her wearing
his clothes, he likes her looking ready for battle, he likes how confidently she wears it, and, well, he just likes all of it. At the best of times, it’s difficult not to pull her into his arms and roll them so they’re pressed flush against each other – this is not making his self-restraint any easier.

“I should check him for concussion,” another voice says, mildly concerned, and Athos manages to drag his gaze away from his wife to see Aramis. Normally Aramis just judges whether the injury is bad by how dazed they look, but it seems his talks with Lemay are teaching Aramis new tricks – Athos blinks when ordered, looks to the side, looks up, and correctly identifies how many fingers are held up, whereupon Aramis pulls him to his feet and embraces him. “Good job not dying.”

“I thought the worst when you fell,” Treville admits.

Athos still feels like a giant bruise, but his headache is starting to fade, and after stretching a little he thinks he’ll be able to fight. “There was a… a length of material?” He looks up at it. Right, a shade-cloth. He hit it hard, but not impossibly so, blacking out for only a few moments. Then he dizzily tried to climb down, ended up half-sliding the rest of the way to the ground, landed hard on the grass, and passed out again.

Once he says he’s ready, they move on again. But just before they reach the entrance, Milady grabs him and pushes him up against the wall. He allows her to, even though it sends a pang of discomfort through his aching head, because the throb of heat through him at her closeness is worth the pain.

“Don’t scare me like that again,” she orders, just like he did to her not so long ago, grabbing the locket and twisting it so the chain bites into his skin to make sure she has his full attention.

She’s so close he feels breathless with desire. They sleep wound around each other every night, but he never gets used to it – sometimes when she drops to sleep immediately, exhausted by her day, he stares at the ceiling and tries to slow his breathing and his thoughts. He forces himself not to kiss the hinge of her jaw, bite her neck, slide his hand down her stomach, press himself against her so she can feel him, forces himself to stay still and hold her gently instead of desperately. Having her near always makes his emotions riot, his nerves light up, his heart pound faster, and his fingers itch with the urge to pull her even closer until they’re skin to skin. An urge he can’t follow at present, he reminds himself, because it’s not fair to push – their lives together right now are such a blessing it would be gauche and greedy to even bring up the possibility of more, only weeks after the birth of their son. He must give her all the time she wants: to rest, to heal, to return to normal. His own desires are irrelevant beside that.

“I promise,” he says, and through what feels like a great effort of will, doesn’t reverse their positions and crush her to the wall in a kiss.

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Despite all their time together, she and Athos have rarely fought side by side, especially in close quarters.

She loves it. They move like one being, smoothly delivering death to their opponents, ducking out of the way of each other’s blade or gun. She draws his gun from his belt to shoot a man behind him while his blades are locked with that of someone else’s, since her own shot has already been loosed. He ducks into and then appears from an adjoining passage to coolly stab an opponent holding a gun to her head – the fool thought she was alone. They brush by each other, circle each other, stand back to back or side by side, step around each other as if every move is choreographed, perfectly knowing what the other will do and what the other wants them to do.
It’s like a dance. It’s like something else as well. All their enemies lie dead on the floor in minutes – although, to be fair, Aramis and Treville deserve some of the credit for that too.

She’d forgotten how nice men’s clothing is. Musketeer clothing is even nicer, though to be fair, she’s always thought that, if only because of how Athos looks in his. He could always give her chills with his handsomeess, even in his lordly clothes, but seeing him weighed down with weapons and clad head-to-toe in protective leather sends her stomach churning wildly and makes every hair on her body stand on end, every time she sees him. He looks delicious in it.

The clothing she borrowed is good for other reasons, though. Unlike the dress she was wearing earlier, there’s no tight corset to crush her still-tender cleavage, her weapons are within easy reach instead of hidden, and she can stride about without skirts tangling between her legs. In battle, usually her clothing is not only a disadvantage, but a constant reminder that as a woman she’s not supposed to be there, that who she is and what she does is somehow abnormal and wrong. In these clothes, though, she’s completely comfortable. She still loves dresses, of course, how she looks in them and how she feels in them, loves the fancy hairstyles and jewellery she can pair them with and the looks she gets when she wears them (especially from Athos). But there’s no denying it’s nice to be able to inhale and exhale fully, to be able to run quickly, to be able to draw a knife in a fraction of a second, to have her hair pulled away from her face fully instead of dangling in her sightline. It makes her happy. She feels almost resentful to all men for being able to live in this comfort whenever they like. Perhaps she should confiscate this outfit just in case she ever needs it again.

She’s at the front of the group, treading stealthily through the corridors, when she hears footsteps. She gestures frantically to the others, but Aramis’s face is already splitting into a grin, and he strides forward, apparently having recognised the tread.

“Porthos!” He goes to embrace his friend, but Porthos holds up a hand.

“Uh, maybe not right now.” He gestures at his shoulder meaningfully. Then his gaze lights on Athos and his pained expression turns into one of relief. “Glad to see you’re just as stubborn as ever.”

“Dislocated shoulder?” Aramis identifies, and Porthos nods. Then Aramis steps forward and advises matter-of-factly, “This is going to hurt, my friend. On three. One… two…”

Porthos’s cry of pain is startlingly loud, even louder than their shots have been. Milady suspects more enemies will be along shortly.

“Next corner, what are the odds we run into d’Artagnan?” she says in an undertone, giving Athos an amused look. They’ve got three of the four already, after all. “You Musketeers just can’t stay tied up.”

Aramis gives her an exaggerated wink, having heard her despite her quietness. “Depends who’s doing the tying.”

Before she has to come up with a response to that, there’s the noise of footsteps again, multiple ones. This time, they take down all but one – Aramis and Porthos each grab an arm and slam him against the wall, and Athos rips the man’s mask away, revealing a face full of defiance and fear.

“Is His Majesty still in the main hall?” Treville says roughly. “Answer me!”

The man stays stubbornly silent.
“Her Majesty,” Aramis butts in, his grin from before already gone. “Where is she? Which direction is the room? Tell us now.”

Still nothing. Milady’s sure the Musketeers are fully capable of intimidating the man into talking, given enough time – no doubt they’re willing to hit him, and willing to threaten worse tortures, but such threats take time to work. Part of her thinks she should leave them to it – after all, Athos is safe, and what does she care about anyone else?

On the other hand, though, the King did pardon her, and who knows if his successor would uphold that. Athos would be unhappy if any of the captives died, especially d’Artagnan. And the Dauphin is Aramis’s son, which shouldn’t matter to her, of course, but Aramis does care about hers so perhaps she should at least pretend to return the favour.

She tells herself firmly that she doesn’t give a damn about anyone except Athos, herself, and their child, and that this is all for selfish reasons, and then sighs and steps forward to help anyway.

“I am going to put your eye out,” she says, quite clearly, interrupting the bluster. Everyone else falls silent. She draws a knife, holds it up, and judges the distance – it would never do to push too hard and kill him. Besides, this is the one she bought for Athos, and brain matter is so difficult to get off.

He sneers. “No you won’t. I’m not telling you anything.”

“Oh, that wasn’t a threat,” she says casually. “I’m going to put one out, whatever you say. That way you’ll know I’m serious, but still have your sight… more or less. It’s the second one you might be able to save by talking.”

Then, swift as a snake, she draws her hand back and strikes. The man screams, managing to form the words “I’ll talk!” in his desperate yell, barely coherent but just understandable, as the blade flies toward his face.

Athos catches her hand at the very last instant, moving even faster than her, and she strains against his grip but only manages to scratch the weeping man’s eyelid with the blade instead of pop the eyeball. “Let go,” she grinds out.

“I’m strongly considering it,” he says mildly, and that’s when the captive loses his nerve completely, sobbing and blubbering, absolutely aware that if Athos had been even a millisecond slower he’d be blind in one eye and in extreme pain right now.

Milady lets her hand drop, and Athos releases her, but he does glance at the main gauche. “Good blade. New?”

“For you,” she says, flipping it and holding it out, and giving him a half-smile.

Looking surprised and a bit touched, he takes it and stows it at his belt. “Thank you,” he says, clearing his throat. He may even be blushing slightly.

“Priorities, people,” Aramis says, giving them a look. She resists the urge to point out the hypocrisy there.

The man spills out where everyone is – King, Queen, Dauphin, Musketeers, every single location he knows. He’s a bit vaguer about the members of court, apparently seeing them as largely irrelevant, an outlook Milady shares.

With a happy sigh, Porthos knocks him unconscious. “Well played,” he approves, looking at
Milady and Athos.

Milady gives a half-shrug. She was fairly sure Athos would stop her. He timed it perfectly, too. Not that she would be unwilling to put a man’s eye out, but it’s always so messy and it does tend to linger in the mind – not exactly the mood she was planning for tonight. Of course, that may be beyond saving. Then again, with the way Athos keeps looking at her…

“I need to go to the King,” Treville says.

“I need to get the Queen and the Dauphin out of here,” Aramis says, even more fiercely, and even Athos doesn’t raise any objection, perhaps realising it would be useless.

“So we split up,” Athos says. “Once we attack the main room, we’ve lost any element of surprise. Anne, Aramis and I will get the Queen and the Dauphin out first. Treville and Porthos, you clear out as many people around the hall as you can. Try not to be seen. We’ll join you as soon as possible and then take on the main group of them together.”

Makes sense – he doesn’t want Milady to go off where he can’t look out for her, but he also doesn’t want to send Aramis off to see the Queen and the Dauphin without anyone there to remind him to keep an appropriate courtly distance from them.

“Unless we hear Marmion about to kill the King,” Porthos says.

“Right. Unless that.”
They get to the Queen at literally the last moment – men with swords had just entered the room. They surprise them from behind, striking suddenly, and they’re dead almost before they know what happened. Aramis kills the last one with a throat cut, and blood sprays onto Her Majesty, who clutches the Dauphin closer to her and cries out.

“I’m sorry,” Aramis says, sheathing the sword and stepping closer to comfort her.

The Queen recovers and steps forward as well, expression of fear turning to a wavering smile. “Aramis, you have nothing to apologise for. Once again, you are my saviour.” She reaches out, touching his face, and then looks down. “You still wear it.”

“Always.” Aramis stares at her with heartbreaking tenderness, and then down at the Dauphin as she holds her arms out. His love for the Queen and for their son is palpable. They’re standing far too close, and look like the family they can never be.

Athos clears his throat, and Aramis steps back reluctantly, cold water poured on his sweet moment. The other woman in the room – the Dauphin’s governess, from memory, although Athos can’t recall her name – takes an uncertain step forward and then pauses, looking at Aramis.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” Aramis says. “I was… forgetting myself.”

The Queen gives a little speech about the loyalty of Musketeers, staring at Aramis with her heart in her eyes, and Athos wants to bang his head on the nearest stone wall. It’s an absolute miracle no one’s realised the Dauphin is Aramis’s, with how obvious these two are – and while it’s not his place to ever criticise the Queen, he can’t help thinking she shouldn’t be encouraging Aramis to hope for things he can never have.

But then, Athos spent years wishing for things he could never have – for his wife to be alive, for her to have really loved him, for him to have a second chance. And in the end, miraculously, impossibly and undeservedly, he got all that he wanted, all of that and more. So perhaps it’s not his place to judge, even if he cannot see a path to a happy ending for Aramis or the Queen in this case. Still, even if he shouldn’t judge, he can still try and contain the damage.

“We have to get you out of here,” Aramis says, so at least he remembers some things, even if he’s thrown most of his common sense to the four winds.

“Anne can escort them out,” Athos says firmly. And escort herself out at the same time, not coincidentally. A part of him loves fighting by her side – watching her in the thick of battle is strangely compelling, she’s a damn good soldier, and the way they move together stirs his blood – but if they’re going to storm a guarded room full of enemies in a straight-up fight, he would much rather she wait for them outside. In safety.

“I wasn’t aware I came under your command,” Milady says, taking this moment of quiet to reload her pistol, only looking up to roll her eyes at him. “If you’re staying then I’m staying, Athos. Accept it.”

As his wife, she is absolutely under his command, according to the Bible, the law, and conventional wisdom, but he’s wise enough not to even try that. He huffs out a breath in a mixture of frustration and resignation. If she wants to stay, he can’t stop her, and she knows her abilities to an inch, so she’s well able to judge the risk involved. She is, after all, the most dangerous person
he’s ever known, as well as one of the cleverest.

Her refusing does create an issue, though. He turns back to the Queen and Dauphin. He’s Captain – he can’t escape outside while the others do the heavy lifting. But he can’t send the Queen and Dauphin off without anyone to defend them, and he’s not sure if he should send –

“I’ll take them,” Aramis says. He gives Athos a pleading look. “It will only take a minute.”

Athos hesitates – too long, he realises, when Milady coughs pointedly. When he glances at her, she lets her eyes slide towards the governess, who looks completely confused. From her point of view, presumably there’s no reason why Aramis can’t escort them out. She looks almost suspicious as she glances between Aramis and the Queen, and Athos winces at his own stupidity.

The Queen, meanwhile, is absolutely aware of why Athos is trying to avoid this situation, and her cheeks flush with some combination of indignation and embarrassment. She turns away and starts whispering nonsense to the Dauphin, trying to keep him calm, and ignoring the rest of them.

Athos pulls Aramis aside and says, “Fine. Get the Queen to safety. And come straight back.” He shouldn’t add the last part, he thinks, and he certainly shouldn’t stress it like that, but he can’t stop himself. The Queen doesn’t hear it, at least, although the governess does.

Aramis nods and starts to hurry the two women out of the room.

“Your Majesty,” Athos says as they pass, an attempt at an apology. “I’m very glad to see you safe.”

She gives him a small smile, forgiving his lapse in manners before. “And I you, Captain.”

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They hear their comrades before they see them, which Milady supposes is in keeping with the Musketeers’ usual attempts at stealth. They’re having an argument which they probably think is sotto voce, but can in fact be heard several corridors away. Athos looks faintly exasperated by this.

“Porthos, for God’s sake, now is not the time.”

“It’s never the time, as far as you’re concerned,” Porthos says fiercely, still managing to keep his voice low – well, low-ish. “The only time I see you these days is when I’m guarding the King. You won’t even let me in your offices anymore.”

“Because you’ve done nothing but harangue me for months!” Treville sounds somewhere between vexed and guilty. “I told you back when we rescued him that de Foix is not your father. I don’t understand why you won’t leave the subject be.”

“Because you’ve done nothing but harangue me for months!” Treville sounds somewhere between vexed and guilty. “I told you back when we rescued him that de Foix is not your father. I don’t understand why you won’t leave the subject be.”

“Because before you came in and shut him up, he made it pretty clear he knew who was,” Porthos growls. He doesn’t even notice as Athos and Milady round the corner, and although Treville looks up for half a moment, he immediately returns to the argument.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You leaving your duties as Minister to come see an old friend who nearly died? Sure, all right, makes sense. You demanding to talk in private, arguing with him, and then him clamming up? He knew something, and you wouldn’t let him tell me. Stands to reason you know as well.”

“I don’t know anything, Porthos, and this is neither the time nor the place to discuss it.”
“And then that legacy. What are you keeping from me?”

“Nothing!” This time, Treville is slightly too loud, and Athos clears his throat, attracting both of their attention.

“Treville is right, this isn’t the time,” he tells Porthos inflexibly. “We have bigger problems.”

“Right, sorry.” Porthos gives a nod, though his face is still a mask of anger. “We got rid of half a dozen of them, and then another three he sent out to check on the ones he told to kill Her Majesty. You got there first, right?”

“We did. How many left in the room?”

“No idea. Want to go find out?”

They burst in like a storm on Treville’s order, sweeping away the enemy. It’s chaotic. D’Artagnan and Constance fight effectively despite being tied together, Porthos manages to send a man out the window, and Treville takes out the two men nearest to the King. Athos gets locked into a duel with one man, but she shoots him casually in the back.

“Marmion,” Treville calls out, pointing in the direction the man went.

“Find him!” Louis howls. “I want his head!”

Athos nods, telling the King to stay where he is and that his wife and son are safe, and then they’re after Marmion, like hounds after a deer. D’Artagnan, meanwhile, pulls Constance close to him, comforting her in a way her husband would almost certainly disapprove of.

Milady doesn’t bother to join in the chase. Based on the few moments before they attacked when she was forced to listen to him wax on about his inner pain, she’s really not very interested in Marmion. The three of them are more than capable of taking out a single man, especially one that whiny. Instead, she goes over to the King, because he looks like a complete mess and really someone should.

He’s in the middle of yelling hysterically at the remaining courtiers to get out, calling them useless wastes who failed to help protect their King. They scatter like sheep, confused, most seeming just as close to nervous breakdowns as the King is.

As a result, she approaches him carefully. “Your Majesty,” she says, adopting the tone of dulcet sweetness she always uses around him. The longer he thinks she’s angelic, the better.

“Milady!” To her absolute amazement, he seizes her hand clumsily, instead of banishing her like he has everyone else. “My saviour, as always.” He looks her up and down, nose wrinkling very slightly at her attire, but then he lifts his slightly-teary gaze to her face again and seems to discard that as unimportant.

Something about the words sets off a warning chime in her – that’s very close to what Her Majesty said about Aramis – but she’s in too good a mood to really register it. Fighting side by side with Athos is a thrill, adrenaline flooding her system and making her feel vital and strong and alive, and her system is humming with pleasure and energy. Killing overly-dramatic fools in plague masks isn’t how she planned to spend her day, but she’s had worse ones. And judging by the spark in Athos’s eyes when she brushed past him before, the rest of the day should be better still. Yes, they still have passion, and hopefully it’s not just on the battlefield.

She hadn’t realised she missed fighting. Not just taking pot-shots from a distance and then wincing
as the recoil sent pains through her still-healing body, like at Pinon, but really fighting. She’d forgotten how incredible it felt – the buzz of adrenaline, the clang of swords, the speed and ferocity of it all, the raw satisfaction of outthinking and outflanking the enemy.

She murmurs comforting nonsense to the King, much like she does with her son when he’s fretful, as he pours out a somewhat-nonsensical story of Marmion’s madness and Treville’s abandonment and d’Artagnan’s contrariness and his own terror, telling her how everyone’s against him. She continues to make soothing noises, wishing she could pull back her hand, until he’s done.

“Who are you, Milady?” Louis says pathetically after he’s finished, seizing her other hand as well as he glances over to see if Athos has returned yet.

“Just a loyal citizen, Your Majesty.”

“No, really. I asked Treville, after last time, but all he would say is you didn’t work for him or the Musketeers,” Louis says, somehow managing to focus past his own suffering for a moment. Sensible of Treville to avoid taking any kind of responsibility for her actions, she supposes, slightly amused by this. “And that you helped Rochefort but turned on him. When we searched Rochefort’s rooms, he had some of the Cardinal’s books and your name was there as well, but the Cardinal’s dead…”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question.” Or the rambling, if she’s being more accurate. Surely Athos and the rest of them should be back by now. If d’Artagnan could stop whispering sweet nothings to Madame Bonacieux, maybe she could pass the distraught yet obstinate King off to him – her hands are starting to go numb.

“If not Treville, or the Musketeers, or Rochefort, or the Cardinal, who do you serve?” Louis says, coming to the point.

“You, of course, your Majesty,” Milady says, sweetly and untruthfully.

He surges up so suddenly that for a second she thinks he’s attacking, but then he kisses her.

She manages to curtail her immediate instinct to shove him away hard, because this is the King. Instead, she stays perfectly still until he pulls back, accepting the kiss but not really participating in it. It’s not the worst kiss she’s ever gotten, but it’s certainly nowhere near the best. She can’t imagine how he could enjoy it – she was as stiff as a board – but when he pulls back he’s smiling mistily at her, as if enchanted.

She leans back, attention now completely focused on the King, and mind whirling in something close to panic. She supposes it makes sense he’d develop feelings for her – the role she plays with him bears some slight similarities to the one she used to ensnare d’Artagnan originally. A beautiful, enigmatic woman who shows up for unexpected rescues and has mysterious motives is catnip for men. Of course, unlike with d’Artagnan, she also speaks kindly to the King at all times, shows him sympathy, showers him with compliments, and has never framed him for murder.

It just didn’t cross her mind he’d become infatuated with her – she’s attractive, she knows that, but the other two times he’s seen her, she’s been wearing a cloak that hid her body entirely from view, and this time she’s wearing men’s clothes, which from his expression before he finds a little off-putting. Still, Athos says he’s been looking for meaning in his life. Men looking for meaning will cling to anything, in her experience. That was another lever she used with d’Artagnan, after all.

She opens her mouth – to say what, she has no idea. She could say she’s married with a child, of course, but she’d rather not risk Athos playing Uriah to Louis’s King David. She could tell him
she’s uninterested? That seems like it will go poorly. The King doesn’t like rejection.

Thankfully, she’s saved from having to come up with anything.

“Your Majesty, it’s time to go,” d’Artagnan says, showing up beside him. “Her Majesty and your son will be waiting outside, and they’ve probably captured Marmion by now.” The look he gives Milady is unreadable. He might have seen the kiss, he might not have.

Of course, she didn’t do anything wrong, so it hardly matters. And nothing really happened – one kiss, that’s all. But he’d probably tell Athos, and she’s somewhat concerned about that. Jealousy makes men irrational. What if Athos confronted the King about it and angered him? She’d like to think he’s smarter than that, but she can’t always predict his actions. And what if he thought Milady ensnared the man on purpose? It’s not like it would be entirely out of character for her to do so.

And – the thought comes to her head unbidden – would it be the worst thing in the world to have some kind of a hold over the King, in case she ever needs it? Even if it’s a hold her husband wouldn’t approve of, like the King desiring her, being infatuated with her. The interest of a King can be as useful as it is dangerous. But then she would be doing exactly what she worries about Athos accusing her of, wouldn’t she?

It’s all tangled in her mind. She’s not sure what to do.

She pulls back, released from the King’s grip, and curtsies deeply before disappearing gracefully into a corridor and out of sight. Once there, she takes her time – Athos won’t leave without her, but she’d rather the rest of the party did.

Sure enough, when she makes her way outside, Athos is waiting with two horses and a concerned look on his face. It fades to a look of relief when he sees her, which warms her from the inside out.

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Athos is lost in his own thoughts for most of the ride back. Milady is healthy and uninjured and riding beside him. The King and Queen and Dauphin are all safe. His friends are fine (from what he saw, d’Artagnan is better than fine, in fact). The day is lovely, now that the earlier storm has passed. Their horses keep a steady and smooth pace – they should catch up with the others before too long. Really, it should be a uniformly pleasant trip, but he’s too distracted by his own worries to appreciate it properly.

The King hadn’t been grateful for his rescue. He had been indifferent to the Musketeers, not seeming either angry or pleased with them, but towards Treville he’d been icy. Treville had abandoned him, according to His Majesty; he had failed his King and country, he would be lucky to keep his position as First Minister after this transgression. While relieved to see his son, and even more relieved to have escaped harm himself, he made it clear that he wasn’t pleased and that Treville was on thin ice.

That had been concerning enough. But then as they were being seated back in their carriages, Her Majesty had spoken up to defend Treville, reminding her husband that he was an old friend and ally to them, who had served them loyally for years. The King had responded by pointing out nastily that the last loyal, long-time friend she had recommended to him had turned out to be a Spanish spy, so either her judgment was severely compromised, or…

He hadn’t needed to finish the sentence. They had been surrounded by courtiers again, by then, all of whom had heard every word, all of whom knew that the King had almost told his wife he
thought she was a traitor to France. The Queen had gone quiet immediately, and not said another word, but her pale, hurt face told its own tale: it is growing more dangerous by the day to be Spanish in France, and even the Queen of France is not quite French enough.

He’s so distracted thinking of politics and countries and war that it takes him longer than it should to realise Milady is as silent as he is. Normally she would at least throw some sarcastic remark at him, try and tease his thoughts out. Instead, she hasn’t made a single sound, lost in her thoughts as well.

Instantly, his mind switches to a different set of worries – has he offended her somehow? By trying to keep her out of the fight, perhaps, even if it was only for a moment. For being the reason she was involved in this to begin with. For stopping her taking out that man’s eye. For abandoning her to chase Marmion with the others. For some stupidity completely unrelated to today.

He studies her as they ride, trying to discern if she’s disappointed or angry. She looks troubled more than anything, though, mouth set straight and stubborn, with that slight line down her forehead she gets when she’s faced with some difficult puzzle, working out the answer.

Of course, now he’s staring at her, he can’t help his thoughts turning from concern to admiration. He’s seen her ride a lot of times, but rarely astride, and she’s as graceful and competent as anyone he’s ever seen in the saddle. Just like she is with weapons. If the Musketeers accepted women, he’d be trying to recruit her already – well, maybe not. It would be impossible for him to concentrate on anything with her striding around like that, tightly-cinched coat exaggerating her curves, snug breeches showing off her perfect legs. It’s becoming impossible for him to concentrate now. He can barely manage to pay attention to the dilapidated road, when he could instead be watching her ride, muscles in her legs taut to hold her steady, loosely-bound hair and scarf streaming back in the breeze, whole body bouncing with the rhythmic movement of the horse –

The thoughts turn from admiration to something else entirely, although he desperately tries to suppress the fire rising in his blood. His adrenaline is up from the fight, but it’s much more than that. It’s how amazing she looks, confident and skilled as she rides; it’s the quick, graceful way she darted around him as they fought and the perfect savagery of her movements; it’s the repeated slide of her body by his in those corridors; it’s the way she pressed him against the wall earlier. It’s all of it. It’s her. He feels every bit of sense and restraint draining away, replaced by pure desire. Suddenly, he wants to be close to her so badly he can’t think.

She glances over at him, and he tries to look away, uncomfortably aware of how badly he’s affected just by looking at her. He feels almost drunk on it. But he can’t manage to pull his gaze from her, and he thinks he sees an answering flare of heat from her. Her eyes darken, her concerned expression smooths out, and her lips part just slightly. She swallows hard.

“Once upon a time,” she remarks, voice trembling a little but still clear, “If we’d gone riding like this, you would have had me down in the grass before we had made it half a mile.”

Lord above, is she trying to kill him?

His brain blanks out slightly, and the next thing he knows, he’s reached out and grabbed her horse’s reins, pulling on them with one hand as he yanks at his own with the other. Well-trained Musketeer horses, they slow to a stop immediately despite the suddenness of the request, and then Athos is almost falling off the horse. He drags her down from her own into his arms, mouth already landing on hers desperately.

It’s a long time later he pulls back, his hands still holding her head in place, hers tangled in his hair. “Is this… is it…” he tries to croak, through the fog his thoughts are right now, too distracted by
sensation to spare much brainpower to form words. “Should I stop?” He has absolutely no idea how long it takes to recover from childbirth – a while, he would assume.

“Don’t you dare,” she gasps out, and brings his mouth back down to hers again by yanking viciously at his hair.

He follows eagerly.

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She has leaves in her hair and dirt under her nails, the coat she stole from Athos’s room is covered in grass stains, and she’s got a bruise on her back from a poorly-positioned rock she didn’t even notice at the time. She smells of gunpowder and horses, her muscles ache, and the sky is starting to darken.

She feels wonderful.

Athos’s head is on her stomach, and she cards her fingers through his hair, making him sigh. “It’s good to know we haven’t become too sedate,” she says, apropos of nothing.

He huffs out something that’s nearly a laugh. “Was that ever in doubt? If we had any more excitement in our lives, my heart would have given out already.”

“I just don’t want…” she struggles to find the right words. “To bore you,” she decides on, because as much as both of them love René, not even Athos can look totally fascinated when stories of her day are inevitably about things like how much their child has eaten and slept. Between the lack of challenges to her wits and skills, and the combined effect of exhaustion and hormones, she’s hardly been good company lately.

He twists his head up to gives her an incredulous look. “Anne… you’re the least boring person I know.”

“Once, perhaps.”

“No, you still are.” His voice is dry as he starts to list evidence. “Your house has more concealed knives than Caesar’s killers. I found three strapped to the bottom of René’s crib the other day.”

“That’s for safety.” Better to have a weapon within reach and not need it than the opposite, after all.

“Your servants think you can teleport and see through walls.”

“They’re shockingly unobservant.”

“Today, you dressed in men’s clothing and attacked a fort, rescuing the King and Queen of France and their child.”

“Yes, but that’s one day. Tomorrow, I’ll be back to taking care of my own child again, not helping rescue other people’s.” She closes her eyes to deliver this next truth, trying not to feel guilty about it. “But I don’t think I can do it for much longer. I know I don’t need the money anymore, and that the plan was for me to spend my days with our son, but… I think I need to find work again. Not… exactly… what I did for the Cardinal, but something. Even if it’s only on my own behalf.”

She craves it more than she should, she knows, especially since a large part of that craving is due to a sort of instinctive, childish fear – of being blindsided, of being ambushed, of her world
crumbling around her once more. Even while pregnant and just after René was born, she found herself looking for excuses to stay involved in that world, to stay informed. She trawled for rumours amongst maidservants, subtly mined the Musketeers who came to visit for facts, persuaded Athos to talk about the King’s and First Minister’s plans in detail in the guise of asking about his day. She was interested in his day just because it was his, of course she was, but she also wanted to know what was happening. She’s had the sky fall on her head too often not to look up. She needs to be involved, to be proactive, to have some way to exert control over the world.

He could have died today. Because he wasn’t forewarned, because he didn’t see it coming. Because there were hidden threats and no one to ferret them out. And she somehow doubts Marmion is the last of it. No, there are threats everywhere – some part of her instinctively knows that, feels it even when she should be at her safest. Being able to see them and lash out in return gives her a fierce kind of satisfaction. She needs it.

She’s never not had something to do, something dangerous and volatile. She was a pickpocket, living on her wits, one bad day from starvation or arrest. She was the best thief in Paris, evading guards, fending off competitors, and bringing back hauls to the crew. She was the Cardinal’s creature, assassin, spy and seductress in one, keeping a step ahead of everyone else. Even when she was the Comtesse de la Fere, she was continually challenged, trying to keep her deceit going, learning how to be a comtesse without ever giving away her own ignorance, and falling in love for the first and only time and discovering a new kind of risk. She doesn’t miss terror, deprivation, criminality or slaughter – but she can admit that she’s become accustomed to that feeling of living on the edge.

She cannot be satisfied spending all her days with their child, not when Athos is out there in the thick of it. It makes her feel trapped and useless, and her love for René is no cure for those feelings. That fills her with guilt, but it’s the truth. Her house is roomy but often feels too small anyway. The nurse has already begun taking over the bulk of the work of caring for René. She can’t do nothing, not when there are dangers unaddressed and threats undiscovered. She isn’t built that way.

“You said you wanted to leave that life behind,” Athos reminds her.

“Yes, when I was going to England. I would have lived in the country there, free of all this, far from politics and machinations and conspiracies. A clean break from who I used to be.” She savours the image for a moment, the image of a world where there are no threats to trouble her, where Athos spends his days with their family instead of out risking himself, where she could finally relax completely, a world containing nothing but them and their newly-recovered happiness. Then she discards it with a sigh. “But I think we both know that so long as you’re a Musketeer, so long as we live in Paris, I’ll always be dragged into this. Just look at the past few months. I may as well go into these fiascos with my eyes open and as much information as I can gather.”

Athos reaches up and encircles her wrist with his fingers, drawing her hand down from his hair to his lips, and kisses the inside of her wrist where the skin is so pale it’s almost translucent. She can feel her pulse beat against the softness of his lips and sighs at the heat of it.

“I’ll tell Treville,” he says before she can curve down into him and begin this dance again, sounding resigned. “He might have something.”

She blinks at the darkening sky, surprised. “Really? So easily?”

“It’s not easy at all. But if it’s what you need, then I won’t try to stop you. You know, sometimes I think about throwing away my sword, buying a cottage somewhere, and us living out the rest of our lives quietly. But at the end of the day… I could never do it. I’m a Musketeer.”
It’s close to what she was thinking, and with the same conclusion. It stings a little to hear that Athos could never leave his brothers, not even for her, but she smothers that feeling. He understands her feelings. Perhaps he doesn’t mirror them precisely – she has always been the one willing to give up more, to change, to adapt herself to the life he wants, the one whose first priority is them and not the rest of the world – but he does understand. That’s enough.

It seems they’re not destined for a life of domestic bliss, not anymore, at least, her dreams of a quiet life in the country notwithstanding. It’s a relief not to have this become the argument she expected. She just hopes he deals as well with whatever she ends up doing. Athos’s issues with lying, stealing, espionage and assassination are well established, especially when she’s the perpetrator. A few months ago she would have said Treville was incapable of asking for anything too dishonourable, but keeping the post of First Minister requires ruthlessness and cunning, what with how erratic and easily manipulated the King is. Anyone else willing to contract her would probably be even more unscrupulous. Luckily, she supposes she always has the option of refusing if she doesn’t like an order – a statement she has never been able to make before.

“There’s something I wanted to talk to you about, as well,” Athos says.

“Oh?” Her own worries dealt with, she’s feeling lazy and sleepy now. Nevertheless, she shifts so that she’s half-sitting up, and gives him an enquiring look.

“We have a lot of new recruits at the Garrison.”

“And they want their clothes back?” She smiles at him, eyes half-closed and mischievous. “Get me somewhere warmer and less dirty and I promise you can remove them fully, Captain.”

His breathing picks up, but he shakes his head. “No, I mean… we could use the space in the Garrison… my quarters could be… it’s not as if I stay there often…” he cuts himself off with a huff of exasperation. “I’m coming at this the wrong way,” he mutters to himself.

“Athos. Are you asking to move in?” She can’t help her surprise. After René was born she brought it up to him multiple times, but he always evaded the question.

“Yes,” he says simply.

She gives it a few moments, just to get back at him for all his previous evasion. “Good. About time. Just be aware that for rent, I expect payment in kind.”

“What, like cooking?” he asks, tone deadpan but a glimmer of humour in his eyes. “Moving furniture? Minding the baby?”

“If you’re not too worn out, perhaps.” She leans over and kisses him, deep and slow and long.

As far as she knows, there is no rule requiring the Captain of the Musketeers to live at the Garrison. There’s not even a rule requiring Musketeers to live there, because back when the regiment was founded, all the Musketeers were single men. Only a dozen or so men have married in the decade since, and most of them left the Musketeers the moment they did (Musketeers tend to marry rich widows), so no one’s ever bothered to enter an official protocol for it into the rules. They certainly didn’t bother to ever include rules for the Captain – at the time, Treville was the Captain, and there seemed no chance of him ever resigning and passing the post on, and certainly no chance of him getting married. So they have no guidelines to follow – but when have they ever?

She remembers telling Athos they needed to take things slow. She can’t entirely verbalise what she meant by that, now. Emotionally speaking, they were already in as deep as any two people could
be, and such minor details as where they lived or how many times a week they saw each other had no effect on that. It wasn’t to protect their child, either, who was bound to become attached to his father regardless of living situations. She supposes what she meant at the time was that they had no guarantee they wouldn’t fall apart at the first bump in the road, and if that happened, it would be bad enough without having wound every facet their lives even more inextricably around each other, so they should try and keep some things separate. But it’s been many months, now, and while they’ve hit a few snags, they seem stronger than ever. They’re doing much better than she could have imagined.

They’ve had arguments. Odds are they’ll have more in future (the incident with the King earlier flies into her mind, but she does her best to banish it – that’s a problem for later). But she loves him. She needs him. She remembers the terror she felt earlier, the coldness of that one moment after Treville said he was dead – could it have hurt worse if he’d lived with her? She doubts it. Nothing could make that worse. But she thinks that having Athos with her always, openly and honestly, could make life better. She’s willing to take the risk, to place everything on the table and go all in, to return to being husband and wife completely. Not because they need to be seen as married in the eyes of the world to be married, or because she wants her son to grow up with a traditional configuration of parents, but because it feels like fixing the final part of something broken. It’s like a wound mending deep inside her, and she almost gasps as she feels it knit, leaving only a small scar.

She kisses him again.

“Speaking of home, we should get back,” she notes after a while. “We have a nice dinner waiting. And I have an even nicer dress to change into.”

“What you’re wearing is fine,” he says, a little too quickly. He gets up and turns to help her up as well. Even in the half-darkness, she can see the way his eyes flick down as she fixes up, tucks and straightens the masculine clothing around herself.

“Athos, do you like this clothing?” She can’t help the wicked grin that spreads across her face. He does, he does, she can see it in the way he glances away.

The horses haven’t strayed far, too well-trained for that, and are eating grass nearby. Athos leads them back over, still determinedly not meeting her gaze as he answers. “You look comfortable in them.”

“Oh, so it’s about my comfort. Well, they are comfortable. Maybe I’ll stay in them for the moment, then.” He helps her mount, holding contact with her for far longer than is proper – but then, they passed proper years ago. She looks down into his face, and sees he’s fighting a smile of his own, the edges of his eyes crinkling with hidden amusement. “Perhaps I should keep them, actually. Just in case I ever need them again. What do you think?”

“That sounds wise.” Another look at her through his hair, which nearly makes her laugh. Yes, she should save the dress for another night.

He mounts as well, and urges his horse to speed. She follows suit, and in moments they’re racing, evening sky blurring around them. She laughs at the joy of it, at the way her body feels alive with adrenaline and speed and pleasure and love, at the way the whole world seems inexplicably perfect. Her husband is beside her, her son is ahead, and her future contains whatever she chooses. At the moment, she feels entirely happy, entirely at home, and entirely herself.
Since there's no Rochefort, and therefore no one to hire the assassins, and therefore basically no plot, I've got everyone mostly doing other things for this episode. I hope you enjoy it anyway!

Athos is going over feed bills for the horses when the noise outside gets too loud to ignore. It sounds like cheering and clapping, the bustle of enthusiastic conversation. He glance out the window in his office, but can’t see exactly what all the fuss is about, so instead he abandons the paperwork for the moment and heads out into the yard.

The men are supposed to be training right now, sparring with each other, but he didn’t leave anyone specific in charge of it. He can’t oversee training himself all the time, between paperwork and organising duties and reporting to His Majesty and Treville. When he’s busy, he normally deputises it to one of his friends, but they’re escorting the King’s cousin, Princess Louise, to Paris and aren’t due back until tonight at the earliest. So instead, today he decided to trust that the professional soldiers he commands were mature enough to manage their own training for an hour or so. Judging by the racket, he was wrong.

The men are all gathered around in a wide circle, presumably watching some intense bout of sparring, but when he clears his throat the ones near him scatter, letting him through.

He can’t stop the smile that comes to his face when he sees her.

“You’re not chopping firewood, fool,” Milady says, rolling her eyes even as she smoothly deflects a blow. The Musketeer she’s speaking to is among the best – no Inseparable, but a decent shot and a better-than-decent swordsman, even if Athos has made the same comment to him several times.

“Speed, not strength.”

The man growls and slashes viciously at her, but again she disengages with ease, not allowing him to lock their blades and overpower her with his greater strength, darting to the side in a smooth movement and allowing his sword to slide off hers like it’s oiled. She’s half a foot shorter than him, and probably less than half his weight, but there’s no question who has the advantage.

“And again. What are you compensating for?” She smirks, taking a half-step back to avoid another lunge. Compared to the sweating and red-faced Musketeer, she doesn’t have a hair out of place – she looks as perfect as a painting, blue flowers dotting her pretty coiffure and elegant dress sweeping the dusty ground.

Now that most of the men have noticed Athos, the cheers have died down, and a Musketeer who seems to have been taking bets quietly loses himself in the crowd, disappearing. Others start to casually wander away, pretending they only stopped for a moment. He suspects this bout has been going for a while.

“You need to turn your wrist slightly more,” she criticises. This time she allows him to lock their blades, but when he forces his full weight down on it, her sword moves in a flash of silver and suddenly his is on the ground and he makes a high-pitched noise of discomfort. “See? Your current
grip leaves an opening.”

The man steps back, rubbing at his sword hand and glowering at Milady, defeated. She looks like the kind of woman who should be at a salon or dancing at a ball, the sword incongruous in her hand, and if Athos didn’t know her it would be almost impossible to believe she could so easily take on one of the most elite soldiers in the country. There’s a scattering of applause, but when Athos looks around, the rest of the men disperse speedily at his level stare.

She looks over at him. “Oh. There you are.”

“Here I am,” he says. “Why are you terrorising my men?”

She lets him take her arm and escort her inside and away from all the staring eyes. “Not terrorising, training. A good wife supports her husband.”

Well, he supposes it’s unlikely the Musketeer will ever hold his sword incorrectly again. Being so comprehensively defeated by a woman will probably inspire him to put much more effort into his fencing skills.

He wonders if he should try and spar with her sometime, and swiftly discards the thought. It’s not that he doesn’t like the idea of sparring with her – it’s that he might like it too much, and there is a certain level of dignity he has to maintain in front of his men.

Although, now he thinks about it, it might be something else as well. Sparring can be light-hearted and even enjoyable, something he does regularly with his friends to keep his skills sharp. But if it didn’t turn in too-enjoyable directions with her, it might turn in other ones – perhaps they’ve had too many real battles for him to feel comfortable with practice ones yet. Fighting beside her is different. Fighting against her would mean thinking of how to target her vulnerabilities, imagining how he would strike at her, testing her defences – to help improve her skills and his own, of course, but he still doesn’t like the thought of it.

Someday, perhaps, if she wants to. Maybe in a few years, when the memory of his sword-tip pressed to her throat is hazier. But not quite yet.

“So why did you stop by? Is everything alright?” he asks, leading her into his office. He’s confused. If it’s some minor message, she usually sends the footman with it, but if she was here for something serious then why waste time sparring? Unless this is a social visit – but she usually respects his work too much to interrupt it.

She waits until he’s shut the door before answering. “I saw Treville this morning.”

This isn’t especially earth-shattering – he normally comes to their place once a week, ostensibly to see how René is growing, but actually to hear whatever rumours have come to Milady’s ears. Athos doesn’t know why they don’t simply have Milady go to the Louvre to report to him like everyone else does, but both Treville and his wife had seemed against that for some reason. Neither are keen for her to be officially considered in the employ of France. So instead, Treville pretends to be interested in babies, and Milady pretends she’s gossiping with an old friend of her husband’s. She described it as a good way to ease herself back into work – low effort, low risk, and low compensation – but Athos has no doubt Treville will find more to do for her in time.

“Yes?”

“He slipped me a note.” Milady lowers her voice to a murmur. “Wants to see us both at some anonymous tavern at midday. Interesting, isn’t it?”
Unlike Richelieu, Treville’s never been honoured by the King with his face on commemorative coins or celebrations of his great achievements – he’s a much less showy First Minister, in some ways. The average citizen of Paris probably wouldn’t recognise him, especially not when he’s out of his ornate armour and going around on foot or horseback instead of in fancy carriages. Milady’s servants certainly haven’t realised the blunt, awkwardly polite man they serve tea to once a week is the First Minister of France. They don’t question it. Athos could easily join them for that tea without exciting suspicion.

Similarly, no one really questions it when Treville comes to the Garrison – he spent so long acting like he still had the captaincy even after he passed it on to Athos that they expect him to visit. And it would be no problem for Athos to send all the men away, either, since he discusses classified information with Treville regularly – having his wife there with him would be a little strange, but not incredibly so.

So why ask them to meet him somewhere else? Whatever he wants to talk to them about must be secret indeed, if he’s too paranoid to discuss it with them in their home or at the Garrison.

He feels his heart lurch suddenly – what if it’s something to do with Aramis and the Dauphin? – but then he calms himself immediately. Treville would not go through Milady for that, and he’d certainly want Aramis there to express his displeasure.

“So I thought I’d take my husband out for midday meal,” Milady says, returning to her normal volume. She calls him her husband much more frequently, now, and not just in front of his friends – in front of the servants and his men, too. Athos has received congratulations from quite a few people on his recent marriage, most of them assuming he wedded his wealthy, pregnant mistress immediately before the birth so that his child would be legitimate, if barely. He hasn’t bothered to correct them – after all, what business is it of theirs? He and Milady are married, in God’s sight, in the law’s, in the world’s, and, most importantly, in their own – that’s all anyone needs to know. If the worst ever happens, she has more than enough proof of their relationship to receive his pension. Not that she needs it, at present.

“Let’s go see what he wants, then,” Athos says in an undertone.

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“I need you to find Spanish spies in Paris.” Treville says it quite bluntly.

Milady raises her eyebrows. “What, all of them?” Interesting.

“Last year you found the tavern Rochefort was sending his reports to,” Treville says. “We caught and executed seven spies, and imprisoned or fined several dozen more informants who didn’t realise who they were reporting to. It’s been months, though, and they must have replaced those men. I want you to find any locations they’re reporting to, and you -” now he directs his hard stare to Athos, “- to clear them out, as quickly and quietly as possible.”

Athos looks down into his drink. After a moment, he says, “Surely there are people already working for the King, searching for spies.”

They don’t have much of a spy network anymore, Milady knows. The information she gave Athos a year ago forced the Cardinal to transfer, remove, or step back from most of the men he had in Paris and the surrounding area. His death shortly afterwards caused his contacts in other countries to go underground, aware he had no successor to continue paying them. But they should still have someone.
“Yes, a few,” Treville admits, sounding tired. “But if – when – they find them, they’ll tell the King. I need you to find them first.”

There’s a long pause, and then Athos shakes his head, slow and disbelieving. “That’s why all the cloak and dagger. You don’t want the King to find out about this. When you said ‘quietly’…”

“Using only your most trusted men, in the dark of night, with no Musketeer uniforms. We’ll come up with some kind of cover story to explain the attacks.”

“I’d think the King would be pleased with you finding spies,” Milady says, idly tracing the rim of her goblet with her forefinger and probably dirtying her glove in the process. Still, she’s been in much worse holes before. “Especially Spanish ones.”

Treville is actually in favour again, even after the King’s anger at Marmion’s fort. He had played it quite well, judging by what she’s heard – instead of pointing out he’d saved the day, he expressed his absolute guilt and sorrow at leaving His Majesty, vowing to do better next time and acting as if the King’s anger was justified. Louis likes to feel like he’s in the right, so he’d forgiven his First Minister. Besides, he depends on Treville, now that the Cardinal is gone.

Apparently, the King and Queen’s relationship is still icy, though. It’s been deteriorating since Rochefort. The King has cheerfully forgotten he ever trusted or liked Rochefort, but he remembers that the Queen and Rochefort were good friends and that she only ever spoke well of him, so he’s decided it’s entirely Her Majesty’s fault that Rochefort came so close to sitting on his cabinet. And with her being Spanish, and Rochefort working for the Spanish, well…

“The King is paranoid about the Spanish since Rochefort’s betrayal,” Treville says, echoing her own thoughts. “He’s itching to go to war with them. Finding more spies could push him into starting one.”

“Why not let him?” Milady shrugs carelessly as they both look at her, although everything inside her revolts at the thought of war – Athos would almost certainly end up on the front lines. But she wants to know Treville’s reasoning. “If he wants a war, he’ll find one.”

“I thought that, at first,” Treville frowns. He looks like a man struggling with his conscience. It’s a loyal Frenchman’s job to follow the King wherever he leads, after all, even into war. “But we don’t have a Minister for War at present, and once I became First Minister, I took over those duties as well to an extent.”

Meaning, of course, that the military-minded Treville couldn’t resist dedicating some of his time to a more interesting subject than taxes, diplomacy, building projects and the King’s erratic moods.

“It took a few months to put together a picture of our relative resources,” Treville continues. “My reports on Spanish forces are old, of course, since before the Cardinal’s death, but I got one of the clerks to work out reasonable estimates of what they might be now. And General Alaman filled in a lot of the blanks, in terms of equipment and troop positions.”

“They dwarf us, don’t they?” Athos asks bluntly.

“More men, certainly,” Treville says. “And a navy ten times ours. With luck, skill, and good tactics, we might put up a good enough showing to force them into a treaty, but it would take years. We couldn’t win, not really. Thousands would die, the treasury would run dry, and at best they might sign over some unwanted territory in an attempt to placate us.”

They’re walking a fine line avoiding war with the Spanish as it is, Milady knows from her days as
the Cardinal’s most trusted lieutenant – Philip would love an excuse to attack them. He does need an excuse, though, or the rest of Europe will side against him. France has too many allies, and Spain too few. But if France invaded Spain without reasonable cause their allies wouldn’t come to their aid. Rochefort’s actions looked bad, but they never managed to conclusively prove he worked for the Spanish, he was only a guard captain, and while he threatened the King’s life he didn’t do any real or lasting damage. If their only justification for starting a war was an unsupported claim that Spain was spying on France – something all great nations do to each other – none of their allies would help them. They would see it as France breaking all her agreements and treaties with Spain, and therefore feel no obligation to keep to their own treaties with France and provide aid.

She can see why even Treville might hesitate to start a war where their only advantage is the moral high ground.

“I see,” she says, deciding to move the conversation on. “So how do you expect me to find these spies?”

Treville looks at her. “You found the other ones.”

“By following Rochefort,” she points out. It took her several hours of watching the tavern he entered to be sure it was a den of Spanish spies – she can’t investigate every business in Paris, not if she wants to be done while René is still a child. “If you want me to find another spy to follow to his nest, I’ll need some things. Access, information to trade, money for bribes…”

“Whatever you require,” Treville says simply. He must really be desperate. Then he looks at Athos. “And you?”

“Of course. The Musketeers are at your service. You know that.” Athos looks deep in thought. “If the rest are taverns as well, we can pretend it’s a bar fight out of control. Patrons dead, spilled alcohol, the fire spreading from the fireplace… it’s achievable.”

Milady finds her mind is already racing, as well, working out the details. The best place to start is the Louvre, of course – now the Cardinal’s not there to prevent it, there must be a half-dozen spies amongst the servants at least, employed by various other countries. The Queen’s ladies probably also number a couple of spies, as does the King’s circle of friends, but the nobility are more likely to pass their titbits through letters to family and friends in other countries than report to some Parisian information-broker. For really sensitive or incriminating information, though, they might avoid using correspondence, and have to mingle with their lessers.

She knows what to look for – unexplained money, suspicious behaviour, that slightly different flavour of curiosity that distinguishes ‘spy’ from ‘gossip’. She worked for the greatest spymaster France has ever had for over half a decade, after all. There’s not much she doesn’t know about espionage.

“I should get to work,” she says, almost to herself, as they stand to leave. Well, head home and feed René, then get to work – she has priorities. If she also spends half an hour or so rocking him, making faces at him, and cooing at him like a fool before she leaves – well, there’s no one there to see but the nurse, and she won’t tell anyone. Besides, it will give her extra time to work out how much she’s likely to need from Treville.

“Be careful,” Athos says in a low voice, ignoring Treville. Concern is visible in his eyes, but he’s doing his best to sound calm and reasonable. “And send word to me the moment, the moment you think there’s any risk.”

She could get annoyed, point out she doesn’t demand such assurances from him – but she can
recognise that there’s a difference. He has people watching out for him. If he’s in danger, Porthos, Aramis and d’Artagnan will tear France apart to save him, whereas for the most part she works alone. And while he says ‘risk’, she knows he doesn’t mean all risk, since risk is inevitable when hunting for spies – he means as soon as she feels unsafe, and the idea of having someone to call on when she feels unsafe is strangely comforting.

“I will,” she says.

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“You got the Princess to the archbishop without incident?” Athos wants to know.

“No real problems,” Aramis assures him.

Athos stops, sniffing. “So why do you smell like a tavern, then?”

“I gave her some brandy to try and calm her down,” Aramis says. “She threw it at me. You should have seen the look the archbishop gave me when he noticed the smell. But she’s his problem now,” he adds with a faint note of satisfaction.

The archbishop has never been a particularly likable man. While Athos is glad Milady had stopped following Rochefort’s orders by the time he told her to kill the archbishop, the truth is that no one would have mourned him much. Still, he has other questions about this speech – “Calm her down?”

“She’s… emotional,” Aramis says, a little flippantly. “Italians, you know.”

“Aramis.”

Aramis looks at him and sighs. “She had some idea of dramatically and publically refusing the marriage. But we managed to at least get her through the archbishop’s blessing, and hopefully when she speaks to His Majesty they’ll sort it out… one way or another.”

One way, Athos thinks cynically – there is no ‘another’ in this case. France’s chosen bride refusing to marry their Crown Prince would be seen as a personal affront by the Swedish, dooming the treaty immediately. No matter how good this woman is at throwing tantrums, she can’t hope to equal Louis.

He disregards the problem for now, focusing on more important ones. “Where are d’Artagnan and Porthos? I wanted to speak to all of you.”

“D’Artagnan’s still at the archbishop’s place, for the moment. The Princess seems to like him better than anyone else, and she’s paranoid about being attacked, so…”

Paranoid, overemotional, spoilt, and fond of throwing tantrums – oh, good. She really does sound like a female Louis. Still, that’s not Athos’s problem.

“Porthos?”

“He’ll be out in a – right now, actually.” Aramis says, as Porthos emerges from the barracks.

“Then let’s go,” Athos says.

Somewhat bemusedly, they follow him to the tavern – a different one than before – and once installed in chairs and with drinks, Athos summarises the situation.
“Just the four of us, you reckon?” Porthos asks in an undertone. “Hmm.”

“With surprise on our side, we can do it, even if it’s bigger than the last place,” Aramis says confidently. “How long do you think it will take Milady to figure out where they are?”

“Not long, I suspect,” Athos says. It never pays to underestimate his wife. “Be prepared.”

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Athos hums to his young son, rocking him gently, trying to calm him. If only there was some way to calm himself as well. It’s very late – the nurse retreated gratefully to her room to collapse after handing over René, and Athos gave the rest of the servants permission to do the same – but there’s no sign of his wife yet.

She sent word, of course – a message saying she’d be late. No further details. He can’t help but worry anyway.

What he really wants is a drink to calm his nerves, but he’s forcing himself not to have one. He’s backslid a few times from his intention not to overindulge, and he’s found there’s a pattern to it – when he drinks with friends, or shares a bottle with his wife, it takes barely any effort to remain sober. When he drinks alone, especially when he’s upset or worried about something, that’s when the trouble starts. He’s never needed being social as an excuse to binge, after all. Even when he used to drink himself into unconsciousness while out at a tavern with the others, he’d normally find a dark corner separate from his friends before he got stuck into the real drinking, uninterested in socialising and chasing nothing but oblivion. When he’s alone with booze, he drinks and broods and broods and drinks, and then he looks up and the world is spinning, and there’s empty bottles everywhere, and he can barely stand. So now he tries not to ever drink alone. He’s not technically alone right now, but a babe of less than three months probably doesn’t count, so he focuses on his son and tries not to think of the siren call of the cellar below.

René clearly wants his mother, but after a few minutes of his father’s humming, quiets down slightly anyway. He’s getting bigger every day, Athos thinks. The bright green eyes Athos secretly hoped for never eventuated, but he doesn’t have Athos’s blue-grey eyes either, not exactly – his blue eyes have just a bare touch of green to them, thanks to his mother. It’s a lovely colour. Athos sometimes tries to pick out other features on his son’s face and work out who they’re from, comparing ears or nose or mouth with his own and his wife’s, but he can’t quite manage it – René still just looks like a baby. Milady feels the same, he knows. No doubt someday the family resemblance will become more obvious, or at least they’ll become better at spotting it, but for now René just looks like himself to them. That’s not a bad thing.

He doesn’t notice her padding quietly into the room until she rests her chin on his shoulder from behind and wraps her arms around his waist. He leans against her as well, his cheek on the top of her head, and inhales the light scent of jasmine and her. Relief floods him. “How’s the investigation going?”

“Nothing Spanish, so far. I’ve found a set of German spies, but honestly, they’re closer to an embroidery circle than professional informants,” she says. “The English network I found the other day was far more extensive and efficient, even if the silversmith it’s based out of has the tackiest necklaces I’ve ever seen.”

“Do you think Treville will want to clear those out as well?”

“No,” she says with certainty. “He’s risking enough lying to the King about any Spanish spies we find. Besides, paranoia about Germany or England might distract Louis from paranoia about Spain
– better for the King to find out that Spain isn’t the only one spying on him than for us to quietly remove those spies.”

“And I suppose Treville won’t tell him about those to hurry that along,” Athos says. Treville is becoming something of a master at subtly directing the King, after all. “Better if the King finds out about them through the usual routes, eventually. If he realises Treville’s searching for spies…”

“Yes, yes,” she tilts her head up to give him a mock scowl he can just barely see out the corner of his eye. “I already realised that the information I’ve uncovered is basically worthless to Treville, thank you. But at least it proves my methods are working.”

They’re working incredibly well, as a matter of fact. Athos never realised how much time and effort the Cardinal – and on his behalf, Athos’s wife – put into keeping Paris mostly clear of foreign agents. Just like the Cardinal spying on other countries, it was something that Athos had vaguely known was happening, but avoided considering more closely out of a mixture of distaste and disinterest. Espionage, after all, has never been Athos’s specialty.

Now he knows how involved his wife was in those activities, though, they seem far more important, as well as far more dangerous.

She sighs and disengages from him with a light kiss to the hinge of his jaw, moving away so that she can remove her belt and loosen her dress’s tight bodice. He would help, but he has René in his arms. “I have a few more servants spending suspicious amounts to follow. Hopefully one of them works for the Spanish. Someone must, after all.”

“If you need assistance or protection, just ask,” Athos says gruffly. Perhaps they can’t tail spies or identify information drops, but his Musketeers do excel at providing protection. He’d feel a lot better if he set someone – Porthos, perhaps – to keeping an eye on her.

“That’s quite an offer. Given how strongly you disapprove of this kind of work, I mean.” Bodice sufficiently loosened to be pulled down, she takes René from Athos’s unresisting grip and starts to feed him, so used to doing so that the movements are a reflex now.

“I don’t disapprove.” He steers her to the nearby chair so she can sit in comfort and rest her feet, then leans over to kiss her forehead. He sits on the chaise longue nearby and she extends one foot into his lap, silently requesting he help remove her shoes while she nurses René. He does so – he’s powerless to resist anything she asks for while she’s caring for their child, but it’s not exactly an onerous task anyway.

“Athos.” She gives him a level look and shifts René in her grip. “Of course you do. You hate lies, and espionage is an industry built entirely on them.”

For long minutes they’re silent, only the sound of the child’s suckling filling the room. It’s not an uncomfortable silence. Athos is getting his thoughts in order, wanting to explain but not wanting to start an argument or drag up painful memories. She generously allows him time to do so.

“I hate you lying to me,” he clarifies eventually, swallowing hard to force down old pain. He remembers how it destroyed him to learn that everything he knew about his beloved wife was false – she morphed immediately in his mind from the most trustworthy, loving person he knew, to a cruel trick. How could he trust her claim she loved him, when even her name was a lie? How could he believe her past as a thief was behind her and he wasn’t merely a target, when she’d never admitted the truth of that past to him?

It still hurts him, in some ways. Despite how much she loved him back then, she didn’t trust him. It
will always be a sore spot, he thinks. She found it easy to conceal parts of herself from him in the past, and that concealment shattered his trust in her. He can’t help but flinch from the thought of her someday doing that again. He overreacts to anyone lying to him, and probably always will, but with her that particular trigger is even more sensitive.

She’s been remarkably truthful to him for a long time now – giving him information about Richelieu, coming to them about Rochefort’s plans, even telling him about her connection to the slavers in the Forest of Evreux once it became relevant. She’s even been honest on a personal level, opening herself up, sharing her plans, her thoughts, her feelings, her worries. He trusts her – if not completely, then at least enough. But that trust has been hard-won, and the echo of old agony will always be there. He never again wants to experience that terrible wrenching sense of confusion and loss, the vertigo and the feeling of falling forever, that was caused by the realisation he’d been sleeping beside, living with and loving someone who might as well be a complete stranger to him.

He looks away from her piercing gaze and swallows again. “Lie to other people all you like. Keep your secrets with them. But please, with me…” He can’t continue.

She’s silent so long that he has to look back, and when he does, she seems paler. “I don’t ask you to bare all your secrets,” she says, and there’s something defensive about it.

“I don’t have any secrets,” he says automatically, and then realises he does. He recognises the knowing, meaningful look she gives him at the same moment. “Wait. You know?”

She doesn’t reply, just tilts her head forward slightly so she’s not meeting his eyes, a silent admission.

To his own surprise, this causes a jolt of hurt to go through him. “You know. About Aramis and the Queen.”

“I know lots of things,” she says dismissively, shrugging it off. “I know that Porthos and Treville aren’t speaking. That Madame Bonacieux’s decided to leave the draper for your Gascon and he’s taking it poorly. That Doctor Lemay has formed friendships with half the Dauphin’s carers and, strangely, with Aramis. That Princess Louise of Mantua has locked herself in her room at the archbishop’s and is refusing to come out. That the stableboys at the Louvre bet on the number of times -”

He holds up his hands to try and stem the flow of words, which is clearly intended to lead him off course from the actual topic. Of course she knows many things – it’s second nature to her to poke, and prod, and keep her eyes and ears open, and search out rumours, and hide in corners – but this is different. “None of those are treason.”

“It’s hardly the first time I’ve been involved in treason, my love.”

“Why not tell me you knew? Why keep it from me?”

“You kept it from me,” she points out.

“To protect you. Not to go behind your back. How long have you known?”

She stands again, patting René’s back as she gently pulls him away and adjusts her dress again. “Months. I would’ve mentioned it, but you were trying so hard to keep it from spreading beyond you and Aramis. I didn’t want to worry you further.” She slants him a look of apology and heads towards the door. “I need to go put René down for the night. We can continue this in a moment.”

The enforced pause helps him wrest his slight flare of temper back under control. It does worry him
that she’s now implicated in treason yet again, she’s right about that, but his immediate feeling of hurt she wasn’t open with him slowly dissipates as he waits – it’s fairly hypocritical, after all. He can’t get mad at her for not telling him she knew, when he kept the same information from her, and for essentially the same reasons. And she did tell him eventually – she didn’t have to admit she knew.

“No one else knows, do they?” he asks finally, when she returns, tone much softer.

“I don’t think so. When I trawl for rumours for Treville, I keep an ear out for any stories that seem at all related, but so far there’s nothing. The child’s barely mentioned.” She avoids mentioning who the child is, even with her voice barely above a murmur, and comes to sit with him.

“We just have to make sure René’s nurse never sees him,” Athos says dryly, lightening the mood somewhat, and putting his arm around her to hold her close. “That woman is capable of seeing resemblances in everything from a baby’s toes to his eyelashes.”

Milady gives a low, rich laugh that feels like it warms him better than wine would. “Isn’t she? Apparently he has my smile. I told her that if mine contains half that much drool, I’m never smiling again.”

“But he does seem to really smile now, have you noticed that?” Of course, René has been smiling from the start, but now he seems to do it on purpose, in response to things that make him happy, like seeing people he likes. He can laugh now, too – far more easily than either of his parents can. Athos feels absurdly proud of little milestones like that.

“Mmm, yes.” She curls into him, and he leans back so they’re lying together on the chaise longue, stretched out with her half atop him. The fire flickers, catching glints in her dark hair as she rests her head on his chest and traces patterns against his bare skin with lazy fingers. He tightens his arm around her slender waist to keep her flush against him. Everything is warmth, and comfort, and closeness. Relaxation spreads through his veins like a drug.

Conversation continues, relaxed and meandering despite how late it is and how much they both have to do tomorrow. They talk for a while longer about René (“I think his hair has gotten darker, don’t you?”), then change subjects to his men (“he only received his commission because of his father’s influence, and worse, he knows it.”), and from there to the household (“the cook’s finally separated the cellar into two sections: ‘good wine’ and ‘for Musketeers’. ”). His friends, rumours in Paris, plans for the week, illnesses going around, even the weather – each topic gradually changes to another.

It is all light, inconsequential conversation – they share small anecdotes about their days, and discuss little practical details that should be dull, but are somehow wonderful. Small worries, petty grievances and little discomforts, all the things no one can avoid, now fade into being totally inconsequential, melting away in the warmth of this. A dry observation from him makes her snort and press a playful bite into his skin as punishment. A witty remark from her makes him chuckle and curl a fallen lock around his finger to tug her closer. He cannot remember ever laughing in the five years she was gone – he must have, sometimes, it is only that he cannot remember it. He also can’t remember ever being at absolute peace, or overflowing with quiet joy. Once, it would have been impossible to imagine ever feeling like this – now, he gets to experience it nearly every day.

Deep inside, he can feel the raw heat and passion she always engenders, roused by every small movement and silky slide of her body against his as she breathes or shifts, stoked by every gentle stroke of fingers or feathery brush of loose hair against his bare skin. But for the moment he holds it at bay in order to savour a different kind of warmth – after all, it’s not like delaying the moment this changes to something else will make the change any less pleasurable. If anything, the waiting
will only make it more so. The doors are shut. The fire is warm. The chaise longue is comfortable. His wife looks more beautiful than he has words to express.

Eventually, she makes a sly comment about exhaustion, her fingers sliding lower and dragging his shirt with them. He catches his breath, quiet contentment completely forgotten as the uncontrollable fire always lingering just beneath surges to the surface, and he rises up to kiss her, burying his hands in her hair. She responds immediately, the way she always does, as eager for him as he is for her.

They’ve been married almost eight years, bound as tightly as any two people can be, but every day it seems like they grow closer still.

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Two years ago, Milady de Winter would have thought nothing about sashaying into the smithy she’s looking at. The smith would have looked up at her entry, and she would have given him an innocent but nervous smile, glancing around her like a frightened fawn in order to note every apprentice’s location and readiness to fight. She would have leant over the plank of wood functioning as a counter, pretending to be lost in the terrifying bustle of Paris, and the men would have gathered eagerly around her to give directions or offer their services as personal guide. Once she had them right where she wanted them, close by and overconfident, she would have drawled that she was surprised – that she expected them to know their way around Madrid better than Paris. They would have panicked. Faces would have paled. Hands would have scrabbled for weapons.

All of the supposed workers, apprentices and patrons would be dead in seconds, and her knife would be against the smith’s throat. *Names*, she would have said, *every name you can think of, and I’ll know if you lie.* And after she got everything she wanted out of him, after he begged for his life, she would have slit his throat and swept out, leaving a building full of corpses behind her.

Of course, that was two years ago, and she is not being paid to kill them.

Still, without that panicked reaction, how is she to be sure whether this is a centre for Spanish spies? If they are, they seem to be more cautious than the lot she found last year – understandably so, perhaps. She’s already ‘accidentally’ bumped into two men heading for the door, but picking their pockets produced nothing but a total of eight sou. Perhaps the informants have been instructed to give their reports verbally right now, even the ones who can write. Presumably the low-level organiser pretending to be a smith writes them down, most likely in code, and locks them somewhere secure immediately. She also hasn’t seen him give money to the people providing reports. Picking the pockets of a man leaving got her nothing but the candied fruit the smith leaves out as snacks. She wondered if he was giving products he’d smithed to pay them in a more subtle way, but while that sort of business model would work for somewhere like the silversmith the English use, it would be ineffective here. Silver and gold is easy to sell on, after all, whether in jewellery form or not, and it has a base worth, but it’s not so easy to sell on pokers or horseshoes. Especially ones this poorly made.

How would she do this if she were running it? Well, to begin with, if she ran a spy-ring in a foreign country it would be a brothel, not a smithy; the ‘informants’ would never even realise they were giving away secrets to the ladies they met with, let alone be paid for it; and all the women would have easily been able to explain their wealth as gifts from drunk customers. So the question doesn’t help much. Perhaps one of these apprentices goes around Paris in the dark, dropping coin-purses by the doors of the informants. No, that would be too risky, surely – by himself, he’d be killed by cutpurses sooner or later, and with a group of guards he’d be spotted.

So: she has no proof that this smithy is a Spanish spy-ring. No one has given the man a written
report. No one’s received money from him. Men go in, and gossip with the smithy, and don’t buy anything, and come back out again. That’s it. But every instinct she has screams at her that this is the place.

She could pretend to be a new informant, perhaps, hired by the man she followed here from the Louvre, and find out the truth like that. But she’s only seen men enter so far. She could fall back on the plan she would have followed two years ago, but that’s risky, and no one knows where she is right now – if it went sideways, she’d just disappear, leaving her husband with nowhere to start searching.

It’s time to call on Athos, she decides.

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“D’Artagnan,” Athos says through gritted teeth, trying to keep his voice level. “The archbishop tells me you’ve been encouraging Princess Louise to go against her duty? His exact words were ‘unholy influence’, from memory.” This is the last thing he needs right now.

“No… exactly,” d’Artagnan objects. “All I did was tell her we choose our own path through life.”

True to an extent, if you’re the son of a farmer from Gascony; true if you’re a son of nobility like Athos, or country gentry like Aramis, or even if you’re a skilled fighter from the gutter like Porthos. Partially true for some women, like Milady or Constance, who can take risks but who have much greater consequences if those risks don’t pan out. Not at all true if you’re a Princess. Much like the Queen, Princess Louise won’t get to make her own choice of who to marry, what to do, or where to go. Frankly, she’ll be lucky if she gets to choose what to wear or who to talk to. A life of enormous privilege and comfort, but very little self-determination. Unless, of course, her husband allows her to take on a role in his rule of Sweden, or if he is slow or sickly or dies young after giving her a son, in which case she’ll have an enormous amount of power over many people – but still not over her own life, not really.

“Why did you tell her a foolish thing like that?” Athos asks, staring down at the letter on his desk. The archbishop is displeased, and he’s making it clear that displeasure will be aired in full to His Majesty. If this treaty falls through, the Musketeers might get the blame.

“Because she’s right,” d’Artagnan says fiercely. “It’s not fair. She’s being sold off to a man she doesn’t even know. What if he mistreats her? Hurts her?”

Athos looks at d’Artagnan, suddenly concerned. There seems to be more heat in that response than there should be. His young friend is almost vibrating with barely restrained fury, and it’s not at Athos. “What’s going on?”

“Constance came to see me, and the Princess overheard…” d’Artagnan hesitates. “Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Clearly not, if it’s why France’s treaty with Sweden is going to fail,” Athos says sharply.

Porthos shows up at the door. “Milady’s downstairs,” he reports.

Athos hesitates, then says to d’Artagnan, “We’ll continue this later.” He follows Porthos, and says in an undertone, “Do you know what that’s all about?”

“Nah, but if I had to guess, I’d say it has something to do with the very visible bruise on Madame Bonacieux’s cheek. Rumour has it her husband has commanded her return home.”
Legally, women can’t leave their husbands, and the husband has every right under the law to physically drag the wife home – he can even hire men to help him with that task if he wants. The wife leaving her husband for another man is even worse, legally and religiously justifying an extreme response (unless the man she’s with is someone too powerful to stand up to, like an influential lord or royalty, in which case the cuckold usually swallows their rage and is rewarded with money or land for their forbearance). After all, the wife leaving doesn’t just deprive the man of her presence – it forces him to break vows made before God to live as man and wife, makes it impossible for him to have legitimate children, and emasculates him before friends, family, and neighbours as a man who can’t control his wife. The church and the law agree – the man must be master in his own home. So Bonacieux isn’t committing a crime.

Nevertheless, Athos feels sudden anger pulse through him – Constance is probably the closest thing he has to a friend outside of the other Inseparables and Treville, and he will always feel slightly protective of her. Athos can understand grief at your wife leaving you (the thought of Anne departing again destroys him), or rage and jealousy at her infidelity (the knowledge of Anne’s past affairs burns him even now), but he would never dream of trying to force his wife to be with him if she didn’t want to. And forcing her physically…

If d’Artagnan’s choking on suppressed rage, then Constance has probably banned him from delivering any kind of retribution to her husband, but Athos isn’t bound by any such promises.

“Perhaps one of us should stop by his shop sometime,” Athos says. “Remind him that Her Majesty isn’t likely to appreciate her closest friend and confidante being abused, and that d’Artagnan has many influential and well-armed friends.” An abuse of power? Perhaps. He can live with it.

“I could take Aramis and do it,” Porthos says, giving him a wolfish smile. “I’m told we’re persuasive.”

Athos nods, then is immediately distracted by the sight of his wife, who’s dressed like one of the respectable but not well-off women who live in this area – subdued dress in a sturdy material, practical hairstyle, a choker that’s really just a ribbon. She’s leaning against the side of the big arch that dominates the entrance to the Garrison, shading her face against the sun, and as she hears his approach she turns.

“I think I’ve found what we’re looking for,” she says, without preamble. “But I could use your help to prove it.”

“Whatever you wish,” Athos replies.

“My favourite response,” she says with a smirk.
Porthos looks exhausted, slumping down on the bench and accepting the mug Aramis hands to him. “Nothing interesting,” he reports.

Athos sighs. None of them came up with much, but a day and night of one of them trailing every single person who stopped by the smithy and seeing where else they went has at least given them a list of spies for Treville. Assuming, of course, they are spies, instead of just honest customers at an honest blacksmiths.

“Tell me everywhere he stopped,” Milady says anyway, and notes down every location. “Hmm.”

“How?” d’Artagnan, who was face down on the table, perks up somewhat now. “You have something?”

“Yes. Three of them stopped at a money-lender.” Milady smiles a grim little smile. “The same one, moreover. What are the odds of that?”

“Very low,” Athos says slowly.

“That’s how they’re paying them.” Porthos puts the mug down with a satisfied clink, having figured it out. “Go to a money-lender, come out with money. Who’d question it? And if the money-lender never chases after the debt, well, they must’ve paid it back. Who’s going to investigate a money-lender for not terrorising his customers?”

“The lender must do legitimate business as well, to cover it up,” Milady says slowly. “There must be some sign or code word if it’s an informant instead.” She looks thoughtful, then pulls up her little purse, rummages through it, then hands something to Porthos. “For you.”

He looks suspicious, as well he might. “Candied fruit?” Under their gaze, though, he sighs and tries a piece of it, then spits it out instantly, choking slightly. “Not just candied fruit. Got a bit of metal in it.” A bit of metal that, when they examine it closely, proves to have an unidentifiable but difficult to copy stamp on it. A smith could very easily make it.

“So they go into the back with the money-lender, supposedly to sign things, and instead hand over those little metal bits in return for money,” d’Artagnan summarises. “That works. Why have two locations, though? Double the risk, and no benefit to it I can see.”

“Money-lenders are checked by the guards regularly,” Milady informs him. Most of them are prone to extortion and abuse, after all, so it’s something of a necessity. “Keeping coded information on the premises would be risky. But who would investigate the candied fruit a smith gives his customers when they stop to chat? Or a few scrap bits of metal in a money-lender’s bin?”

Porthos looks at Milady, gaze shrewd and considering. “Took you less than a week to find most of the spies in Paris. That’s… impressive. Good at finding things out, aren’t you?”

“Such flattery. You’ll make me blush.”

“We’ll need to take out both of the businesses they’re using as a cover, then,” Athos says. “The same night, preferably. A fire in a smithy is easy enough to explain. With the money-lender… it’s not unknown for them to disappear overnight, or be attacked by debtors who don’t wish to pay. No one will blink at it.”
“Tonight,” Aramis agrees. “We can do it. Will you be joining us, Milady?”

“Of course,” she says. “But if we’re not acting until nightfall, I think I’ll take the opportunity to get some sleep.”

Athos offers to escort her home, although he probably can’t afford to get any sleep himself – his men need direction from their captain, there’s the situation with the Princess to sort out, and he needs to try and calm the archbishop. But even a short walk with his wife is pleasant.

This mission does disturb him, though. The Musketeers have sought justice outside the law before, of course. They’ve done things without the knowledge or approval of His Majesty on many occasions, sometimes by Treville’s orders, sometimes not. Athos’s wife and one of his closest friends have both committed treason, and he’s done everything he can to see they avoid punishment for it. They have never treated the law as some guiding light in the sky.

But this is different. It feels sneaky, scummy, dishonourable. They’ll be killing men in the dark of night and covering up why they died.

And it might not even end there. The Musketeers will probably need to interrogate the fake smith and find whatever names and locations of informants they can, in addition to the ones they’ve already found. Someone will need to arrest, kill, or at least speak to those men, depending on how complicit they were in providing information to Spain. Only a handful of the people involved will actually be Spanish agents, of course – the people who work at the smithy and money-lenders would have to be, but probably no one else. Everyone else will be local informants they recruited. Some of those informants would not know or care where the information they provided was going, others would have knowingly sold their allegiance to Spain and been trained by the ringleaders, and others still will be the victims of blackmail or threats instead of bribery.

It will take weeks, perhaps even months, of quiet investigations, abductions, interrogations, and threats in dark rooms to sort out. It’s one thing to kill a few Spanish spies and the businesses they use as a cover in a precision strike, quite another to check out every informant they paid and systematically murder any who are loyal to Spain. It’s not what Musketeers do. It’s dark, dirty and underhanded, and crosses lines Athos isn’t comfortable with.

Of course, perhaps Treville has no intention of asking the Musketeers to be involved in this past the initial attack – perhaps he plans to ask Anne. Athos isn’t sure he likes that either. She could do it easily, he has no doubt, but she told him she wanted a life without lying and without killing. Obviously, she still does do these things, but there is a distinction – even the Musketeers lie sometimes when it’s for the greater good, and kill in self defence or to defend others, and that’s what Milady’s been doing lately too. Slitting men’s throats in little rooms seems like a step backwards, even if it’s at Treville’s order.

Then again, Treville is an honourable man. Athos believes that absolutely, even if this particular mission leaves a sour taste on his tongue. Treville is no murderer. Perhaps their former captain doesn’t plan to have anyone killed but the actual agents of Spain, who undeniably have this coming. Perhaps he plans to simply arrest anyone else involved. But then, even if Treville comes up with false charges and arrests the men instead of killing them, it would still involve constant lying and deceit.

It’s all so disgustingly dishonest. He is almost sure that the Treville of six months ago would not have asked this of them.

“Poor Athos,” Milady murmurs provocatively after a while, apparently well able to read his silence. “Too honourable by half.”
“I don’t like dishonesty, that’s all,” he says, although he knows it’s hypocritical of him – he’s as capable of being dishonest as anyone, if it’s for the right reasons, and as he told her himself, he can survive her dishonesty as well if it’s not directed his way. Still, he tries to explain. “If we’re not willing to admit what we’re doing, maybe we’re doing the wrong thing. People in the right don’t usually need to hide it.”

After all, that’s one reason why he hid what he’d done to her for so long, because he’d known it was an unforgiveable crime, whatever he pretended. If he’d truly thought her execution was justifiable and deserved, he would’ve still felt as heartbroken and destroyed by grief and regret, but he at least might have been able to be honest about it. Obviously, deceit isn’t an infallible sign of wrongdoing, but it’s not a good sign either.

She goes silent, at that, and when he looks over he sees she’s biting her lip. She looks anxious, and a little drawn.

“What’s the matter?” he asks, cutting through the knot instead of driving himself mad trying to figure it out. There’s no point considering and discarding an endless series of possibilities when he could just ask her. They stop walking, and she turns to face him.

“The other day, when you asked me not to keep secrets… there may have been one I, ah, neglected to mention. In my defence, we moved to other subjects so quickly…”

Her cautious tone sends up warning signals. “What?” He asks brusquely. She draws in a breath, then stops. After a long moment filled only with her palpable uncertainty, he orders, “Anne. Tell me.”

Turning it into a command may have been a mistake, he realises a second later as she stiffens. This time she doesn’t bother to lead slowly and tactfully into her admission, doesn’t try to soften the blow or reassure him – she seems stung by his curtness, and quite prepared to respond in kind.

“The King kissed me.”

Athos stares at her, a positive storm of emotions barely held in check, face twisting into a furious scowl as the words process. “He did what?”

“You heard. It was after we rescued him at the fort. He just grabbed me, and -”

“And it didn’t occur to you to stop him?” He articulates every word carefully, barely hanging onto his temper.

“I did stop him,” she says, a little defensively. “I stopped him before it went further than that.”

“You shouldn’t have let him touch you in the first place! You should have made it clear that -”

“How, exactly? Should I have slapped the King of France?” She pulls back to confront him, hand on her hip. “How well do you think that would’ve ended?”

He feels jealousy rise in him like bile. She’s so casual about it – and it’s only a kiss, perhaps he shouldn’t be this bothered, but something about the ease with which she justifies herself galls him. He can too easily imagine her justifying herself in the same way, if it had gone further – he’s the King, Athos, how could I say no? And what if it did go further? How can he trust that she would tell him that?

“I have only your word for it you stopped him at all,” he says, and his tone is ugly now.
She stares at him. “And my word is, of course, meaningless to you. You’d rather think that I committed adultery -”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” he says viciously. “I read your account of your time with the Cardinal, remember, and it wasn’t difficult to read between the lines. Not to mention everything with d’Artagnan. I know what your preferred tactics are.”

She shies back from him, her face paling and tightening at the hit. “Then you also know that I had a good reason for every one of these supposed infidelities.”

“Then that’s the difference between us. I don’t consider any reason good enough.”

“Really?” she asks, and now her voice is silky and dangerous. “Have you forgotten the first time I betrayed our marriage vows, Athos? Was my life not a good enough reason? It’s wonderful to know that my husband would rather me dead than unfaithful.”

He wouldn’t. Anything is better than the thought of her dead. But he’s too angry to admit that, too angry to be reasonable right now. “I would rather you not throw yourself at my King, or at any other man.”

“What exactly is it you think I should have done? He surprised me.”

“You should’ve told him you’re not his to kiss,” Athos spits the words.

“Oh, my mistake. I must have forgotten to present your deed of ownership.”

_Doesn’t_ she think she’s his? He knows he belongs to her. He’s stalking forward before he can stop himself, and she backs away as he does, until she’s pinned between him and a building. “Don’t go near him again,” he orders.

Another command, and she looks like an angry cat at this one, ready to spit and hiss and scratch his eyes out. Instead, she angles her head and glares up at him. “Because if I do, I’ll swoon into his arms? Do you know how ridiculous you sound?”

He is often ridiculous when it comes to her. It may as well be jealousy making him so.

He’s seen the amused disdain on her face in the past when he tells her stories about the King. He knows she barely respects the man, let alone has feelings for him. But he also knows emotions rarely govern her choices when it comes to who she shares her bed with – look at d’Artagnan, Mendoza, LeMaitre, the many other men he knows she seduced to gain some advantage or succeed in some scheme. It’s about what they can give her. It’s about power or money.

And in the whole of France, no one has more power or money than the King.

“You’ll stay away from him, or you won’t like the consequences,” he threatens, voice low, and when she opens her mouth to spit some other insult at him, he stops it with his own.

It is all fire and fury, her trapped between him and the wall, his grip rough and uncompromising, both unwilling to pull back or slow down, both scrambling to get close as they can. She drives her nails into his back, twists at his hair, bites his lip bloody: but he gives back as good as he gets, leaving bruises on her hips and arms and neck, rasping her back against the wall as he presses into her. When he sinks his teeth into her neck, just below her choker, she gasps and forces him even closer although they’re already body to body, fingers pulling his hair so hard that he swears breathlessly against her skin.
“Oi! Take yourselves elsewhere! This is a respectable street!”

Athos pulls back, breathing hard, and then Milady yanks him in against the wall with her again just as a full bucket’s-worth of water strikes the ground where he just was, causing mud to splatter on his breeches and the hem of her dress. He looks up to see a scowling fishwife glaring at them from a window directly above. She holds out the bucket threateningly, clearly willing to go fetch more.

He stares for a long, agonised moment at his wife, a moment that could go in many directions – a return to the vicious kiss, a continuation of the argument, even shared amusement at having water thrown at them like stray dogs. None of these happen. They glare in angry silence, and then he shoves away from the wall, and strides off towards the Garrison.

At the last moment, before turning the corner, he glances back in spite of himself. His wife is nowhere to be seen.

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Princess Louise looks exactly like her painting, except for one minor detail – portraits do not usually depict the subject in floods of tears, for obvious reasons. If there’s any positives about the month-long period where it seemed his son would never stop crying, though, it’s that the noise of wailing barely bothers Athos now. It seems almost like background noise.

Aramis, on the other hand, looks harried. Still, he draws Athos to the side of the room, leaving Louise alone. “Don’t worry. We’ve worked it out. She’s just… getting it out of her system. We can head to the ceremony soon.”

“Like this?” Athos waves a hand at the prostrate woman, still in the grips of a tantrum more fit for a five year old.

“I’ll probably give her a few more minutes,” Aramis says. “The important thing is that it’s dealt with.”

Normally, it would feel rude to talk about anyone this way in their presence, especially a princess, but Louise is so clearly entirely absorbed in her own misery that it feels useless to address any comments to her. Her crying is almost hysterical – he half-wonders if they should be throwing water in her face or slapping her, to jolt her out of it. “Dealt with? How?”

“I… laid out her options.” Aramis doesn’t look proud of this. “The facts of the matter. That if she refuses to marry, it will be seen as an insult by Sweden. To avoid it seeming like a worse insult, His Majesty would never let her marry elsewhere. She’d be placed in a convent. I told her those were her options – marriage to the Crown Prince, or life as a nun.”

“And that worked?” Surely he can’t be the first person to explain this to her.

“She said it wasn’t fair,” Aramis says, lowering his voice and looking miserable but resolute. “And I told her… well, sometimes the world is like that. Sometimes there isn’t an option that makes us happy, and all we can do is pick the best one for the people we care about.”

“Aramis…”

“I told her that sometimes we don’t get what we want, no matter how badly we want it. And we can behave like children, and refuse to admit that, or get up and face it and keep going.”

Athos isn’t good at comforting people. He tries anyway, reaching out to grasp Aramis’s shoulder, and his friend looks grateful for the attempt.
“She chose the Crown Prince… she decided that was better than being locked in a convent, that maybe it was worth the risk.” Aramis shrugs. “Marriage is always a gamble, after all, whether it’s by choice or by arrangement. I just hope she does better than most of the people we know.”

Athos realises, with surprise, that he doesn’t know any marriages that are happy. Except his own, of course, and that’s the strangest thing of all – that even now, as furious as he is with her, there is nothing he wants more than to be holding her tightly in his arms. They might yell at each other, and get angry, and push each other against walls, but that changes nothing – he is hers, and she is his, always and forever. He’s not sure it could ever make sense to anyone besides them – he’s not sure if it even makes sense to them, half the time – but if marriage is a gamble, then it’s one he unexpectedly won. They broke nearly every vow, but remade them on their own terms.

He just wishes he could be sure she planned to keep all of them, even those she seems to view as unimportant. Back when they were the Comte and Comtesse de la Fere, he thought they lived almost wildly, free from the trappings and trammels normal people bound themselves with – running through the fields, laughing and playing together, showing their affection so much more openly than was proper. He could almost laugh at that now. Beneath all their playful ways, the marriage was actually very conservative – a wife who ran the house and gave way to her husband’s decisions, a husband who managed land and tenants, a plan to have and raise children according to accepted customs amongst the nobility, and fidelity an absolute guarantee. The only thing unusual was that the husband was faithful as well, which is somewhat uncommon among the nobility.

Now, of course, there is nothing conservative about them. A wife who’s independently wealthy, works as a spy, and may be legally dead. A husband who’s abandoned his title, makes his living as a common soldier, and knows how to clean, burp and rock his child to sleep. When you add in treason, dramatic rescues, attempted murder, kidnappings, and all the other colourful details of their day-to-day lives, they don’t much resemble the people they used to. They don’t much resemble anyone else at all. So they have to make their own path, their own rules and plans and way of life, their own version of marriage, essentially; and they have to decide that every day, together. And that’s good, it is, since every shared choice brings them closer and makes them stronger.

There are some things he misses about having that clear, logical, ordered existence, though. Now that everything is a discussion and a compromise, lines that once seemed like impenetrable walls of stone now seem as hazy and nebulous as the concept of duty has become. Once, he would have stated with absolute certainty that his wife would never be with another man. Now, he knows that there are rewards she considers worth crossing that line for, and so he fears her crossing it again. Does she see fidelity as just another relic of their past relationship, something she’s long since discarded as unimportant to her?

Did she kiss the King because of the advantages it would get her? Does she plan to do more? She was so casual about it, so uncaring, he thinks with a pang of pain. When she acts like infidelity is a small, unimportant matter, how can he trust her not to betray him again? And truly, if his feelings on the matter are that irrelevant to her, how can he not feel wounded by that?

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When she turns up where they planned to meet, the other Musketeers greet her in their usual cheerful way, even d’Artagnan giving her a nod – they’re getting on much better these days. Athos, on the other hand, seems dourer than ever, barely able to speak to her.

She even thinks she sees temper flash in his eyes at d’Artagnan’s greeting, and recalls his earlier reference. Once upon a time, his uncontrollable jealousy and hurt at her and d’Artagnan’s
relationship filled her with malicious glee, she remembers. Now, things are very different. How can it still bother him?

She has never been the Virgin Mary, but in some ways, she’s been very faithful to her husband – far more faithful than most women would be after the man in question had them hanged. She’s never allowed another person into her soul. Her heart has remained untouched by anyone but him. Her thoughts have never revolved around other men – even when she’s with them, most of her mind has been with her husband. But of course, she has been with other men, and it seems he is not as fine with that as he pretended.

Seduction was a necessary part of her work for the Cardinal, but she cannot deny that spite was driving her as much as pragmatism. After all, when they were first married, it never crossed her mind to be unfaithful – to the point that she killed Thomas rather than give in to him. Now that they’ve reconciled, the idea is equally outlandish. It was only when she hated him that it seemed acceptable. Not because she sees adultery as horrifying or unforgiveable – in the world she grew up in, ‘fidelity’ was as arcane and irrelevant a consideration as ‘duty’ or ‘honour’ – but because she understood that he did see it that way, and apart from during those awful six years, the last thing she wanted was to hurt him. If her being with another tore him apart the way it tore her apart to imagine him loving another – well, then it was almost worse than stabbing him or shooting him, in terms of pain, and therefore only reasonable when their relationship was at a point where those were also reasonable.

But that’s the whole point, really. Given they were willing to kill each other at the time, she didn’t think of her actions during those years of hatred as infidelity. She’s a bit surprised to find that he does. He hasn’t mentioned it before, not really. She supposes she thought that he’d offered unspoken amnesty for things done during those years, while she was destroyed with rage and pain, just as she’s offered unspoken amnesty for his actions against her. Not forgotten, but forgiven. It seems she was incorrect, and it seems that the trust she thought they were rebuilding is still as fragile as it ever was, at least in this one way.

“Milady?”

Aramis is looking at her, eyebrow cocked. It seems he asked her a question.

“Sorry, I was blocking out your incessant blathering,” she says snidely. “What did you say?”

He smiles, entirely un-withered by her attempt at withering contempt. All the Musketeers take her insults in stride, these days. They seem to have decided they’re just an expression of her sarcastic and snappish personality, instead of actual attempts to demean or offend them, and basically view her comments in the same light as the playful, bantering insults they lob at each other on occasion. She doesn’t know if she appreciates that or not.

“I asked if you thought we should go in through the front or back.”

“Front,” she says, forcing her mind to stay on target. “This time of night, if anyone was coming to see them, they’d use the back, so they’ll have someone watching it. And it’s too narrow – if there’s a man with a weapon there he could take us out one by one as we enter, create a choke-point.” The front door is much sturdier, but also much wider, since it goes to the shop instead of the apartments above.

In the end, she and Porthos are the ones to head forwards first – two former thieves. She picks the big locks, and he slides her thinnest dagger through the small space between the two doors to flip up the inside latches. That still leaves a deadbolt, but only one, and a few juddering slams of his body against it proves enough to force it open. They both yank the doors wide and draw their guns,
giving cover for the others as they move in first. Aramis is watching from a balcony that gives him a sightline to both doors, ready to snipe anyone who tries to escape out the back or who seems like they’re about to surprise them.

It proves to be a very quick, if busy, fight. Only one person is awake – on watch, presumably – and they take him down in moments. The others wake at the noise, though, and pile down the stairs to attack too. They die just as easily.

Any qualms Athos had about killing the men is quieted when the smith appears from an unexpected direction and presses his gun deliberately against Milady’s head, despite the many men he could be fighting instead, and says he’s leaving here with her and they better not follow. He gets slightly too graphic in his description of how he’ll treat her, should they try and pursue him, and by the time Milady rolls her eyes and twists out of his grip, it’s only d’Artagnan pushing Athos’s arm up that stops the pretend smith from taking a bullet to the head.

Instead, Porthos tackles the man, and then Milady questions him. She gets all the answers she wants in short order, and then he dies, and they move on.

The whole thing takes perhaps five minutes. A few worried neighbours are starting to light lanterns and come investigate, but they evade them easily, and leave an untended forge fire as the ‘accidental’ cause of the house burning. The shops are good quality, made of stone, and not so close together that others should catch, but the inside of the smithy has a lot of wood and it’s blazing impressively before they’re more than a few streets away. Tomorrow, the Musketeers will investigate, and conclude that some apprentice had carelessly left a log of wood half out of the fire, and all the noises were caused by the commotion as people tried and failed to get out.

The money-lenders is, if anything, even quicker.

They’re done by midnight. The others need to go back to the Garrison like good little boys, but Milady doesn’t have anyone who’d question her movements, so she can go speak to Treville. Athos could come too, of course, since he doesn’t live at the Garrison; but he doesn’t offer, and she doesn’t ask.

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“So many names and addresses,” Treville says, a bit hollowly, staring down at the piece of paper. “People in the Louvre, the noble houses, the streets of Paris, even the church.”

“Most are nothing but fools earning an extra livre a month by spilling their guts about rumours they’ve heard,” Milady points out. The Spanish are rich, and can afford to buy as many fools as they want. The only thing holding them back is the risk. “Still, we can question them and make sure -”

“No. We won’t be interrogating them.” Treville looks at her, having reached a decision. “I want you to keep an eye on the informants, make sure they don’t contact Spain. We’ll only intercede if they do. I don’t care about little fish, only big ones.”

“I can’t watch dozens of men alone,” she says matter-of-factly. “In fact, I can’t even watch one. Trailing men means keeping the hours they keep, barely sleeping, darting through the streets after them night and day, subtly questioning the people they speak to. A few days of that was fine, to help you find spy-cells, but weeks of it? No. I have a household, a husband, and a son.”

Once upon a time, that was the exact life she led. She worked almost every hour she was awake, and slept little. When she wasn’t pursuing a specific mission, she spent her time searching out
useful rumours and intelligence, hiring more agents to the Cardinal’s service, or checking on the
agents they already had and ensuring they were still reliable – but the truth is, those occasions were
rare, and something close to a holiday for her. Normally, she was always out on assignment, not
just in Paris but in the surrounding areas, in other cities, even in England sometimes. It was a
demanding, exhausting and stressful life, with no time or energy for personal attachments – not that
she wanted any, back then. She was very good at it, and found it easy to keep up a calm and
purposeful demeanour as she carried out her tasks, an air of effortless success, but that doesn’t
mean the life didn’t wear on her eventually.

For a second, Treville looks like he’s about to scold her, give her a harsh speech about her duty to
France. Then he pauses, shakes his head, and sighs. “You’re right. Would you know where to hire
trustworthy men we could set on the possible spies, then? As First Minister, I’m provided enough
discretionary funds to pay them well.”

“Trustworthy men?” she raises an eyebrow. “For this line of work? No. The best I can do is
somewhat dependable. But I do know people.”

“If I gave you access to my funds, could you hire them on my behalf and manage them while they
carry this out?”

After a moment, she nods. It is, essentially, what she did for the Cardinal, but with the pivotal
difference of not having her own time-consuming and difficult schemes to carry out on top of
managing other agents and contacts. A comparatively easy workload, really, although having secret
meetings with an endless parade of shady men every week may somewhat damage her façade of
respectability if anyone ever discovers it. Still, she has faith in her ability to remain hidden.

“Access to your funds?” she says, despite liking the idea, because if she wasn’t difficult she
wouldn’t be Milady de Winter. “That’s trusting of you.”

He gives a faint smile. “I think I know where to find you, if you steal from me.”

She admits to herself that he’s right – she’s not going anywhere. No amount of money would be
worth having to flee Paris, not when it means leaving Athos. Perhaps if he were willing to leave
with her – but no. That will never happen, so Treville is right. Still, she doesn’t like the slightly
condescending amusement she sees in his confidence. She almost wants to hit back with some kind
of proof he doesn’t understand her or her motives as completely as he thinks...

…but no. Better to fire back in kind, demonstrating that however well he thinks he can read her, she
can read him twice as well.

“It’s a dangerous road you’re walking, you know. Once you’ve got spies out on the streets – and
make no mistake, these men you’re hiring will be spies – you’ll find it hard to let go of the
advantage they give you,” she says musingly. “At first, it’s only keeping track of potential Spanish
spies, and responding to their machinations. Then it’s all foreign spies, because really, aren’t they
all threats?”

He tenses slightly, and she knows she’s right. When she mentioned in passing that she’d found
spies from England and Germany (testing to see if there was any profit in those discoveries), he’d
looked thoughtful. He might not want to remove them like the Spanish, but he’d certainly be
interested in keeping an eye on them. He’s been considering it.

“Then, you start to worry about the nobles of Paris, who are so fond of plotting. And the people –
well, it’s always good to keep an ear out for conspiracies and rebels.” She smirks. “You already
have me do it, after all, don’t you? So you hire people to watch everyone, to ferret out secrets and
spies and schemes, a whole network of men and even women, growing every day. And then when issues come up, you prevent them – you remove threats before anyone else ever hears of them. You finesse, for the good of France."

“Stop,” he says, a little roughly, standing up and pushing his chair back. “I know what you’re saying. I know who you’re describing, as well. I’m not the Cardinal.”

“No,” she says, seeing the revulsion in his eyes warring with resignation. He knows where he’s headed as well, little as he likes to admit it. And he always shared a few qualities with Richelieu, didn’t he? They were never as different as they pretended to be. “Not yet. Maybe you’ll never be exactly like him, but you’re getting closer. Not everything the Cardinal did was bad, you know. You could do worse than be the kind of First Minister he was.”

And, she supposes, she could do worse than be Treville’s assistant in that endeavour – she’s good at choosing the right men for jobs, at keeping on top of mounds of information, at knowing how to thrust a spoke in the wheel of others’ schemes. She doubts Treville would ever ask as much of her as Richelieu did. She could probably even hire assistants if the work got too time-consuming, something she’d never dared to do with Richelieu – it would have made her too expendable if other people knew her methods and her contacts.

She could spend her days advising Treville, acquiring and managing French spies, discovering and ordering the removal of foreign spies, organising and responding to information, and only doing the occasional piece of hands-on work herself to keep her skills sharp. She would like it, work that uses her skills at spying and plotting, but doesn’t involve cold-blooded murder or seduction. She examines the idea, and decides it’s viable – although it will probably take Treville a while to get to that point, as inevitable as it seems to her. Well, she can wait. It will give her more time with her son and husband. For now, managing a dozen or so people as they track down any remaining Spanish spies is enough work to keep her from the fear that being uninformed brings her.

Athos would like it too – well, not the work itself, but the relative lack of risk, and that she’d be working for someone he respects and trusts as much as Treville.

At the thought of Athos, though, some of her good mood drains away. She needs to go home and speak to him. She doubts it will go well.

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He can’t stop himself from getting a bottle of wine from the cellar, tonight. René is still sleeping and the servants have all gone to bed, so he has the place to himself. He doesn’t even bother with a cup. The first few sips relax him somewhat, but by the time he’s halfway down the bottle, he thinks he feels worse.

The wine seems to poison him with paranoid thoughts, like what if she’s not coming back. He knows it to be foolish, knows she wouldn’t leave René, wouldn’t leave him either, is certain of it in his heart… but that worm of doubt remains, eating its way through his mind. What if? It’s the worst fight they’ve had since she returned. There is a deep, dark part of him that expects every fight, every setback, every moment of doubt to ruin everything, to break them apart and tear them into pieces until they can never be reformed. When he’s sober, he knows that fear is nothing more than an echo from the past. But a few drinks down, he’s like a badly-shot soldier, flinching from every noise as if it’s a musket going off, unable to make scarred body and mind comprehend that not every sound heralds pain and death. He can’t remember that not every conflict means an ending, means a loss. He is hers, and she is his, forever and always; but that hasn’t always been enough to keep them together in the past, and he’s taken too many blows to weather another.
Perhaps he should have gone with her to see Treville. Perhaps he should not have yelled at her earlier – but he knows he couldn’t have stopped himself. She stabbed at an open wound, however inadvertently.

When she enters, his whole body floods with relief, and then with resentment at both himself and her for the unreasoning, stupid fear he felt that she wouldn’t come back. He almost feels as if she deliberately made him wait, made him worry, although he knows that’s probably not the case. He scowls at her, and takes another swig of his drink.

Her eyes dart to the wine, judging how far through it he is, and then to the floor around him in case there are empty ones. “I see you’re enjoying yourself,” she drawls, looking a little relieved that he’s still on his first.

“We need to talk,” he says.

She sighs. Judging by the dark shadows under her eyes, visible now they’re in a well-lit room, she didn’t get the sleep she was planning to earlier. Whether that was because René needed her, or because she was as upset by the argument as he was, he has no way of knowing. He feels some of his anger depart at the sight of it, though, at her clear stress and exhaustion. He remembers he’s not the only one at risk of getting hurt here – she armours herself so well that sometimes he forgets that.

“Oh, good. Another round of this argument is just what I need.” She lets her cloak fall to the floor, to be dealt with by the maid or nurse tomorrow, and comes to sit by him, but not too close.

“You kiss another man, and I’m the one at fault for being angered by that?” He manages to keep his tone fairly even, but repressed frustration lurks behind every word.

“You weren’t putting me on trial for the kiss, but for everything,” she says flatly. “Not just the King, but d’Artagnan, Remi, my work for the Cardinal… Five years where I hated you, where I killed more men than I can count, and your complaint is about infidelity?”

He looks at her in sullen silence, but of course she’s right. When it comes to her murders, he blames himself as much as he blames her, if not more; and Athos is a soldier, after all, and as a result, well-accustomed to killing and death. He’s killed plenty of men himself, although he hopes more honourably. He can forgive that. And as for hating him, and wanting him dead, that seems entirely reasonable to him after what he did to her. He hated himself and wanted to die as well, if he’s honest. But he was never unfaithful to her. He never wanted to be. He loved her, and that would never change.

“I don’t want anyone but you,” she says, reaching forward and twisting the bottle out of his hand so she can have some. “You’re the only man I’ve ever loved. You know that. Don’t you?”

“That hasn’t stopped you from being with other people in the past.” It hurts even to say.

“I wish that didn’t bother you so much. I don’t even understand why it does bother you,” she says, almost plaintively. “What does it matter what I did? None of it meant anything.”

But it does matter, somehow. He’s not sure if he could explain why it is so important, why it bothers him so much more than it really should. His friends never seem this furious or hurt when the women they’re with have other men, or husbands, or even work as courtesans. But then, they also seem able to enjoy the company of women without feeling anything for them at all, and he finds that just as confusing. It’s as if, for them, there is a divide between sex and love, whereas for
Athos the two are so tangled together there is no separating them. To him, that level of intimacy is an expression of love. It’s too shattering, too wonderful, too revealing, too important to be merely a pleasant pastime or diversion. It is something precious and unimaginably perfect that he shares only with her. Perhaps it is unfair of him to conflate fidelity with love, simply because for him they have always been connected, but the unfairness doesn’t stop him from thinking it.

“Maybe it meant nothing to you,” he says. “It means something to me.”

“I can’t change the past, Athos,” she says. “And I won’t continually apologise for it either. But it is the past.”

“But it’s not. You say every seduction you undertook, whether as part of your own schemes or the Cardinal’s, was for a good reason. What happens when you find a good enough reason again? Life in a palace, for example.”

“There is nothing I need from the King badly enough to risk losing our life together,” she says clearly and distinctly. “And back then, I wanted revenge, I wanted to hurt you. That’s not the case anymore.”

Now that she’s talking to him genuinely, instead of using the dismissive, mocking tone from before, a lot of his anger fades away. It’s obvious to him now that even if a kiss itself is not important to her, that it pains him is. There’s real concern in her face. No doubt if he hadn’t been curt, harsh and accusatory the moment she tried to start the conversation, it would have gone a lot better. Of course, she’s not blameless there either, too confrontational by half. Both of them are far too prone to escalating arguments.

All she shared with Louis was a kiss, he reminds himself, forcing himself to be reasonable. Even Athos has kissed other people, though not many. And it sounds like the King initiated it. In the past, she never stopped at kisses, but here she did, and she told him about it.

“Why didn’t you just tell him we’re married?” he asks, and now he’s the one who sounds plaintive. She has no hesitation in telling other people, so he can’t help but wonder what makes Louis so different.

“The man’s a child,” she says. “What makes you think he’d consider me being married to be a deterrent? But say he did. Then you’re the man standing between the King and what he wants.”

“The King’s many things, but he’s not the kind of man who would force a woman. If you told him you were uninterested -”

“He’s spoilt, and petulant, and unused to rejection,” she says. “If he didn’t lash out at you, he’d lash out at me. He might reconsider that blanket pardon he gave me, for starters.”

“So what’s your plan then?”

“Well, his attention span doesn’t seem that impressive,” she says, with a glimmer of amusement. “So I thought I’d just keep out of his sight for a while, until some vapid noblewoman or clever courtesan catches his eye.”

“You looked like you wanted to put my eye out for suggesting you avoid the King,” he says incredulously.

“Yes, because you made it an order, and you also made it very clear it was because you didn’t trust me at all,” she flares.
Athos has an unwelcome moment of self-reflection, where it occurs to him he’s not as different from men like Monsieur Bonacieux as he’d like to be. Reprimanding his wife, ordering her around, lashing out at her, even physically intimidating her… although of course, Anne’s nearly impossible to intimidate, and actually seemed to enjoy that part. But still, it’s something to think about. Perhaps that’s what convention says marriages are supposed to be like, but he wants to be better than that. They are better than that. He’s not her owner or her master. They’re equals.

There’s a long pause, where they’re looking at each other, and then Athos sighs. “I do trust you,” he says eventually. “I just… overreacted. I’m sorry. I was hurt and angry.”

“You have nothing to worry about,” she says. “I promise. I’m going to stay out of His Majesty’s way.”

It seems like the atmosphere lightens, any remaining tension between them draining away – no, not draining away, changing. He can feel it. Their embrace earlier left him frustrated as well as furious, and he can feel that returning, the growing desire to yank her against him and resume where they left off.

“Good,” he says, voice dropping lower. “I did say there would be consequences otherwise.” This time, he makes it a promise, instead of a threat.

“Hmm, yes.” Her eyes darken slightly, mouth curling into a feline smirk in response the huskiness of his tone. “Perhaps you should explain what they are… just so I know to avoid them, of course.”

He moves closer to her as if drawn, letting the empty wine bottle drop to the floor. “Well, first, I would be forced to make you forget that any other man existed, especially Louis. Wipe every one of them from your mind.”

“That sounds like quite a feat,” she drawls, challenge sparking in her gaze. She reaches up and rests her hand gently on his chest, index finger tapping slowly against the locket.

“I think I can manage.” His heartbeat quickens, fire rising in him.

Gentle fingers suddenly turn sharp as she digs her nails into his skin, pressing forward and up so that her lips are at the corner of his mouth. She gives a soft, almost chaste kiss, a sharp contrast to the scrape of her fingernails and the heat in her eyes. “Then prove it.”

X_X_X_X_X

“My God, Porthos, do you know what time it is?” She stands up as he enters, pretending she wasn’t just napping on the chaise longue, and shifts her sleeping child to a different position. It’s a good thing she pulled on a robe earlier, because otherwise he’d be getting a decent eyeful through her sheer white nightgown, but she still doesn’t look as put together as she’d like.

“Around noon,” Porthos says, looking amused.

“Oh.” She pauses, reassesses. With the curtains drawn, it seems a lot earlier than that. Alright, it’s later than she thought. That explains why Athos wasn’t beside her when she woke up again fifteen minutes ago. He was there a few hours earlier when she staggered over to the nursery to feed René, so she was vaguely surprised to find he’d disappeared, but too sleepy to really question it.

They were up far too late last night. She’s covered in little marks, and bruises, and every muscle in her body aches. She enjoyed every minute of it.

“I want to hire you,” Porthos says. “To find my father. It’s becoming pretty clear Treville is never
going to tell me the truth, and I need to know. I can pay you with this.”

She looks at the piece of paper he holds out for her. A legacy, apparently – a decent sum, too.

It takes her a moment to run through the implications of this. Treville, her main employer, won’t like her helping Porthos to find out something he chose to hide. She’d be tracking down a man no one alive knows anything about, dealing with the insular Court of Miracles and the close-mouthed Treville. The answers she’ll find are probably not the answers Porthos wants her to find.

Then her gaze settles on her child, curled up fast asleep in her arms. Her child who, if she’d had her way, would never have known his father. If things had happened just a little differently, would René have ended up always wondering, never knowing? Would he have been desperate to find out the truth of his past?

“Keep it,” she says, a little brusquely, and then when his face falls, she adds, “Wait and see if I can find anything before you pay me, idiot. And now, tell me everything you know about your father.”
The Court of Miracles never changes. It’s an odd place, Milady thinks – thieves and beggars and liars, all her kind of people, but undoubtedly part of a community (if a strange one). Everywhere else, the bond between criminals is transient and fragile, temporary alliances followed by inevitable double-crosses. In the Court, though, there’s always an air of bonhomie, a feeling that everyone is family. It’s a little misleading – if it is a family, it’s a dysfunctional and somewhat cruel one – but it’s more than most people in the slums get, and certainly more than most thieves and beggars do.

Porthos somehow fits there perfectly and sticks out like a sore thumb, both at the same time. They greet him enthusiastically, as if he’s been gone five years instead of five days. Milady hangs back in the shadows and avoids getting involved, until – “I would reconsider your choices, dear,” she says, fingers encircling Flea’s wrist tightly and lifting the other woman’s hand away from her purse.

Flea gives her an unrepentant grin. “Worth a try.”

Milady considers stealing the other woman’s dagger in retribution, but the last time she tried Flea had it back almost before she could stow it. The woman may be one of the best pickpockets Milady’s ever met, perhaps even better than she is – although she knows when it comes to spying, sneaking, manipulation and murder, Flea has nothing on her, so she can accept that slight sting to her pride. They would make a formidable team, though, if they weren’t on such wildly different paths in life.

Porthos finally notices Flea and breaks off from the others to come and embrace her. The Queen of the Court of Miracles doesn’t accept hugs from her old paramour, though, and instead pulls him into a kiss that makes some of the little Court cutpurses holler and laugh.

Porthos pulls away and Milady realises in amusement that he’s visibly blushing, despite his dark skin. Aramis and d’Artagnan always seem unsurprised and even slightly smug when women want them, but Porthos has a real streak of hesitation and humility beneath the charming, roguish grin and occasional cocky jokes. He’ll never have their complacency, which is good, because it’s not a trait Milady considers particularly admirable. Of course, his nervousness is nothing compared to Athos, who seems genuinely unable to comprehend anyone wanting him, and even less able to deal with it – unless the person in question is her, anyway.

“So,” Porthos says, clearing his throat unnecessarily. “You said you found someone who knew my mother?”

“Follow me,” Flea invites with a wink and a saucy grin. If she didn’t encompass it to include Milady as well, she’d think Porthos was just being invited to her bedroom – actually, even with that, she’s still somewhat uncertain. For the most skilful pickpocket in Paris, Flea does seem to brush against Milady’s body rather too much when she goes for her purse.

“So who is it?”

“Old man. Says he used to beg right next to Marie-Cessette, back when you were only a baby. Got taken in by his nephew, though, when the boy got a respectable career. Been living with him instead of in the Court ever since. That’s why we never ran into him before.”
“You know he’s just going to confirm it’s Belgard,” Milady says under her breath to Porthos.

He gives her an annoyed glance. “Maybe, maybe not. Let’s hear him out first, okay?”

She quiets, but she’s still sure it’s Belgard. Older men are very happy to talk about the past with her, sharing all their old adventures, and every man she’s found from Treville and de Foix’s time at the military academy talk about Treville, de Foix, and their best friend Belgard, who is now in disgrace after the assassination of the late King. Unless Treville himself is Porthos’s father, which she finds unlikely, Belgard is the best bet. The beginning of the breaking down of that close friendship even coincides with a rough estimate of Porthos’s birth, which is probably not a coincidence.

Really, at this point, the main reason Porthos is resisting the idea is because Belgard is a Marquis, rich and influential and powerful, and he was free and respected back when Porthos was born, well able to provide for a mistress and a child. Porthos wants his father to be too poor and helpless to have been able to help him and his mother, or a prisoner of war or otherwise falsely imprisoned at the time of his birth, or maybe even a man who sacrificed his life helping his beloved escape enslavement or recapture. Basically, he wants his father to have wanted him, to have loved his mother, to have been forced by circumstance and a cruel world into losing them. The more likely alternative of his father abandoning them is one that he seems to have previously been at peace with, but this whole mystery awoke childhood fantasies again, and now he finds it hard to accept.

“You do have the look of Marie-Cessette to you,” the old man says almost immediately, when he lays eyes on Porthos. He’s a frail thing, all bones and angles, but he manages a weak and wavering smile. “You won’t remember me – you were only a little thing – but I remember her, too. She was a good woman. Strong.”

“Not strong enough,” Porthos says grimly. “She ever mention my father to you?”

“Once or twice, once or twice.”

“Yeah? And what’d she say?”

The man looks away, humming slightly to himself. With a sigh, Milady flicks a coin to him, whereupon he seems to remember he’s in a conversation with them. “Rich man, she said, titled, powerful.”

“Told you,” Milady murmurs with satisfaction.

“Then why’d she never go to him for help?” Porthos asks, ignoring her, eyes fixed on the man’s face.

“She would’ve done anything for you, you know.”

Porthos inhales sharply, a dozen unnameable emotions passing over his face. “Yeah. I know.”

Then he turns and walks away, as if that’s the end of the matter.

Milady and Flea look at each other for a moment, having a fierce yet silent argument about who should go comfort him, and then with a heavy, annoyed sigh, Milady stalks after him.

She’s not the comforting sort, though. “So what’s the plan now? I think at this point we can assume it’s Belgard. I can start watching the estate, get an idea of how you can meet him.”

“You think I want to meet him? You heard what that man said. Sounds like my father threatened my mother, like he wanted her gone.”
Milady gives a lazy half-shrug. “Alright, so instead, we rob him blind. Sound good?”

To her surprise, Porthos cracks a smile at that one. “Tempting.” He seems lost in thought for a few moments, then finally he says, “I think I do want to meet him, actually. Take his measure. Figure out if he really is... you know. Maybe I should just go ask him.”

“Oh, please. As if he’d tell the truth. But we could go to Treville -”

“As if he’d tell the truth.”

“But his reaction could tell us all we need to know.” Treville is not a good liar, although he’s getting better at it.

Porthos shakes his head. “That’s not what I need to know. I need to know why my father abandoned me, why he let my mother die in poverty and despair. I need to know what really happened and why. Even if he’s a monster, I need to know if this man is my father.”

“And if he is?”

“Then… then I don’t know.” Porthos gives a shrug of his own. “I’ll figure that out once I know more. So yeah, watch the estate. Let me know if we can stage a run-in with Belgard – even recluses have to go out sometime, right?”

“The word ‘recluse’ generally implies the opposite, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Athos takes René from the nurse – for once, his son is sweet smelling, thanks to having just been bathed – and goes to stand by his wife. She’s taken over his desk, so it’s lucky he doesn’t have much paperwork to do today, but he must admit he is curious about what she’s doing. It never seems to annoy her to have him looking over her shoulder.

He shifts his son to one arm and picks up one of the pieces of paper. “Anne? Whose letter is this?”

“They’ll get it back,” she says, which isn’t an answer.

He slides a few more towards him. “The Marquis de Belgard? So you still think he’s Porthos’s father. Won’t stealing his mail be a poor first impression?”

“They’ll never notice a delay of a couple of days, not with how slowly mail moves these days,” she says reasonably.

“They?”

“The Marquis, his daughter, and his son-in-law,” Milady says, a little absently. “So far, all I’ve found out is that Eleanor Levesque spends ludicrous amounts on dresses, her husband enjoys gambling far too much, and her father, who is possibly Porthos’s father too, never does anything or goes anywhere.” She picks up another letter and holds it out. It’s on top of a pile of ones that look identical to it. “This is the only interesting thing I’ve found, the letters she’s sending out to parish priests.”

He scans it, somehow evading René’s hands as his son tries to grab at his nose, and then at his beard. René likes grabbing things these days, and has an especial fascination with facial hair – Aramis’s moustache seems to be his nemesis. “So she’s looking for a governess for her children?”
“No children that I’ve been able to discover,” Anne says. “And it says in Paris – they’re not in Paris. It must be for a friend. Regardless, it says they’ll transport the governness in question to the city, and given the length of the journey, if we time it right, I think it’s likely they’ll put the prospective servant up at the estate for the night.”

He experiences a sinking sensation. “Are you planning to pretend to be a governness?”

She snorts. “As warmed as I am by your belief in my skills of deception, you might want to re-read the description of what they’re looking for. Fresh-faced, innocent, sweet… every single word carries the implication of young.”

Athos glances over it again and silently agrees. While his wife’s nowhere close to being a crone, or even really a matron, this request does seem to be for a young girl more than a woman. That’s not unusual – very young servants are not only cheaper, they’re considered more biddable. Requesting one from the country is also fairly common. Some people think servants from the city are mercenary and ungrateful to their employers.

“So Celeste, then?” Athos asks sceptically. Not only does it seem slightly immoral to involve her, but he doesn’t have much faith in their young maid’s nerve.

“I expect if I asked her to figure out if Belgard shares any resemblance with Porthos, all she’d report is that Belgard is light-skinned.” Milady says, rolling her eyes. “And if I asked her to find an excuse to wander the house and search his room, she’d faint on the spot. Luckily, though, we do know someone young enough to plausibly be sent off in response to this request, even if it’s a close thing.”

It takes him a moment. “Constance?”

“Oh, I know, she’s probably a few years older than the kind of scared little doe they’re looking for. But ‘Father Jean’ can avoid mentioning that his reply letter, and offer her services cheaply, and when they meet her I have no doubt she can talk them around. The trick will be doing so while not giving away her Parisian accent.”

“Have you spoken to d’Artagnan about this?”

“Why on earth would I speak to d’Artagnan?” she says, fixing him with a hard look. “He’s not the girl’s husband. And even if he was, I doubt you lot ever asked Monsieur Bonacieux before you sought his wife’s help.”

He judges it safer not to respond to that. While they do tend to go through d’Artagnan when it comes to Constance, he thinks that’s less because they consider d’Artagnan her keeper than because d’Artagnan sees Constance a lot more than the rest of them do. Anne, on the other hand, probably sees Constance rather more than d’Artagnan. He’s not sure if Constance comes to see René because she bonded with him by being his sole carer for his first few days of life, or if she’s genuinely worried about what harm and neglect Milady de Winter could be inflicting on an innocent child, but either way she visits fairly frequently. Especially of late, come to think of it.

When he happens to be home for those visits, he’s mildly impressed how Constance and Milady manage to navigate their stiff conversations, avoiding such wide and diverse subjects as d’Artagnan, the Musketeers, the Cardinal, Constance’s husband, Milady’s past crimes, and Constance’s current position. Really, they seem to limit the discussion entirely to the baby. But just like with d’Artagnan, there is a suggestion of thawing, of past transgressions being, if not forgotten nor forgiven, at least politely ignored. Milady’s done a lot to make amends, after all, even if atoning was never her aim. She’s saved the lives of all the people Constance cares about most –
she’s helped save d’Artagnan from slavers, helped save Her Majesty and the Dauphin from Marmion’s men, helped save the rest of them from Rochefort (and the whole of France with them, for that matter).

“I sent a message to Madame Bonacieux to meet me tomorrow,” she says. “She’ll either agree to help or not, and that’s her choice.”

“Just like it’s your choice. Have you accepted the legacy from Porthos yet?”

“I haven’t found his father yet, not for certain,” she says, a trifle defensively. “I’ll take it when we’re sure, trust me on that. Maybe I’ll even demand more if it turns out there’s something to be gotten from this Belgard. A Marquis might pay a lot to avoid scandal.”

“Of course. We all know you would never help a friend simply out of the goodness of your heart,” he says gravely, hiding his amusement to the best of his ability.

“What friend? I don’t have friends,” she snaps. Then she catches the gleam in his eyes. For a moment, her glare intensifies, but she can’t hold out for long against his quiet amusement, and eventually an unwilling smile spreads across her face. “Oh, quiet, you. So I’ve become fond of those fools you call brothers – no, not fond. Entertained by. That’s it, they entertain me. And they can be useful, on occasion. It doesn’t change anything.”

“Of course not.”

René gurgles, finally achieving his goal of grabbing Athos’s moustache. Athos winces and detaches him—there’s not much strength in a baby’s arm, but it doesn’t take much strength to make this uncomfortable. Milady moves around the desk and leans over their son, dark hair hiding her expression from him. She reaches up a hand and strokes the side of her index finger very gently down the baby’s cheek.

“Porthos hopes his father abandoned them for a good reason,” she says, sounding a little strange, almost stilted. “That he had no choice.”

“You don’t think it’s possible?”

“Once I would have been even more certain. I would’ve told him to stop being such a fool. That he should think about what profit he can make off this, not about some closure he can never get. If a man throws his woman and child to the wolves, it’s obvious enough what kind of man he is. The kind every man is, sooner or later.”

“Now?”

“Now… I don’t know. I came so very close to leaving for England, you know. If I had, you would have had nothing to do with our son. But it wouldn’t be through cruelty, or lack of love. So I can’t help considering…” she trails off, and shakes her head, frustrated. Their son tries to grab one of the dangling locks, but misses.

He thinks he understands what’s bothering her, and it’s not just the thought of choices she almost made. The change in her is slow, but visible to everyone—she is not any less clever or dangerous, but she is softer somehow, less sharp. Soft enough to worry about the feelings of friends she claims she doesn’t have. Soft enough to talk about her regrets, to comfort her son, to tell her husband she loves him, to open herself up, to admit she is a woman instead of just a weapon. It must be confronting.

But then, of course Athos understands. He used to hate himself, but he also knew himself—
drunk, the cynic, the death seeker, the distant, cold man whose past was never shared. Not this
man, who limits himself to a few cups of wine a week, who spends all his time in the company of
loved ones, who is happy and sure, who is hopeful for the future and awed by the present.

“Are you ever angry at me?” she says, tilting her head so the mane of soft curls falls back again
and her uncertainty is visible. “I mean, I nearly took him from you.”

His beautiful little son, with his stubborn certainty someone should be holding him at all times, his
desperate need to grab and yank at everything within reach, his easy giggles and smiles and tears,
his big blue eyes that hold every wonder in the world to his father and melt his heart every time
they focus on him. Yes, she could have taken Athos’s son from him.

And even worse than that, she would have taken everything else as well, all of it. She would have
taken herself away. Lazy mornings where she yawns and curls into him and gives him sleepy
smiles, embraces where he holds her so closely and fiercely it feels like they meld into one, quiet
evenings talking about anything and everything, their matching amazement and pride at every
stage of their little son growing and every expression on his face. The absolute, perfect happiness
of not just a life shared, but a life shared with the only person you could ever love, the other half of
your soul. The thought of not having this is heart-breaking.

“But you didn’t,” he says, though he knows that’s not the whole story. He wouldn’t have been
angry with her if she had gone to England, not really – distraught and wrecked, but not angry.
Because he knew she was just trying to give their son a good life. And it wasn’t like he was entitled
to a son, or a wife, or this level of happiness… her leaving would not have been a theft. Her staying,
on the other hand, was a gift.

“But I didn’t,” she echoes, and gives him a crooked smile.

X_X_X_X_X

“Yes, that’s definitely the right one,” Milady says, giving her a critical up and down. In all that
white chiffon, with her hair left half-loose and no touch of powder on her face, Constance looks
much younger. She also looks a bit like a sacrifice for some pagan altar, but that’s alright.

“Still not sure about this,” Porthos says.

Constance gives him one of those exasperated glares she seems to have perfected. “I’ll be fine. All
I’m doing is ‘accidentally’ wandering into whatever dark room this Marquis is hidden in and
seeing what I can find out. And that’s only if they put me up at the estate overnight instead of
taking me to my new ‘employers’. If they do that, all I’m doing is minding someone’s children for
a few hours, quitting and walking back the Louvre. Simple.”

“D’Artagnan know you’re doing this?” Porthos asks doubtfully.

“I told him I’m helping out a friend. It’s the truth,” Constance says, and now the glare holds as
much fondness as exasperation. “Just let me, will you?”

Milady wonders how d’Artagnan could think for a moment that when Madame Bonacieux said she
was helping out a friend, it wouldn’t be something dangerous. All her ordinary, respectable friends
probably headed for the hills the moment she left her husband, since shame and scandal is
catching. Milady imagines she’s only left with the Queen, the Musketeers, and perhaps a couple of
the Queen’s other attendants who’ve been forced to treat her well.

Of course, perhaps d’Artagnan doesn’t realise that. He can be quite impressively oblivious – no
one knows that better than Milady, except Constance, presumably. Perhaps he’s so thrilled to have
gotten everything he wanted at basically no cost that he doesn’t realise this is closer to a pyrrhic
victory for his beloved. She’s lost her respectability, her good name, her family, most of her
friends, her security, and perhaps her chance at legitimate children and a comfortable life once she
leaves the Queen’s service. And knowing d’Artagnan, he’s unlikely to be sympathetic if she
mentions any of this to him, since he’ll think true love should be reward enough for her not to mind
any of that, especially since he isn’t feeling the pinch at all. Ah, young, entitled boys, too pretty for
their own good and too used to women melting at their smiles – something Milady is glad not to
have to deal with ever again. She has something much better now.

“Talk as little as possible, and keep your voice low when you do,” Milady instructs. “You don’t
want your accent to give you away.”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

“We’re keeping an eye out,” Porthos says. “We’ll see you tomorrow. And she’s got someone
watching the place, that fellow at the inn nearby, so if you need help -”

“I know.”

“Try and seem shy and a little confused,” Milady continues. The stiffness that normally permeates
their conversations seems to have vanished temporarily – perhaps both her and Constance find it
easier to communicate when they have a specific aim, and specific actions to take to reach that aim.
“That way when you pretend to get lost -”

“I know. The coach is outside, right? It’s been a while since I’ve been out of Paris.” She rolls her
eyes at them both, and makes her way downstairs, where the coach is indeed waiting, to take her to
a country chapel where the Levesques’ servants will presumably pick her up.

There’s a long silence after she leaves.

After a while, Porthos clears his throat and says what Milady is thinking. “If this is so simple and
safe, why’ve I got such a bad feeling about it?”

X_X_X_X_X

“I need your help,” d’Artagnan says without preamble, walking into Athos’s office at the Garrison.

Athos takes one look at his friend and dismisses the new Musketeer cadet he was scolding.
Conversations about the inappropriateness and disrespectfulness of ranking the women of court by
their curves – and the utter stupidity of doing so within their earshot – will have to wait for another
time. D’Artagnan looks almost feverish, eyes too bright and face too flushed with fear. “What’s
happened?”

“No one’s seen Constance since yesterday,” d’Artagnan says. “She said she was spending the night
at a friend’s and would see me by midday today, but she didn’t turn up. I went down her old street,
but none of the women she used to spend her time with would even talk to me.”

Athos blinks at him. “At a friend’s,” he repeats, a little flatly. “She said she was staying with a
friend?” Oh, for God’s sake. None of them bothered to fill d’Artagnan in? Alright, Athos knows
his wife well enough that he didn’t really expect her to bother telling d’Artagnan anything, and
Porthos is so distracted by the question of his paternity he can’t see straight, but surely Constance
herself should have let d’Artagnan know. Of course, Athos can hardly throw stones, since it’s not
like he passed the news on either.
“Judging by the way they reacted, they think she’s a fallen woman,” d’Artagnan says, infuriated. He looks like he would like to arrest every single one of Constance’s former friends for this. “Beneath their touch. I even went to see one of her brothers and he all but said she was dead to them for how she’s shamed them. Her brother said that. I can’t imagine any of them letting her past the threshold. So it must have been a trap.”

“A… trap?”

“Bonacieux must have gotten one of them to send a note to lure her back there, then grabbed her. I can’t find him, though. If you order everyone to look for her, though, I’m sure we can find her.”

Athos sighs and rubs at his closed eyes. “D’Artagnan, she hasn’t been kidnapped by her husband. She’s made the extremely dubious choice to aid Porthos and my wife in an equally dubious plan. She’s probably dealing with five squalling infants and an impossible employer as we speak, trying to find an excuse to leave the house.”

It’s then, of course, that Porthos strides into his office, closely followed by Anne. That both of them look worried as well immediately changes Athos’s frustration to real concern.

D’Artagnan turns on them immediately, eyes flashing fire. “What have you done with Constance?”

“Yes, do let’s focus on assigning blame, instead of the problem in front of us,” Milady drawls.

D’Artagnan gives a disdainful snort. “Of course you don’t want us to point fingers when you’re the one they’d be pointing at. What did you do?”

“We’ll explain on the way,” Porthos says.

“On the way?”

“To the home of the Marquis de Belgard,” Porthos says. “Or at least to a pretty nice inn nearby. Grab Aramis. We need to go.”

X_X_X_X_X

The inn is very nice, that much is true, although surprisingly busy. Athos orders himself some wine, more than he usually drinks these days, because he has a sneaking suspicion he’s going to need it. All of Milady’s efforts haven’t managed to reveal anything more than what they already knew – Constance was dropped off at a pretty little chapel in the country. Constance was picked up by a fancy coach. No one has seen Constance since.

They need to make some sort of a plan, but so far they’re failing.

Of course, their options aren’t great. ‘Go and ask’ is so far the only sane idea they’ve come up with (for a given value of ‘sane’, anyway). But if Constance has been exposed as a fraud and the Levesques have overreacted, revealing she’s a spy as well isn’t likely to help her case.

D’Artagnan would like to tear the estate to pieces looking for her, but the truth is, they have no reason even to assume she’s there, not really, and they can’t offend a Marquis with no proof at all. Aramis thought they should cover their faces and raid the place as bandits or something, capturing and threatening one of the Levesques to get her location, but that plan has far too high a death toll. Athos’s somewhat-duller suggestion is that they go there as Musketeers, claiming they’re tracking a criminal by Constance’s description and requesting she be handed over, but Milady is against it.

“They didn’t find her out, at least not that fast,” she says flatly. “So if they’re holding her, it’s not
“Maybe you don’t make as convincing a priest as you think,” d’Artagnan says.

Aramis shakes his head, still somewhere between awed and horrified by this blasphemy. “I can’t believe you pretended to be a priest.”

“Only in writing,” Milady says. “Besides, it’s not like I haven’t pretended to be a nun plenty of times.”

“You have?” Aramis rubs his forehead, looking a little wild-eyed. “I’m going to leave this piece of heresy alone for the moment, but at some point, we need to have a discussion about this. Pretending to be a man or woman of God when -”

“Quiet.”

“Right, right, I realise there are more important concerns right now, but I’m simply saying -”

“No, quiet.” One moment Milady’s sitting perfectly upright, sober as a judge, the next she’s stolen away Athos’s tankard, shaken her hair loose, and let her head fall forward against the table so that her face can’t be seen. She looks like a lush. She even lets out a convincing groan, turning to a laugh.

They might be surprised, but none of them are slow. Aramis props his feet up on the table, leaning back precariously with his hat pulled down over his face. Porthos slumps slightly, dons a foolish grin, and starts to tell a dirty joke in a stumbling voice. D’Artagnan leans his head against Porthos’s shoulder like it’s too hard to sit up straight, raising his own cup to his lips. Athos tilts his head back to stare at the ceiling as if fascinated by the pattern, sighing up at it.

A man in a fancy coat strides past, accompanied by a footman. He doesn’t spare a glance for the table of tipsy, road-worn soldiers with their drunken tavern wench.

After he’s gone, Milady raises her head. “Well, I never expected to see him again,” she comments.

“Who is he? Could he have Constance?” d’Artagnan gets right to the most important question.

“I doubt it. He doesn’t much like women who can fight back.” Milady’s lip curls. “He’s a vicomte. He was unofficially exiled from Paris by the Cardinal years ago. Lords are allowed to do as they wish with their servants, of course, but when it starts to risk riots -”

“My God, the one with the basement,” Athos says, looking after the man and feeling a lurch of nausea. “I remember. And he would have recognised you?”

“There may have been some blackmail and a few threats involved in his decision to pay his servants vast sums as recompense and quietly leave Paris.” She gives them a thin-lipped smile. Then it dims as something occurs to her. “His estate is at least a day’s journey away, though, and this place is an hour off the road to Paris. It makes sense for the Levesques to stop here on the way to the city, but why would he -”

They all make the connection at the same moment. A man known for being much too free with his servants. A dozen letters sent off to parish priests when surely only one or perhaps two would be necessary. A disappearing supposed governess hired for children who don’t exist. Both Levesques spending far too much money, far more money than they really should have.

The description of the women required turns from innocuous to horrific in the space of a second.
“They’re selling them,” Porthos says, looking sickened.

“They’re selling Constance,” d’Artagnan says, panicked. “To a man who’s known for -”

“No, not to him,” Athos says, looking around. “Or rather, not just to him.”

Aramis gets it a moment later. “There are a lot of men here, aren’t there,” he says slowly. “A lot more than you’d expect to be visiting a country village, in an area not known for its beauty, outside of hunting season. The inn’s packed.”

Porthos shakes his head. “We can’t be sure -”

“Then let’s get sure,” Milady suggests, and beckons them closer.

Ten minutes later, the vicomte turns the corner as he heads back to the part of the inn that serves drinks, and walks directly into a tall, dark man. The impact is such that he barely stays on his feet. “Out of my way, fool,” he says sharply.

“Ah, sorry, my lord,” the man says, bowing much lower than people normally do. He looks like a soldier, but his deference is surprisingly polished, despite his accent. Then he squints at the vicomte and lowers his voice conspiratorially. “You here for the… for the auction?”

The vicomte looks around. “I don’t know what you mean,” he says cautiously.

“Alright, then,” the soldier says, with a wink. “I’m here to help out with it, that’s all. Thought I could give you a head’s up about which girls are worth the coin.”

The vicomte’s eyebrows shoot up. “But that’s – that’s not right,” he blusters, immediately outraged. “The whole point is that – that they’re pure, they’re maidens. They can’t have let you touch the girls. Those liars. My God, you can’t trust anyone these days.”

“No,” the soldier says, suddenly seeming a lot soberer and a lot angrier. “You really can’t.”

Sensing danger, although he’s not sure why, the vicomte turns to move away quickly, and finds himself face to face with a beautiful woman. Three men stand behind her. “Remember me?” she says, and smiles.

Once they’ve got him in the room, Athos thinks the vicomte will never shut up – it seems he’s just as susceptible to threats as he was when the Cardinal got him out of Paris, and more than willing to tell them every detail about these auctions. He’s more resistant to the idea of bringing them along, but when Milady brings up the previous blackmail material, he folds faster than a man in a brawl with Porthos. He agrees to everything they ask – often before they can even finish their sentences.

“Can’t believe we’re gonna pretend to be his friends,” Porthos says with distaste.

“Look on the bright side, he has more than enough livres to pay the entry fee for everyone,” Milady says. “Except me, of course. I think I might stand out a little.”

“We can’t all go,” Athos says. “Any more than two would be suspicious.” Frankly, even pretending the vicomte has two friends seems like a stretch.

“I’m going,” d’Artagnan says immediately. When Athos opens his mouth to disagree, d’Artagnan talks over him. “You would go if it was Milady. Don’t even try and pretend otherwise. Constance needs me and I’m not going to sit this one out.”
Athos sighs, but after a moment, nods reluctantly. “All right.” He feels the urge to choose himself as the other person, but he knows with a sense of regret he shouldn’t. As Captain, he has a different task. “I’m going to head back to Paris for reinforcements – there’s a lot of bidders here, and I want to get all of them. Even if we can’t arrest them, I want them to know we know.”

And there’s also someone in Paris he wants to talk to. Perhaps it’s too late to help anything – and then again, perhaps it’s not.

“I’ll go with d’Art-” Porthos starts to say, but Milady’s quicker.

“Aramis should go to the auction,” she says casually. “I think he’ll fit in better with the rest of them.” The brief glance she gives Porthos is heavy with meaning, though.

Athos waits until she looks at him again, so he can make it clear he caught the look. Her lips quirk into a small, secret smile, and he just shakes his head. It’s not hard to figure out her plan. Everyone on the estate will be distracted by the auction, all the best servants and guards gathered in one small area, while the rest of the place will be basically abandoned. It’s the perfect time to break in.

From what the vicomte says, there’s no reason to believe Belgard is at all involved in this auction. It’s true that the apple can, on some occasions, fall far from the tree – Belgard’s daughter being a monster does not make him one, not definitely. There’s no proof that Belgard is physically capable – he attended the military academy with Treville, but that was a long time ago, and he’s spent much of the past decade as a housebound recluse. So overall, there is no reason to think his alarmingly capable wife and friend, both of whom have spent a significant portion of their lives as thieves, should be in danger from breaking into the estate. Certainly not any more danger than d’Artagnan and Aramis will be in from attending a slave auction.

But if Belgard is Porthos’s father, then Treville has gone to a lot of effort to keep Porthos from him. Treville wouldn’t do that without a very good reason, Athos is sure of that.

He needs to know what that is.

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“You sure about this?”

Milady shrugs. “Either we’ll find information about Belgard or some unguarded valuables. A good night all around.”

Porthos manages a smile. “Thanks for this.”

“You’re paying me for this.”

“Right. Forgot.” He shakes his head. “What d’you think we’ll find, though? Do you really think a man who throws his mistress and child to the slums is gonna be holding onto love tokens from her decades later?” He can’t hide the faint note of hope to his voice, though.

“If he is your father,” Milady says quietly, “Then that’s something that ruined his relationship with his two closest friends, somehow, and possibly contributed to them letting him take the fall for the late King’s death. He’s a recluse. They dwell on the past – the sad ones like to get nostalgic, the bitter ones like to rage about it. He’ll have something, some record, some account of it, however biased.”

“And if not?”
“Then I suppose we default to your plan and simply ask him.” She gives him a knife-edge of a smile. “Under the circumstances, I think we could persuade him to tell us the truth. And it’s a pretty good time to get him alone -”

“No,” Porthos says, slightly too fervently. “We avoid him at all costs. If he is my father, I don’t want to meet him for the first time like that – breaking into his house, looking around for information on him, threatening him. What would he think?”

She feels the same sinking sensation she felt before, when seconds after admitting his father was probably a terrible person, Porthos still wanted to meet him. He’s investing far too much in this, hoping far too much. He’s nervous about meeting the man who abandoned him, as if he thinks he has to win his father’s good opinion instead of the reverse. He wants a family so badly he can’t see straight. Even when he mentions the man’s possible crimes and cruelties, the way he talks about them makes it clear he wants her to contradict him – tell him they don’t know for sure that Belgard didn’t care about Porthos or his mother, tell him that they have no evidence that Belgard is involved in pimping out young girls. When she doesn’t, he looks slightly disappointed, every time. He’s lying to himself to the best of his ability and he wants her to join in.

She clears her throat and says, “Are you sure? If he’s in on this auction business as well, we should have plenty of blackmail once we’ve gone through his things.”

Porthos shakes his head. “Nah, I’m up for looking through his stuff, but it’s not for blackmail. I just… I want to know more about him.”

“And if he’s involved in the Levesques’ actions,” she reminds him, a little tightly. Perhaps this was not the best plan she could have come up with, but she knows if she backs out now he’ll just go without her.

“There’s no evidence he is,” Porthos says, a little stubbornly. “But sure, we’ll keep an eye out anyway, just in case. I don’t want a father who’s part of anything like that.”

“It’s a bit late for you to get a father anyway, I think.” She looks at him, hiding her worry under brusqueness. “I grew up in a place not so far from you, you know. We’re both aware that family isn’t a necessity, and it’s certainly not a guarantee, even if it should be. The people of the Court of Miracles will always be the ones who raised you, who grew up with you, who made you who you are. You don’t have a family any more than I do. You can’t change that now. So no, you won’t get a father. What you’ll get is the truth. Good or bad. Isn’t that what you want?”

After another pause, he smiles, even though it looks pained. She can almost see him rejecting her words. “I suppose. Thanks. Really. Yeah, I know you’re getting paid, but still… thanks.”
“Athos!” Treville’s exhausted look changes to one of pleasure as he looks up to find Athos at his door. “It’s good you’re here. I wanted your advice on a matter of policy -”

“I’m afraid that will have to wait,” Athos says. He knows his voice comes out cool. So far, he’s stayed out of the whole issue of Porthos’s paternity – he hasn’t told Porthos to stop looking into it or tried to ban his wife from helping him, but he also hasn’t made any attempt to persuade Treville to share what he knows. But now Porthos’s father has turned from a hazy idea, relevant only in terms of Porthos’s emotional state, to a real man who may also be a real threat. “What do you know about the Marquis de Belgard?”

And there it is, immediately – the confirmation that Anne was right, as she so often is. Treville’s colour leeches away, his face tightens, his eyes harden. “He’s an old colleague, who worked with me to defend the late King,” he says tightly. “We haven’t spoken in many years, though. Why?”

“You know why.”

Treville looks down at his desk, ageing a decade as Athos watches. For a long moment, Athos thinks he isn’t planning to reply at all, but then he says, “Why can’t Porthos just leave the past alone?”

Because the past informs the present, and the future too. Because there are questions in everyone’s life that go unanswered and unresolved, but some of those questions ache like a rotten tooth and need to be pulled. Because it matters to Porthos if the man he trusts and looks up to, the man he sees as a mentor, has been keeping the truth from him.

Athos shrugs, simplifies this. “It’s hard to let the past go.”

Treville huffs a quiet, bitter laugh. “Oh, I know that better than most.” He meets Athos’s eyes again, his gaze almost apologetic. “I can’t give Porthos what he wants, Athos. I made a vow never to speak of what happened, and I won’t break it. You understand that, surely.”

He does. He understands more than Treville thinks. If he hadn’t broken that long ago promise to Anne that nothing would come between them…

But he can think of a more recent vow as well.

“A year ago, I swore to Anne that I would see her hanged again for her crimes,” Athos says flatly. “Do you think I will ever keep that vow? I would rather lose my honour, than lose everything else.” Besides, if deliberately breaking a vow destroys your honour, his own was lost long before. “What would you rather sacrifice? Your pride or Porthos?”

“For God’s sake, Athos, it’s not about my pride,” Treville snaps. “Do you think I want this secret on my conscience? But it’s better I carry the truth than that he does. Nothing good can come of Porthos seeking out Belgard.”

“Then perhaps you should tell him that,” Athos says. “And also tell him why.”

Treville shakes his head, refusing this. But after a long pause, he does speak again, voice heavy with regret. “Once, long ago, Belgard, de Foix and I were as close as you, Aramis, d’Artagnan and Porthos are. Brothers, even if not by blood. We swore to always protect and help each other, just like you have…” He leans forward, gaze both pained and intense. “What would you do if one of
your brothers asked you to do something dishonourable?"

“They wouldn’t,” Athos says immediately.

“But say they did. Would you consider yourself bound by your promises then?” The answer seems to be important to him.

Now Athos hesitates, actually thinking about it. No, his friends have never asked him to behave dishonourably. He had people threaten the husband of d’Artagnan’s lover, he covered up treason for Aramis, and he’s here trying to persuade a man to break an oath for Porthos — but they never asked him to do any of that. Everything Athos does is his own decision.

He asked them to behave dishonourably, though. Help me threaten my wife, trick my wife, arrest my wife, send my wife to her death again. He asked them to behave dishonourably without even recognising that’s what he was doing, and they agreed without a blink, because they trusted him to know right from wrong.

“We make many vows,” he says eventually. “To family, to friends, to the King, to God, even just to ourselves. I’m not sure it’s possible to keep them all. But no oath absolves us from the responsibility to consider what we’re doing, decide what’s right, and make our own choice. We’re the ones who have to answer for them, in the end.”

“I wish I’d thought that way when I was younger,” Treville says, again with that bitter smile. “I didn’t, though. I thought myself bound by the oaths I made, and I followed them to the letter. And in doing so, I committed a great injustice. I did something so cruel that… that I’ve spent every day since trying to atone for it.”

“Aramis would say confession is the first step towards atonement,” Athos notes.

“No doubt.” Judging by Treville’s expression, a confession isn’t coming, though. He looks guilty, miserable, and weary, but also stubborn. “Keep Porthos away from Belgard.”

“It’s too late for that,” Athos says. “He’s probably inside the man’s house right now. With my wife, I might add. So if Belgard is dangerous, it would be best if you shared how and why.”

“Belgard… poisons people’s minds,” Treville says. “He twists your thoughts around until you can’t see up from down, or truth from lies.”

Well, Milady should be fine, then. Porthos perhaps less so. That is such an unhelpful description of the threat Belgard represents that it annoys Athos, though. “If Porthos knew the truth, it would be much harder to do that.” Or if any of them did, for that matter. He’s becoming sick of Treville’s vague pronouncements.

Treville pauses, looking on the edge of speaking, then stops and says instead, “He has to find out himself.”

“Why?”

For some reason, Treville looks stumped by this, as if he didn’t expect to be asked. Then he rallies. “That’s the only way he’ll believe it. Lately, his trust in me -”

“Has been damaged by you lying to him,” Athos completes for him, voice dry. “Telling the truth might counteract that, you know. In any case, father or not, Porthos has little reason to trust Belgard. I believe he and Anne are breaking in to see if there’s proof he’s involved in his daughter’s crimes, as much as anything else.”
“His daughter’s crimes?”

“Well, daughter and son-in-law. They’re selling unwilling young girls to rich men. There’s nothing linking Belgard to it, not yet. He may not even know about—”

“He knows,” Treville says grimly, something like fear flashing in his eyes. “It’s just the sort of thing he’d be involved in. If you knew him as I do, you would never even question it. And if there’s evidence about, it will be well-guarded, and he won’t hesitate to kill to protect it. He’s as cunning as he is manipulative and cruel. If they’re caught, Porthos and Milady could be in grave danger.”

Normally, Athos’s response might be able to wave this off – Porthos and his wife are well able to take care of themselves. With half the servants occupied with the auction, there will be next to no one at the estate, apart from an old recluse who has no known weapons except his way with words. But Treville looks genuinely afraid for them, and that sparks fear in Athos as well.

Ten to one they will be fine, Athos tells himself, but the worry won’t leave him. They are expecting, at worst, someone like the Levesques; who are overconfident and not as clever as they think they are, judging by both their correspondence and by their actions. Treville’s fear indicates that Belgard is much more clever and ruthless than that. He could be armed himself. He could have tricks or traps they don’t know to expect. And his private servants will still be in the estate, presumably, and who knows how well-armed or well-trained they might secretly be? Belgard trained with Treville. He’s probably able to train others to be just as capable.

“Come on then,” Athos says roughly, gesturing. “We need to go.”

Treville doesn’t hesitate this time. “Just let me grab my sword.”

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The first part goes smoothly – so smoothly, Milady thinks in retrospect, that she should have been more suspicious. The locks on the servants’ entrance are so simple to pick it’s like someone greased them in advance. The place is all but deserted. At one point, they hear the distant sound of voices coming closer, but with a slightly guilty look Porthos moves a huge container of flour so it will ‘accidentally’ fall when a nearby door is opened. Once the chattering servants come through, they’ll be busy for the better part of an hour cleaning up the floor and their clothes, and never know it was Porthos’s fault (although the cook may get an earful). They move on.

The old homes of the nobility often follow the same basic layout, and they’ve both been in enough of them to figure out their way around quite quickly. She’s been a spy, a blackmailer, and a mistress; he’s been a guard and an investigator of the nobility; and they’ve both been thieves – between them, they know all the usual hiding spots for both secrets and valuables. They know just about everything. They move through the place quickly and quietly, checking everything efficiently and moving on.

They find a few letters and account entries that provide further proof of the Levesques’ activities, and take them just in case – the more evidence, the better. They find no proof that Belgard had anything to do with it.

Then finally, they reach Belgard’s private rooms. They can hear him moving about in the bedroom, so they head for the study instead – they’re probably more likely to find useful information there, anyway. She’s getting more worried about Porthos with every step, though – he looks like a man on some kind of substance, movements too jerky, teeth clenched, and eyes bright and glittering with feverish intensity. She has no idea what he’ll do if they find something
indicating that Belgard never cared if Porthos and his mother lived or died. Frankly, she has no idea what he’ll do if they find the opposite, either.

Perhaps it’s because she’s worried that she’s so careless. In any event, after picking the lock of the second drawer, she opens it incautiously. There’s been nothing but these pathetic locks so far, after all. But when she pulls it, she realises there’s a tiny hidden string connecting it to a container of writing implements, which tips over with an almighty clatter. It seems Belgard is craftier than expected.

She and Porthos look at each other for a moment of frozen uncertainty. They’re more than a match for some frail old man, but he doesn’t want to encounter Belgard like this, and she’d rather not add another item to the list of crimes she so recently had wiped clean.

Then, they’re both out into the hall and into a nearby room. She tries to hide behind some absurdly frothy curtains, but Porthos takes things a step further and is out on the window ledge before she can blink. He gives her a look – come on – and for a moment she considers dropping to the ground, but then sanity reasserts itself and she shakes her head. Yes, she could probably survive the fall, and maybe even survive it without hurting herself, but it’s not a guarantee. She’d rather be briefly apprehended by Belgard than end up down there with a broken leg – the man’s a disgraced recluse, after all, so who’s going to believe his charges against her? She’ll be far away by the time he’s describing her to whatever resembles the law around here, anyway. Porthos looks disappointed, but after a moment, nods understanding.

Instead, she yanks the curtains shut again behind her, sliding half-out onto the sill so she’ll be difficult to notice. Porthos, meanwhile, shows off by taking a running leap to the next ledge along, which seems to be his attempt at a compromise between their two plans. He hits the edge of the stone ledge with his midsection, his breath escaping him with a grunt, but manages to pull himself up with an effort and turn to her. It’s reasonably far away – for a tall man in breeches, a difficult jump. For a medium-sized woman in a tight-fitting dress, an impossible one.

“I’ll catch you,” he offers in a whisper that just barely carries to her, leaning out precariously over the gap.

She hesitates. If he’s overestimated his strength and skill, she’ll fall, hitting ledges and perhaps even the wall on the way down. If he catches her and her weight proves too much, or if he fails to catch her, or if they stumble –

But it’s Porthos, and somehow, despite all her usual cynicism, she trusts him. Not just because he’s Athos’s friend, or because he’s as steady and reliable as the ground beneath your feet, but because some bone-deep understanding exists between them despite their myriad differences. They both know what it’s like to be marked by your past, to never have had a fair chance at life, to have to scrape and claw and scramble for what others get handed to them. They both know what it’s like to be scorned, looked down on, spat upon, shamed.

She takes a breath and nods.

Then a surprisingly strong hand closes unexpectedly around her ankle and yanks it hard so she falls. Her hip strikes the ledge painfully and half her body is precariously over the air for a few seconds, that grip the only thing keeping her from a fall, and then she’s pulled back into the study, bruised and breathless.

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Athos passes the reins to the ostler, for once not inclined to try and care for it himself. Treville
follows suit.

Inside their room at the inn, they find Aramis leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, Constance with her head on d’Artagnan’s shoulder, and a crowd of girls in white dresses talking animatedly and loudly. Athos nearly steps back from the noise. Then he blinks as he registers that the matching white gowns are no longer matching, and also no longer white – there’s quite a few torn sleeves and skirts, and some red flecks which look like blood.

Aramis notices their entry first, and gestures to d’Artagnan and Constance, and all three come out into the hallway to speak in the relative quiet.

“We can’t leave them for long,” Constance says. “They’re still pretty shook up, poor things. We’ll send them home tomorrow.”

“Did it go alright?” Athos asks straightforwardly. They have the girls, which is a good sign, but the blood and signs of a struggle worries him. He wants to rush out again, but there’s no point in rushing over to the estate without any idea of the situation. “Where are the Levesques and the buyers?”

“We commandeered the local lock-up for the night,” Aramis says. “It’s uncomfortable and there’s not much space, but let’s be honest, who cares?”

Athos lets out a relieved sigh. Well, that’s most of the threat dealt with. “Good job.”

“We didn’t have to do much, to be honest.” A brief smile plays about Aramis’s face, and he sneaks a sideways glance at Constance, who’s starting to get a slight flush to her cheeks and determinedly doesn’t look back at him. “When they were supposed to be leading the girls in, no one came, and then suddenly there were a lot of screams and yells coming from the other room.”

“Turns out Constance had a hidden knife, and she used it to cut all of them free of the ropes they were tied with,” d’Artagnan says, looking both stunned and impressed. “Then they hid as many sharp and heavy objects about their persons as they could, and attacked on her order. They were… thorough.”

“Well, wouldn’t you be, in that situation?” Constance asks with irrefutable logic. “Anyway, how was I to know you lot would turn up? I can’t always get lucky and have Musketeers looking out for me.”

“I’m honestly not sure if you were lucky we turned up, or if Levesque was the lucky one,” Aramis says. “Since I don’t think he would have survived you and the girls if we didn’t arrest him in time. But we did get to feel useful when it came to rounding up the rest of them. I think we’ll at least get them stripped of some titles and land for the disgrace. And the Levesques will certainly face punishment.”

“Did they say anything about Belgard?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” D’Artagnan frowns. “They’re claiming he’s the mastermind. We were waiting for you to get back before we acted on it, though, because we wanted to break it to Porthos gently. Speaking of which, where is Porthos? He and Milady left right when you did. We thought they’d gone with you.”

Aramis closes his eyes for a moment, realising. “They went to the estate, didn’t they?” Then he considers this. “Well, no harm done. We can go there now and arrest Belgard as well, figure out the truth of these accusations. They might even have found some proof for us… although for Porthos’s
sake, I hope not.”

“Proof of that is amongst the better things Porthos could get from Belgard, I assure you,” Treville says grimly. “He would have thought nothing of killing him as a child. I can’t imagine he’ll show any more mercy to the adult.”

“You can’t be worried about Porthos against some old man, surely?” d’Artagnan asks incredulously, then remembers Treville isn’t that much younger than Belgard and flushes slightly. “I mean… that is to say…”

“You misunderstand me. I’m not worried about what he’ll do. I’m worried about what he’ll say.”

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She can feel the bruise already flowering on her hip, and she has blood in her mouth from biting her tongue when she hit the ledge, but otherwise she’s fine. If you consider being surrounded by three large and angry-looking manservants, one of whom has a gun to your head, and facing the Marquis of Belgard’s stare as ‘fine’, anyway.

He doesn’t look much like Porthos, as far as she can tell.

“So what exactly were you doing in my house?”

No, nothing at all like Porthos – his eyes are so cold it banishes any possible resemblance. Telling him she broke in with his son seems unlikely to help her position, so instead she says in her sweetest voice, “Robbing the place, of course.”

That actually seems to take him aback. “That’s very honest of you. Trying to buy some mercy?”

“No, no.” She waves a dismissive hand, but then the servant with the gun pushes the muzzle more firmly against the skin of her forehead and she stills. “Go ahead, throw me over to your local magistrate.” No one’s going to try a crime as unimportant as thievery at this hour of night. Porthos will already be halfway back to the others by now, and they’ll have her out by morning, whatever half-truths they have to tell to do it.

“Now why would we bother him?” Belgard smiles. It’s not a nice smile. She begins to think she may have misjudged this situation. “But I’m not sure we’ve had the truth out of you yet. You don’t look like a thief, not in that get-up.”

“Appearances can be misleading.” He must be in on it, she realises – there’s no other way to explain this level of paranoia. Eleanor wrote the letters, so he doesn’t procure the women. Levesque handles the auction, so he doesn’t sell them. As a recluse, it’s unlikely he’s the one transporting them. That leaves only one role that she can see – the man in charge.

“I’m aware,” he says, and she has no doubt he is. “So let’s pretend you’re telling the truth, for now.”

“Let’s.” She needs a way out of this. She examines her options and finds them depressingly few. She didn’t prepare enough for this, didn’t bring extra knives or ether, too busy hurrying to come and rescue Madame Bonacieux from the danger she’d placed her in. Emotions have a lot to answer for, she thinks bitterly – guilt, and fear, and especially concern for other people, they all lead to stupidity. So now she has no weapons, and she doesn’t rate her chances against these three – four, if you count Belgard, who is seeming less decrepit and harmless by the second.

He nods, as if to himself, than looks at the servants, gaze switching between them as he dispenses
orders. “You, hold her hand flat against the table. You, keep her still, and you, shoot her if she gets free.”

She struggles a little anyway, just to be difficult, throwing her head back so it slams into the nose of the man behind her with an audible crunch and he lets out a low noise of pain. But then they have her held tight, her hand slammed on the table, and this doesn’t bode well at all. The one holding the gun takes a few steps back towards the door, damn him – she was planning to try for it, but now she has no chance.

“What is the punishment for thieves?” Belgard wonders, opening a drawer and taking out a musket he lays on the desk, followed by a knife he keeps hold of. “Their hands being cut off, isn’t it? But I think we can start with fingers instead. I wonder how many we’ll need to remove before you start telling us the truth.”

She snorts, fighting her fear with mockery. “I don’t have enough fingers for you to get that.” Oh, she would if she thought it would help, but she can see this man’s eyes and she is suddenly sure that telling him the truth will doom her instead of save her – he’ll kill her the second he’s satisfied himself that he knows everything. She needs to stall him for as long as possible instead. She would just also prefer to find a way to stall him that doesn’t include losing body parts. Her mind is racing with options – fight, bribe, threaten, seduce, distract, flee, scream –

“Really? Well, we lose nothing by trying.” The tip of the knife lightly traces the base of her ring finger, leaving a thin line of red.

The frothy curtains are pulled to the side and they all automatically look that way, to see Porthos drop back down into the room. In a second, he has his sword drawn and at the throat of the man holding her hand, and his gun raised and at the head of the man who’s got his arms wrapped around her from behind.

“Let her go now,” he orders Belgard, his voice a rumble. “Or you’ll lose quite a bit.”

Apparently, Porthos didn’t take the opportunity to leave after all. Now that she thinks about it, she can’t imagine why she thought otherwise, except that it would have been the sensible thing to do, to go get help – even she, with her low opinion of Porthos’s probable father, thought he was probably just selfish, venial, and stupid. She didn’t expect him to be a complete psychopath.

And also… well, maybe she’s used to being left. Maybe that’s why she didn’t expect him to stay, let alone face down his father for her and ruin any possibility of the happy reunion he imagined.

The man with the gun moves it to point at Porthos instead of her, and the one holding her from behind tightens his grip to the point of pain to compensate for that despite the gun Porthos has on him. Thankfully, though, the one holding her hand lets it go in response to the blade at his throat and she snatches it back and away from the knife. In an instant, though, Belgard takes a step forward and presses the point of the knife to her neck, scraping the scarred skin behind her choker and then sliding higher to prick her bare throat, his other hand curling around the nape of her neck so that she can’t jerk away from it.

Why does everyone decide threatening her will help their position? Do they assume the Musketeers are so chivalrous they can’t stand the thought of her dead? If they only knew. Of course, perhaps these days it’s true, and even their enemies have a more accurate grasp of her relationships than she does – an uncomfortable thought.

She judges that she can get the knife from Belgard in moments – he might be well-trained, but he’s years out of practice and she is very good at what she does. If she makes that movement, though,
she’ll set them all off – Porthos can probably take down the two men he’s threatening and she can easily handle Belgard, but the servant with the gun only needs a fraction of a second to shoot Porthos, and she doubts either of them can reach him in time. His shot spent, she can then deal with him, leaving her with a room full of dead and disabled men, free and safe – except that Porthos will get shot. Better to wait, see if she can find a better moment.

Perhaps these days she can’t stand the thought of any of them dead either. Although wild horses couldn’t drag that admission out of her.

“Another one,” Belgard says, seeming remarkably calm even though this situation could tip into chaos at any second. “And despite talking like the worst kind of gutter scum, you’re just as well-dressed and well-armed as her. Are you also going to claim you’re just a thief with the bad luck to choose my home?”

“No,” Porthos says. “I’m your son.”

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It’s Porthos’s voice he hears first, and Athos gestures to the others to follow him down the corridor. He’s never heard Porthos sound like that before – pained, and pleading, and angry, all at once. He can’t make out the words until they’re closer though.

“Marie-Cessette. Her name was Marie-Cessette.”

The answering voice is harsher, older. “I remember her. But you can’t be… and what are you doing here, then? Armed and breaking into my home? What are you looking for?”

“My father. I’m looking for my father. Nothing more, I swear.”

“Then lower your weapons. We can discuss this calmly.”

“Lower yours first!”

The scene that they walk into is a tense one, but also an oddly still one – Porthos has a gun pulled on one man, and a sword on another, and there’s a third one who has a gun pointed at him as well, all of them waiting as if for a call to arms. But it’s the last man in the room – an older man who has to be Belgard – that gets Athos’s attention. He has a knife pressed hard against Milady’s throat just above her choker, a droplet of blood already sliding slowly down to soak into the dark ribbon. Athos immediately wants him dead – well, even more than he did before.

“I suggest you lay down your weapons,” Athos says, making his voice iron, and all their heads shoot up in shock. He raises his sword with deceptive laziness to come rest against the neck of the nearest servant, the man with the gun. “Quickly.”

The man lowers his gun halfway, uncertainly, and then everyone else explodes into action.

It’s Milady who kicks it off (of course), by getting the knife off Belgard – she grabs hold of the smallest finger on that hand, twists it up and wrenches it with a disgusting popping noise, making Belgard growl with rage and pain. As the knife drops from his now-wounded hand, she catches it in her own and brings it to his throat, in a mirror of how he was threatening her. The man behind her starts forward to help and Porthos shoots him in the leg – a deafening noise in this confined space. The servant with the gun tries to bring it up to shoot at Porthos but Athos forces his arm down and slams his hilt against the man’s head. The one with Porthos’s blade against his throat takes the opportunity of the distraction to get out of there, but Aramis cheerfully grabs hold of him and slams him against the wall, making him slide down it, dazed.
In seconds, they have everyone down on the ground, except for Belgard. The one with the hole in his leg is making high-pitched sounds of agony, and staining the ugly carpet red as he thrashes about on it.

“Aramis?” Athos says, flicking his eyes meaningfully between Aramis and the wounded servant. They probably shouldn’t let the man bleed out, not if they can stop it.

Aramis sighs. “I’ll deal with the one with the bullet wound, I suppose,” he says, a little grudgingly. He looks at Porthos. “Next time, can you try and avoid any bones? I’m not actually a doctor, you know, and flesh wounds are much easier.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Porthos says with a flicker of amusement.

D’Artagnan helps Aramis get the wounded servant out of there, presumably to a room where they can lay him down properly. The other two stay down, one too dazed to run and the other unconscious.

Belgard ignores the knife at his throat with surprising coolness, raising his injured hand to examine it. After a moment, he lets it drop and returns his attention to them. It looks painful, but at the end of the day it’s just a broken finger, after all – broken fingers are fairly common when you’re starting to learn to use a sword, and most soldiers have experienced at least one.

“Oh, your poor finger,” Milady says with a malicious pretence of sympathy. “It looks so sore. Should we cut it off?”

“And you, Are you alright?” Athos asks. “We have him covered.” He’d like her to step back, just in case, because while it’s unlikely Belgard could successfully take her as a hostage he’d rather the other man not even try. He can feel Treville at his shoulder – the other man’s gun hasn’t wavered from Belgard since they entered.

Another woman might drop the knife now and fly into his arms, sobbing. Milady tucks it away instead and turns towards him, teeth glittering in a savage smile. “Just fine.”

She stalks past him to leave the room, brushing closely enough for him to feel the warmth and solidity of her, meeting his eyes for only a moment as she passes. It’s enough for him to wish he could follow and comfort her – anyone who didn’t know her well would think she was barely bothered by any of this, but he can tell she’s deeply shaken, more so than she usually is by threats to her life. She’s taking purposefully deep, calming breaths and fiddling with her choker. He wonders what happened before they entered the room. He turns back to Belgard, murder in his eyes.

“Athos,” Porthos says, seeing this. He’s also breathing a little too quickly. “Athos, come on. We’re the ones who broke in, and who attacked just then. He went a little too far, but -”

“Further than you know,” Athos says.

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” Belgard says.

“Really? Because Eleanor and Levesque have both claimed that the idea to sell young girls to interested buyers was yours,” Athos says. “They’re willing to testify to that.”

“Lies,” Belgard snaps. “If they were taking part in something that disgusting, I had no idea. They would say anything to shift the blame. Surely you can see that.”

“Perhaps,” Athos says silkily. “In any event, the account book Levesque has admitted to keeping in
secret ought to help us tell truth from lies. Once we locate it, it will be easy enough to tell where the money went. I doubt it all went on fine silks and card games.”

“Your crimes had to catch up with you one day, Belgard,” Treville says.

Belgard looks past them, recognising the voice, and his eyes widen as he sees his old friend. “Treville. Well, that explains this reunion. What, did you find the boy and tell him to come kill me so you could cleanse your own guilt? Did you happen to mention your part in what happened?”

“He found you himself. I told him nothing. But I should have.” Treville turns to Porthos, his face crumpling into deep lines of regret and pain. In all his years working for Treville, Athos has never seem him look so old or so defeated, except perhaps during some of their arguments about what happened in Savoy. “I should have told you that many years ago, I made the worst mistake of my life, and that I have regretted it every day since. I should have told you that -”

“You should have told him that you left him and his mother in the slums,” Belgard finishes for him. Athos notices his hand is groping backwards, towards the musket on the desk. “You should’ve told him that whatever you gave him, money or position or even respect, was just as a sop for your conscience.”

Porthos looks at Treville, eyes bright with hurt. “Captain?” he asks, forgetting that Treville hasn’t been their captain for many months now.

“Only half of that is true,” Treville says pleadingly. “De Foix and I left you and your mother at the Court of Miracles, yes, but it was at his urging. He said he’d slit both your throats if we didn’t. I’d given my word to help him, and I did, and I am more ashamed of that than words can say. But I never had the chance to find you and make amends – you came to me instead, and there was nothing I gave you that you didn’t earn. I swear to you, Porthos, that’s the truth.”

“Look at how he twists things,” Belgard snaps. His hand is now stealthily closing over the musket. Athos readies his grip on his sword, prepared to draw the second he raises the gun. “He was the one who took you there, and he’s the one who’s been lying to you.”

There’s a very long pause. They all watch Porthos get lost in thought. His gaze moves from Belgard, to Treville, to the window, to the desk, to Athos, to the door, and then come to rest on Belgard again. Something in his look is that of a lost child, but it disappears as he seems to work through something in his mind.

Finally, Porthos shakes his head. “Yeah. He’s lied to me. But he’s not the one who’s been selling girls. And he’s not the one who nearly cut off my friend’s fingers. And he’s definitely not the one who’s about to -”

Belgard raises the gun at Treville, then cries out in pain as it’s wrenched from his hand and flies backwards – Porthos was faster, and his bullet hit the musket squarely. No doubt it’s ruined. Porthos tucks his own gun away and stares at the man.

“You don’t understand,” Belgard says weakly, holding his stinging hand to his chest.

“No,” Porthos says, face twisting with pain, “I don’t understand. Not at all. But I’m just gonna have to live with that, because I think I’m done here.”

“You have to hear me out. You’re my son. You said it yourself, you’re my son.”

Porthos looks at him, and something in his eyes hardens. “I was wrong. I might not know exactly who I am, but I know who I’m not.”
He turns and leaves.

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She is not quite sure what she’s doing here, standing outside this dingy tavern and considering entering.

The moment they got back to Paris, Porthos dragged the rest of them – including Constance and Treville – to the nearest tavern, but Milady hadn’t hesitated to refuse. She had to go home and see to her son, she said, an irrefutable argument (and quite true – even when she was spy-hunting for Treville she managed to stop by home quite often, so this is the longest she’s been away since his birth, and her breasts ache). Athos had made noises about coming with her, but she’d waved him off, and headed home on her own.

Where she’d fed René, and helped swaddle him, and sat watching him sleep. Sitting there, it hadn’t taken long to realise she was bored, and somewhat lonely, and a bit worried about how Porthos was doing in the aftermath of his long-held dreams crumbling to dust. She wants to know if he’s alright. And what about Constance – Madame Bonacieux, she forcibly corrects herself – who she sent into danger and has barely seen since, let alone checked on? And Aramis, who she hasn’t had much of a chance to talk to recently, and d’Artagnan, who she has several pithy comments saved up for, and Treville, who she needs to discuss a few espionage-related issues with, and where better to do that subtly than on a night out with friends? And of course her husband, who she sees all the time, of course, but rarely shares a drink in a tavern with.

When did these people come to matter to her? Enough for her to care about them. Enough for her to be standing here, ready to sweep into the room, full of blasé excuses about why she’s turned up after all after claiming she had better things to do.

She hears footsteps behind her and turns, frowning slightly – they weren’t the confident tread of someone on legitimate business, but the scurrying steps of a human rat. A thief, perhaps, or a watcher. Maybe a spy from one of the spy-nests she found for Treville. She’d done her best not to be seen, but anyone can make mistakes.

“Hello?” she says, just in case they’re fool enough to reply and try to cover for their error by pretending to be an honest citizen. “Who’s there?”

“Anne?” The voice comes from behind her instead, and she turns to see Athos coming out the door of the tavern. His expression brightens at the sight of her. “I was just going…”

“Home?” She arches an eyebrow at him, deciding not to worry about whoever was following her. Like as not it’s just a thief, trying his luck with whatever drunk patrons stagger out of this place. “Leaving your wife by herself in this unsavoury location?”

“Never,” he says, and holds out his arm for her to follow him back inside.

Everyone seems to be a few drinks down, and they don’t question Athos’s reappearance with her, only raising mugs in cheerful greeting. She settles into a seat opposite Porthos and dispatches Athos to get her a drink (this being, of course, what husbands are for – well, one thing, anyway).

Aramis is in animated conversation with Constance about the treatment of some horrible childhood ailment they’ve both seen before. According to Aramis, the correct treatment of the sores is turpentine, and according to Constance it should be eggs. Confusing things further, some notes on it that Lemay’s lent Aramis claim oil of roses is better than both (why does he keep encouraging the man?). It’s a surprisingly involved argument for something Milady considers so wholly
irrelevant to any of their lives at present.

D’Artagnan just sits there, happy to listen, basking in the joy of having his arm around Constance. Occasionally, his gaze sweeps around the tavern – looking out for threats, maybe, or perhaps just for judgmental stares. He was very quiet on the way back from Belgard’s estate, sharing his horse with Constance, brow creased in thought.

Milady thinks speaking to Constance’s friends, neighbours, and family was good for him – it let him experience some small measure of what she has to every day. Men so rarely get to feel the consequences of illicit affairs (unless, of course, like Aramis, they’re stupid enough to cuckold men who can have them killed with ease). In most affairs, the social and legal ramifications belong to the women in question. Even the church considers them temptresses, and their lovers barely culpable – it was Eve who offered Adam the apple, after all, they say. Her failing, her fault, and Adam an innocent victim, who could not be expected to say no. Nearly all paintings of that scene show the snake with Eve’s face, or the face of another woman, in a fine example of the church’s lack of subtlety. She’s sat through a depressing amount of sermons on the subject in her life – one of the many downsides of pretending to be a nun, although the black market value of holy relics more than makes up for the rest, in her opinion (she decides after Aramis has finished his talk with Constance, she’ll tell him this).

Porthos is looking at her. “Sorry about not stopping him when he had a knife on you,” he says, with his typical bluntness.

She shrugs. “I’m the one who got us caught in the first place,” she says, matching his bluntness.

“No harm done,” he says. “Here.” He pulls a sheaf of papers out of his leather jerkin and holds them out to her. “You kept your word. You found him.”

“No need,” she says, making a careless flicking gesture.

He raises his eyebrows. “Nice of you.”

“Not at all. You can do me a favour in return sometime. I’ll enjoy holding it over your head. A favour from one of the famous Inseparables is more valuable than some paltry inheritance from an old general, after all.” As always, she inflects the word ‘Inseparables’ with the same gentle mockery she does ‘Musketeers’.

He looks at her and laughs, really amused by this rather transparent lie. “Of course. Because that’s the only way one of us would ever help you? Even your husband? And of course you’d never do something for me of the kindness of your heart. It’s all trades and deals, cheques and balances, nothing more than that.”

“Well, what else would it be?” She affects an air of disdain, looking away.

“I’m onto you,” he informs her, grinning.

Athos places a tankard in front of her, and after a moment of hesitation puts his arm around her – they usually twine around each other like vines in their home, but affection in front of other people is considerably rarer. It feels like it steadies her, somewhat. She turns her head to address something to him but before she can speak, d’Artagnan’s leaning forward to start a discussion with him and Treville about training.

She’s stuck with Porthos, who’s still grinning at her. She gives him a glare in response. Having feelings is ruining her reputation.
“I don’t know what you’re looking so happy about,” she tells him. “All our plans failed dismally. We didn’t learn a thing except what Treville told us. Will you forgive him now, do you think?” Distracted by his own conversation, Treville won’t hear, but she lowers her voice just in case.

He drops his own in response. “In time, yeah. I wish he’d come clean earlier, but he told the truth eventually, and he’s sorry. Might take a while, but we’ll get back to where we were before. Maybe even better, now I know how wrapped up his story is with mine.”

“I don’t suppose he said if you’re legitimate? With Belgard and the Levesques locked up, there’s a nice estate sitting empty…” She shrugs. “You didn’t get a family, so you may as well get a fortune.”

“I did get a family. Sort of.”

“Shame they’re such pieces of work, really,” she says, flexing her fingers as she thinks about the Marquis’s cold eyes.

He laughs. “Well, some of you are, but I’m used to it. Wouldn’t change a thing.” It takes her a second to register what he means, and by then he’s already continuing. “I’m pretty lucky, you know? My family is big, and getting bigger every year. Treville, Aramis, Athos, d’Artagnan, Flea, Samara, Constance, the kid, you…”

“Don’t involve me in this.”

“You’re married to my brother, what are you if not my sister?” He leans back in his chair, satisfied with his logic. “You said it was too late for a family. I think you’re wrong. You have a big family, same as me. You can only fight that for so long.”

It’s a long pause, where they stare each other down. Unexpectedly – at least unexpectedly to her – she’s the one to give in.

She glances around the room and admits, silently and reluctantly, that he has a point – she’s been telling herself since the birth of her son that he could do worse than having this collection of people as allies, and the truth is she could do a lot worse too. They’re absurd and self-righteous and overdramatic and quixotic and make terrible life choices, but when the situation is at its worst, there’s no one better to call on.

She can remember the midwife telling her that women giving birth usually had a huge crowd of family and friends with them, and sure enough, by the end of it, her house was packed with them. Perhaps she’s been fighting this since then, this bizarre fondness she can’t help but feel for these idiots. They love her husband nearly as much as she does, they love her son, and they talk to her like a friend and equal.

She leans slightly further into Athos and he shifts to let her. She can feel his heartbeat, steady and sure and strong. He glances down at her and gives her a shadow of a smile. He loves these people, and so they will always be bound to them, and her son will grow up with them, and she – well, she may as well allow herself to feel happy about that, instead of scared and defensive. She is happy about that, although why she should feel happy about the thought of a lifetime clearing up the messes caused by their impulsiveness, overactive emotions, and terrible plans, she has no idea. Family… yes, perhaps, if you want to get technical. But after Athos’s father, after Thomas, after Catherine, after her own messy and dangerous upbringing, the word holds no positive connotations for her.

Friends is better. Friendship is a choice, and now, with a sigh, she makes it.
“Friend,” she says finally, grudgingly. “I’m willing to accept friend, alright? That’s it.”

“He does know her, she admits – knows her well enough not to crow over his victory, but instead change the subject immediately to something else. Hopefully he also knows her well enough not to even try any of his little tricks, because she is not an easy mark.

“Fine,” Anne says with a pretence of exasperation, but she can’t stop the smile that comes to her face.
Athos runs his eyes down the rows of flowers. It’s silly, he knows, that he puts so much effort into always buying her the healthiest and brightest-looking forget-me-nots, examining the blooms with the same laser-like focus he gives to ensuring his weapons are sound and sharp. Silly, and yet the least silly thing in the world, because perhaps they’re nothing but a token to show he loves her and thinks of her always, but that just means the more effort he puts into it the more completely he demonstrates that fact.

The flower-seller, by this point well accustomed to his obsessiveness, serves another customer and leaves him to it.

Athos examines a little posy at the end, stepping closer to look at it, and then there’s the familiar whine of a bullet passing close by his ear. It slams into the wall, throwing out chips of stone that slice his cheek and shred several flowers.

The surprise holds everyone else frozen, but Athos’s reaction to the noise of gunfire is built into his nervous system at this point – he’s diving for the ground, taking the flower-seller with him, before the second shot hits. He yells out, “Get down! Everyone, down!” with as much authority as he can manage while being stretched face-down on the ground. “And stay down!”

His years of experience give him an innate awareness of the angle and distance – someone on ground level, all the way across the square. At that distance, with the flatness of the ground and the colourful collection of stalls blocking sightlines, being as low as possible is the best option. However, it means he can’t find whoever it is. Adrenaline fizzes in his veins as he scrambles upright again as quickly as possible, finding cover behind a wall and then using the ladder there and a window sill to get himself around the side of the upper level in moments. The shooter would have lost him the second he had cover, and people don’t usually look up when they’re seeking someone who was previously on the ground. Now he can search for the shooter without being an easy target.

And he knows, with absolute sureness, that he was the target. If he hadn’t taken a step forward at that precise moment…

He scans the entire square. There’s a few people still rushing to get out of there instead of simply hitting the ground, but none of them are in the right location to have made that shot. It takes him a minute to narrow it down, but when he does, he almost groans – they picked their spot well, this shooter. It must have been that little depression in the wall right at the mouth of the street. An easy place to lean against, pretending to be tired, just sheltered enough to draw a weapon without being noticed, a perfect sightline to the flower shop, and the shooter could leave and be lost in moments in the busy street after taking the shot. They’ll be long gone by now, he knows.

He also knows this was no opportunistic attack. For them to pick the perfect spot, they had to know what times are too busy to make the shot and what times are too slow to escape afterwards. They had to know that Athos stops by this flower-seller regularly. They had to know he just left the Garrison and was on his way home, in order to get there ahead of him – lying in wait would take too long and someone would remember the shooter. They must have been following him. For some time, probably.

But who wants him dead so badly, and why?

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“Shh,” Milady murmurs to René, bouncing him a little in her arms. He only cries louder. She’s too tense herself to be able to calm him, she thinks – her body too stiff. She heaves out a sigh of frustration, closing her eyes. She’s getting a headache. She’s been like a nervous cat for the past hour, standing suddenly, pacing the room too quickly, wondering constantly if she should go speak to Athos immediately. He’s supposed to be home by now. What’s delayed him so? She needs to talk to him right away.

For the past few days, René has been teething, so she’s stayed home with him. But today he seemed fine, his fretful crying dying down and his temperature returning to normal, so she’d gone to gather gossip for Treville. She hadn’t expected what she found.

“My lady?” the nurse says hesitantly.

Milady blinks and realises she’s holding René against her chest too tightly – not enough to hurt him, but enough to be uncomfortable. “Take him to the nursery,” she orders the woman brusquely, passing over the crying child. The woman nods, bobs a curtsey, and leaves with him.

Milady wraps her arms around herself. Perhaps she should go to the Garrison. But Athos should be home any minute, surely, and there’s too many listening ears there anyway. You have to all but clear out the Garrison to get privacy there, and that takes time.

She doesn’t know why this worries her so much, why she’s reacting to rumours with the urgency she would normally save for direct attack. But lately she’s been strange and overly paranoid all the time – when she walks down the street, she feels like she’s being followed, she notices that creeping sensation of dread, like cold fingers wandering up her spine, caused by another’s gaze on her back. When she looks, of course, there’s no one there, and certainly no one watching her. Perhaps she is, after all, unable to cope with a simple and safe life without conjuring spectres in every corner, perhaps she’s too used to being hunted and under threat to comprehend a world where no one is after her. Perhaps. But the crawling discomfort has lodged itself under her skin, leaving her itchy and jumpy, and when she heard this gossip her free-wheeling fears had found something to latch onto.

She relaxes slightly as she hears the noise of doors opening and closing, and a moment later he’s in the room – covered in dust, a cut on one cheek, and brows furrowed like he’s already troubled, but here. He blinks as he takes in her equally troubled expression.

“I need to talk to you,” she says bluntly.

“Is everything alright? Were you attacked?” he asks.

“What? No.” She bites her lip. “I was gossiping with the maids at the Louvre, if you must know. And what do you think the most scurrilous rumour was, passed on by a Red Guard one of them’s been seeing in her off-hours?”

“What?”

“The Queen and her lover,” Milady says, dropping the words like the bomb they are. The walls of this room are very thick, otherwise she wouldn’t dare talk above a whisper, but she still keeps her voice low just in case. “Her Musketeer lover, moreover. There was no name attached, but it hardly matters. It’s all over the Louvre, Athos, everyone’s talking of it. The maids, the guards, the footmen, the grooms, the Queen’s ladies, all of them whispering about Her Majesty’s infidelity.”

Athos curses, pacing the length of the room in angry strides, then turning back on her like he’s about to launch an attack. “What did Aramis do?”
“Who knows?” she snaps, still keeping her voice so low he has to strain to hear it. “But whatever he did, it attracted attention.”

“Perhaps no one will dare to tell the King. They must know he wouldn’t stand for that kind of talk about Her Majesty.”

“With the way he’s been about the Spanish lately? With the thoughts he’s aired about his Spanish wife, about the Spanish spy she talked him into employing, about her Spanish brother who tried to have him killed?” She shakes her head. “Some idiot will overestimate the King’s pique and petulance, and underestimate his underlying fondness for Her Majesty, and they’ll try and curry favour by passing it along. A courtier, perhaps.”

“His Majesty isn’t as credulous as all that,” Athos says firmly. “He knows his courtiers’ words are about as much use as birdcall, and much more insincere.”

“I hope so,” she says. “I really do.”

“Someone must have started the rumours,” Athos says. “Can you find out who?”

Rumours grow in tangled, twisted ways, warping as they move from person to person, taking on a life of their own. Tracing the source of them can be very difficult. So far, the Red Guards were the furthest she was able to trace it back, and they gossip worse than the courtiers. She’d need better access to them than she currently has to figure out where it originated. But by Athos’s dark expression, he doesn’t seem to think this gossip developed organically.

“You think this was planted?” she asks, giving him a thin smile. The story is consistent enough that it’s a possibility. “You’re becoming nearly as paranoid as me. Not everyone is out to get you and your friends, Athos.”

“Someone took a shot at me earlier,” Athos says. She could point out that people shoot at him every day, but that’s different – they’re shooting at the Captain of the Musketeers, not at Athos. She feels a surge of worry and anger go through her. Is that what she’s been sensing, the source of her dread? Not someone after her, but someone after Athos – a much less understandable crime. “How close?”

“Close enough. I think they were following me. Keep the doors barred and stay away from windows, just in case.”

“I will.” She shifts back to the previous topic, considering the possibility of a planted rumour. It’s better than demanding to know exactly how close is close enough, better than throwing questions at him about where and when and why, because he is every bit as capable as investigating that side of things as she is, if not more. She should focus on her own specialties, and not delve into things she does not need to know that will only worsen her illogical fears. “From the sound of it, the rumours have been going around for a few days now. What was Aramis doing a few days ago?”

“Escorting the English ambassador to Le Havre for a visit home.”

That increases the possibility of the gossip being a deliberate attack, she supposes. Aramis couldn’t exactly spark rumours while miles away. Unless the Lady Marguerite quarrelled with the Queen over him, and she doesn’t seem the quarrelsome sort. Still, she can’t rule Marguerite out – the woman would ruin her own prospects and the stability of the whole country as well as Aramis’s life, but that might not matter to someone angry enough. It’s been at least a month since Aramis left her, but Milady has waited years for revenge before, and she knows that time doesn’t always dull
anger. Even if Marguerite’s anger is probably less like the toxic, slow-boiling rage that made Milady’s world run red with blood and start to burn, and more like a spoilt noblewoman’s pique, that doesn’t mean it’s not a possibility.

“I can look into where these are coming from,” she says slowly. Starting with Marguerite. “I’ve got a few leads.”

“I’ll come with -” Athos starts to say.

“No, you won’t.”

“It might be dangerous.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Yes, it might. But I need to get information subtly. You’re many things, Athos, but subtle isn’t one of them. I don’t want people to know I’m questioning them, and you never talk to people except to question them, so it’s a bit of a giveaway.”

He pauses, then says, “Fine. I suppose if someone’s shooting at me, it’s best not to have you standing next to me anyway. Could you take one of the others with you?”

She considers it. “Fine.”

If she’s going to talk to Marguerite, the woman’s likely to say more with Aramis around, so it would be worth taking him just for that. It occurs to her that if Lady Marguerite isn’t the source of the rumours, she could be the solution to them – all she needs to do is tell people that the reason Aramis spends so much time near the Queen and Dauphin is because of her. An illicit affair as cover for an illicit affair. Of course, she probably won’t want to ruin her life for the man who used her, but Milady can be very persuasive, and presumably, so can Aramis.

It’s interesting the rumour is so rife in the Red Guards, as well – the traditional rivals of the Musketeers. Is this some scheme by one of them? In her experience, most Red Guards are so lacking in intelligence they need someone as smart as Richelieu to make up the difference, but it’s not impossible. She’s avoided talking to the Red Guards before now, despite them being a useful source of information, because she was aware a few might remember her from the times she worked with them or passed on the Cardinal’s directions. But Porthos regularly drinks with them, doesn’t he? And fleeces them at cards. He could help her with that.

“I’ll take Aramis or Porthos with me for everything,” she tells him, “So long as you promise to keep d’Artagnan with you at all times.” D’Artagnan’s best quality, after all, is his willingness to take a bullet for her husband, and Milady is happy to make use of this.

“Fine,” he echoes her with a sigh.

“Are you going to tell Porthos and d’Artagnan what’s going on?”

“Only that someone’s spreading malicious gossip about the Queen, and may be targeting us,” he says. “But if this does reach the King’s ears, they’ll have to know that the rumour’s… well…”

“Not inaccurate?” she suggests, with a sour half-smirk. “Hopefully I can deal with it before that happens.”

“We’ll deal with it together,” Athos promises, uncharacteristically optimistic. “We’ve dealt with much worse, after all.”

“And if worst comes to worst, we can always flee,” she says, letting her eyes slide half-closed and
surveying him through the slits. “Leave it to others to sort out wars, lines of succession, politics, all that rubbish. Find a nice cottage somewhere.”

He gives a brief smile, though it seems like an effort. She can’t tell if he’s taking what she said for an ill-timed joke, although she didn’t intend it as one, or if he’s taking it at face value and is mildly discomfited by the suggestion. His response gives her no clues. “I’m sure we can find whoever’s behind this and arrest them before it reaches the King.”

“Arrest. Of course.” She thinks of the problems she’s ‘dealt with’ in the past, problems just like this – the Cardinal’s preferred approach to incriminating information spreading through the city was not a gentle one. She doesn’t miss those days, and she certainly doesn’t miss those methods. But she will use them if necessary. If close enough becomes too close, she won’t hesitate. She would rather risk his disappointment than his death.

Athos must see the darkening in her eyes, the way her expression twists slightly at the thought of his reaction. “Anne?” he asks, seeming confused by her changing mood.

Of course Athos won’t want her to do anything morally dubious, not to blackmail anyone or frame them for a crime, not to make anyone disappear. He has lines he doesn’t want her to cross: lines, she sometimes thinks cynically, he would never apply to himself or his friends, who can do whatever they wish and call it right. As if they have Athos’s good opinion by default, whereas it’s something she has to fight for every day.

She tries to shake the thought off. But truthfully, she’s felt for months now as if she has to prove herself to him continuously. He told her once there was nothing she could do to make him stop loving her, but deep down, she can’t quite believe that, because she remembers what he did the first time she failed to be the woman he wanted her to be.

But this… this is who she is. She wants to be better, she’s trying to be better, but when it comes to the safety of the people she loves…

She reaches out a hand and lays it on his cheek, and he turns his face into it and closes his eyes. The bristles rub against her palm, and she can feel the curve of his smile against her skin, happy just to be close to her. “If whoever’s behind this is a threat, then I’ll do whatever it takes to stop them,” she says bluntly, emphasising it so he takes her meaning. “Whatever it takes. If you believe anything, believe that.”

He pulls back for a moment, smile fading, and something flickers across his face, a flash of emotion he locks away before she can identify it. Disgust? Fear? Disdain? Disappointment? She doesn’t want to know.

She desperately wants to know.

“I do,” he says quietly. There is something almost sad about that plain, unadorned truth, but she still can’t tell exactly what he’s thinking.

He’s troubled by what she said, she thinks, feeling a sinking sensation. Troubled by the reminder of who his wife is?

He kisses her palm, then tilts his head down so she can meet his lips with hers, ending the conversation.

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“I can’t believe it,” d’Artagnan says, lips pursed in disapproval. He looks likes Treville at his most
annoyed, or even Athos himself – less fiery and more contained than he used to be, but just as annoyed.

“It’s hardly the worst rumour that’s made the rounds,” Porthos says more peaceably.

D’Artagnan shakes his head. “Maybe, but this is still low. Not just attacking the Queen’s reputation, but attacking the honour of the Musketeers.”

So that’s what angers him so. It makes sense, Athos supposes – maybe it’s the relative newness of his commission, but d’Artagnan is more invested in the glory and nobility of the Musketeers than the other Inseparables. To the rest of them, the honour of being a Musketeer has long since settled into comfortable background noise of their lives, just part of the job. To d’Artagnan, it’s still shiny and new, yet to be fully tarnished by reality.

“Making the Queen out to be faithless and fickle,” d’Artagnan pursues, oblivious to Aramis’s growing expression of discomfort. “And claiming the Musketeers’ devotion to Her Majesty is based on sordid reasons, that we’re so base that we’d forget about duty, honour, loyalty to France -”

“Yes, we get the idea,” Athos says, mostly because Aramis’s expression is approaching rictus-like. “In any case, we need to look into it.”

Milady clears her throat pointedly.

“And look into the person who tried to shoot me,” Athos adds with a sigh, correctly interpreting her disapproval at his priorities. “D’Artagnan and I will go back to the square and see if there’s anything more we can find out.”

“If whoever it is has been following you for a while, some of the men might have seen him,” d’Artagnan says. “We can ask around. Someone will have noticed something.”

“So Aramis and I are investigating the rumour while you do that?” Porthos asks.

“No, I am,” Milady says. “But Athos has generously lent you to me for the time being.”

“Well, well,” Aramis says, not looking especially thrilled by this, although he tries to hide it with a wry smile. “And what will you do with us, now you have us?” He clearly expects to be kept out of this as much as possible, which is the worst punishment he can imagine – sitting idle and pretending innocence while others try and deal with the ramifications of his actions.

“We’re going to see the Lady Marguerite,” Milady tells Aramis, with a knife’s edge of a smile. “Just the two of us.”


She shakes her head like she can’t believe how oblivious they all are, but doesn’t enlighten them anyway. “She’s the right place to start. Trust me on that.”

Athos also searches his memory for Lady Marguerite, and comes up with a vague image of her, a long pale figure always in the background of Her Majesty and the Dauphin, always present. She has more opportunity to have seen something than anyone but Constance, who is obviously not a suspect. And Marguerite was with Her Majesty at the old fort at Chatillon, he remembers suddenly. The woman had been in the room while Aramis and Her Majesty all but embraced each other and declared their feelings, while Aramis stared at the Dauphin like he was staring at the face of God, while Athos dropped slightly-too-heavy hints about the impropriety of Aramis spending time with the Queen… his wife is right, as usual.
“What about me?” Porthos wants to know.

A part of Athos itches to tell him to go with Milady and help protect her, but he stifles it. If she’s only taking Aramis, there’s probably a reason. And she seems… colder, today. Like she’s unhappy not just with the world, but him in particular. Whatever he’s done to hurt or offend her, he doesn’t want to make it worse. “Stay here and keep an eye on things. If anything happens, send for the rest of us immediately.”

“What do you think is going to happen?”

Athos shrugs slightly. Truth be told, he has no idea. He only knows that the King has come close to disbanding the Musketeers before, and may again. He only knows that someone is targeting him and his men, and he doesn’t know why.

He only knows that his wife seems unhappy, and that it’s probably his fault.

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“I keep telling you,” Aramis says, “Spreading rumours isn’t Marguerite’s style. Revenge isn’t exactly her style either.”

“Oh, does your intimate understanding of her extend so far? Do you know her soul?” She invests the words with as much sarcasm as possible. “If not her, who do you think spread this rumour? Someone knows. Someone told. She’s the most likely suspect.”

“It could be a lucky guess?” Aramis suggests hopefully, and she gives him an incredulous look. “Well, it could be. Besides, since when does His Majesty react strongly to rumours?”

“Hmm. Since people started trying to kill him every second week? Since his most trusted advisors all died or turned out to be traitors? Since -”

“Alright, alright.” Aramis stops moving and gestures at the door at the end of the corridor, two guards at attention outside it. “Marguerite will be in there, with the Dauphin.” His voice wavers very slightly on the last word.

Milady reaches out a hand to stop him as he starts moving forward again. “The last thing we need is for you to be caught breaking into the Dauphin’s rooms. We’ll wait for this governess of yours to leave the room, then speak to her.”

“But I always just knock on the door and she lets me in,” Aramis protests quietly, stilling. She can practically feel how badly he wants to see his son, the way he’s straining towards the door.

“And you’ll be lucky if that doesn’t get you hung. We wait.”

They hang just out of sight for what feels like two hours. Twice Milady pulls Aramis into a small hiding space she knows to avoid the patrols – though they’re doing nothing wrong, she’d prefer not to be spotted anyway. Then, finally, Marguerite emerges, presumably to go get some toy or meal for the Dauphin. When she’s passing the corridor place they’re in, Aramis whistles and then gestures to her.

Marguerite frowns, seeming for a moment like she’ll refuse to approach her former lover – Milady thinks she can see guilt in the hesitancy. But then, with a long sigh, she comes over. “Aramis,” she says, a little tightly. “What are you doing here?” She switches gazes to Milady, recognition registering in her blue eyes – the woman from the fort. “And who is she?”
“How about we ask our questions first,” Milady drawls. “Heard any good rumours lately?”

Marguerite tenses slightly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, you can do better than that. That was completely unconvincing,” Milady says. She lets some of the lightness leave her voice, to be replaced by coldness. “Let’s try this again…”

“Marguerite,” Aramis says pleadingly, ignoring Milady and stepping forward. “If you know what’s going on, please, tell me.”

Marguerite pauses, biting her lip, staring up at Aramis. “I’ve heard the rumours,” she admits stiltedly, after a second. “About you and… about you and Her Majesty. I didn’t have anything to do with them, though. I swear it, Aramis, I would never -”

“I know, I know -” Aramis starts to say soothingly, but Milady has already grabbed the woman’s neck and slammed her back against the wall. “Milady!”

“That’s interesting,” Milady says conversationally to Marguerite. She raises one of her daggers, pulled from a carefully concealed part of her skirts, and holds it a few inches from the other woman’s chest. She tries not to think of what her husband would say if he saw her now, what he would think – someday, will she take it one step too far and return to being nothing but a monster in his gaze? But how can she help doing whatever it takes to protect them?

Marguerite’s eyes dart between the knife and her hard face. Milady continues, “I spent hours investigating these rumours, seeing how far they’d spread. And you know, everyone who spoke of it talked about the Queen and her Musketeer lover. No name included. So how is it you have a name?”

“Aramis!” Marguerite bleats, not even struggling, pale face going the colour of whey. “Aramis, please -”

“That’s enough,” Aramis snarls, tugging Milady back. She allows it, but keeps her knife out. “You jump to violence far too quickly. If Marguerite says she doesn’t know anything about this -”

“Then I suggest she tells me what she does know,” Milady says coolly. She doesn’t let her gaze leave Marguerite’s face, watching the way her eyes dart about like a trapped rabbit. Fear, guilt, anger, shame. It’s all there. “What do you know? And more importantly, who did you tell?”

It takes a few more threats from Milady, a few more beseeching looks from Aramis, but then it pours out on a tide of wrenching sobs that makes Milady grind her teeth in annoyance.

Marguerite had realised that the way Aramis looked at Her Majesty was slightly too loving, slightly too longing. The tension when the two of them were together, the way they seemed to speak in code to each other, Aramis’s ban from the Louvre… and then there was the way he was with their future King. That time when the Dauphin was sick and he’d all but burst in – his preoccupation with the little boy’s safety – his expression as he sang lullabies – well. Perhaps she was a fool to think it, but –

Milady has, by now, come to the inescapable conclusion that Marguerite most definitely is a fool. But worse than that, she’s weak, she’s damp. She’s apologetic when she should be angry, self-effacing when she should be strong, swooning when she should be sensible. Giving Marguerite a secret and telling her to look after it would be like leaving your horse’s reins in the hands of a friendly drunkard – if he kept it, it would only be by accident. The most surprising thing about the situation is that Marguerite ever put two and two together and made four, and Milady suspects the
only reason she ever did is because Aramis has a poker face that could lose him a fortune. You can practically see his thoughts written above his head as he listens to her.

“So who did you share these… unfounded suspicions… with?” Milady cuts in finally, bored by stammered apologies and self-contradictions. The woman is clearly still madly in love with Aramis. Bizarre, considering his behaviour to her, but then Marguerite seems like the sort of wet sop who would swoon for any man if given the chance. Against Aramis’s slick, practiced charm and his flamboyant good looks, she must have fallen apart completely. How nauseating.

“No one, no one -”

“Liar.” Milady doesn’t bother to say it threateningly, instead casually dropping the word like a rock.

Marguerite looks to Aramis pleadingly, clearly still believing he must be the one in charge and therefore able to haul his companion back like a dog on a chain. Personally, Milady would focus on the person with the knife and no reason to like her, but then she has considerably more experience surviving than this woman does.

“Please, Marguerite. No one blames you,” Aramis says softly, looking like he blames himself more.

“I… I was upset,” Marguerite says, wide pale eyes widening further. Between that and the dark shadows below them, she looks more like a wraith than anything else. “And he came across me, and he was so kind, so I may have said some things I should not have…”

“Who?”

“The doctor,” the woman says, cringing away from Milady’s fierceness.

“Lemay?” Aramis says, brow clearing. “Well, he’d never tell anyone.”

Milady opens her mouth to disagree, and then closes it again. Truthfully, she can’t see Lemay telling people about this either. Frankly, she can’t even really picture him comforting a crying Marguerite – the poor man must have been awkward beyond words. She’s met him a couple of times through Aramis (even excluding the time she nearly died), and he’s a very friendly man, but for all his learning, he’s not very clever with people. He somehow manages to live in the Louvre and remain utterly oblivious to all rumours and undercurrents, completely untouched by them. Even Constance and d’Artagnan’s terribly-concealed affair came as a surprise to him.

“May I return to my duties?” Marguerite says. “The Dauphin is alone but for his guards, and I only planned to step out for a moment.” Milady sighs and steps back, letting her go.

“Wait a moment,” Aramis says urgently. “Marguerite, I just want to make sure… if someone comes to ask you about this, will you… I mean, could you please… on the basis of whatever wisps of fondness you may still feel for me…”

“I’ll tell anyone who asks I never said such a thing,” Marguerite says, with surprising fierceness. She gives Aramis a trembling smile, and says, “After all, if things had been different… if we had been able to really be together…”

“Please just go,” says Milady, who’s getting a headache. Apparently Marguerite still hasn’t realised that Aramis’s main interest in her was always the Dauphin, and she never had a chance at his love. It’s in their interests that she doesn’t ever realise that, but it still frustrates Milady.
“You don’t want to keep interrogating her about whether she told someone else?” Aramis asks her in an undertone as Marguerite darts away. “I mean, you can’t seriously think Lemay told everyone this.”

“I don’t,” Milady says grimly. “I think the Lady Marguerite sobbed out a scandal in the Louvre, a place that has thin walls and is continually patrolled by Red Guards, who gossip worse than anyone and have a deep-seated dislike of Musketeers.”

Aramis looks like a weight is lifting off his shoulders. “But that means… we’re fine, surely. Marguerite will deny it to anyone who asks her. Lemay will deny it to anyone who asks him. No one’s going to believe a couple of Red Guards spreading lies about the Musketeers.”

“I’ll track them down anyway,” Milady says, letting the ‘lies’ comment go for the moment. “Better to persuade them to leave Paris. Then it looks like it was a couple of fools who didn’t think their treasonous little rumour would spread so far or so quickly, and fled when they realised they could get in trouble for it.” She’ll even see if she can get them to leave a letter stating that with a friend or a favourite in whatever brothel they frequent, to neatly wrap the whole thing up in a parcel.

She could feel the weight slipping off her shoulders as well, if not for one detail. If this rumour isn’t a deliberate attack, just Marguerite blabbing about her romantic woes, then who tried to kill Athos? Is that related to the rumours – some madman trying to punish the Musketeers for supposedly disgracing the Queen – or is it utterly separate from them, a total coincidence?

“I’ll talk to Lemay,” Aramis says, “Just to make sure he’ll keep quiet as well. And then perhaps I should stop by Her Majesty’s rooms, just to let her know not to worry about the rumours, that they’re sorted.”

She jerks her attention back to him. “What? No you shouldn’t.”

“I have to tell her -”

“No, you don’t.”

“But she’ll be concerned.”

“No doubt. Have Treville or Athos pass along that everything is fine, if you must send a message.”

Milady glares at him.

He looks back at her. “You don’t understand. I have to see her.”

“No, I don’t understand. I don’t understand why you’re determined to wreck everything. It’s like you just don’t learn. You feel guilty, but not enough to change. You’ve implicated my husband in treason -”

Aramis scoffs. “Oh, please, they’ll never connect him with it.”

She ignores him. “Not to mention me as well -”

“That one’s your own fault, with respect. You didn’t have to pry.”

“And you endanger the Queen every time you do this.”

“I would die for her,” Aramis says with quiet fierceness.

“Keep this up and maybe you will,” Milady says snidely. “You think only of yourself. Think of
her, will you? Or at least think of your son.” What she really means is, think of how you’re impinging on my life, but she somehow doubts that will be as effective a guilt trip.

“I think of nothing else!” It’s almost an explosion. “However hard I try! I think I’m coping, dealing with it, and then I come here, and I can’t help myself. Risking everything to talk to Her Majesty. Seducing Marguerite just to see my son. I know I’m behaving stupidly, but it’s impossible to stop. It’s like nothing else matters when I think of them. Nothing. Not the King, not Marguerite, not the Musketeers, not my orders, not my honour, not my commission, not my promises -”

“And what about your beloved Inseparables?”

At that, he sags. “They matter,” he says miserably. “Of course. And Treville, and Constance, and René, and even you, as much as you glare at me for saying it. But… do you know how impossible this is? I come here nearly every day… I almost miss Athos’s ban. It’s torture, and I can’t -”

Milady frowns suddenly, hearing low voices from far away. The patrol coming around again. “Hush,” she commands harshly, and he silences immediately, apparently recalled to where they are as well.

They were speaking relatively quietly, but this is still the Louvre. The guards won’t leave their post by the door to the Dauphin’s rooms, the patrol hasn’t reached them yet, the Dauphin’s only attendant at present is his governess, and they checked at the beginning to make sure there was no one in this area but them. That doesn’t mean there’s no risk in speaking so openly.

They stare at each other for a long moment. “I’ll speak to Lemay, and then return to the Garrison,” Aramis says quietly, a peace offering, face still set in deep lines of misery. “I… every time I think I’ve made my peace with this, it turns out that… it’s just hard to…” he shakes his head, lost for words.

“I know a little something about that,” she says wryly, a peace offering of her own.

She kept herself from Athos for five years, watching from a distance. She remembers the feeling like a harpoon through her, pulling her painfully towards him, every resistance causing more waves of agony. She had rage to steady her, though, to let her ignore that pain.

Not that Aramis’s feelings for Her Majesty seem anything like Milady’s for Athos. Despite the complexity of the situation, Aramis seems to see Her Majesty surrounded by glowing light, polished and perfect, absurdly idealised. Some glorious and inhumanly beautiful monarch from an old story – Guinevere, perhaps, or Isolde. And if that’s the case, Aramis is her Lancelot or her Tristan, her knight in shining armour. A fabled and destined love thwarted by fate, timing, bad luck.

She will never understand how anyone could want something so saccharine, so starry-eyed, so simplistic.

But then, she doubts Aramis would want her and Athos’s version of love, any more than she wants his. Oh, perhaps she and Athos had something similarly idealised once – she saw him as the noble Comte saving her from her squalid life, he saw her as the beautiful innocent – but that time’s long since passed. They were a daydream, and then they were a nightmare, and now they are painfully, wonderfully real. The kind of real that can only develop when every ounce of hope and sweetness has been crushed down to sharp little shards of what could have been, the world shattered into bloody pieces and set aflame, and then somehow reformed and rebuilt in a purer form through overwhelming need. The kind of real where two people have looked at each other and seen a traitor, a monster, a murderer, and loved just as fiercely and helplessly despite that, where they
have been forced to learn forgiveness for both themselves and each other. The kind of real that requires time, and loss, and anger, and pain, and knowing each other inside and out, and having seen the absolute worst of each other, the darkest depths of the soul. They are not pretty stories of a gallant, devoted knight errant and his beautiful queen. What she and Athos feel is too rough and raw for poems, for stained glass pictures, for romantic tales – it’s lodged deep in their blood and bones, the stinging smoke of burning buildings mingling with the sweet scent of forget-me-nots, the bright gleam of metal and the red rawness of fresh scars and the brilliant blue summer sky all together. Harsh and uncompromising, terrifying and wonderful. Complicated and confusing. Beautiful, sometimes, but never pretty: the bite as well as the kiss. It suits her better than the fairy-tale ever could.

Of course, Aramis’s ideas of love aren’t the only ones that confuse her. D’Artagnan and Constance… they’re happy, no doubt, and well-suited to each other, but Milady finds their relationship incomprehensible nonetheless. She and Athos never built slowly on a friendship, because they never had the ability to do anything slowly. They couldn’t ever play at being platonic, because around each other feelings rose to the surface too quickly and too strongly to contain them. Brief truces were possible, but peace never was. They love or they hate each other, or both at once: they deal entirely in extremes and do nothing in moderation.

Their is a relationship of the highest highs and lowest lows, of terrible betrayal and incredible forgiveness, of tearing heartbreak and impossible hope. It’s left them wound around each other so completely that there seems to be no hope of extrication – and she thanks God for it, or she would if she were the kind of woman who thanked God for things, because she never wants either of them to be free of each other. The very thought of it… it terrifies her on some deep level, impossible to explain. She likes them tangled together like vines, entwined so long that even their thorns have simply grown into the wounds they left, so that her past and present and future are all utterly defined and dominated by what she feels for him.

Other people, those with sense, might flee from such a thing. Milady has never for a moment regretted her foolishness in running towards it instead.

They still have no limitations when it comes to what they’ll do for each other, despite the more sweet and settled relationship they share now. Or – well, perhaps Athos has some limitations, shaped by his simpler, kinder brothers-in-arms and by the duty that gives him purpose, created by the trappings of the life he built without her, the life she suspects he loves every bit as much as he loves her or perhaps even more. His morality, his loyalty, his duty and his honour all give him boundaries he used to lack. But she still has none. If someone endangers the fragile little family they’ve built, she will deal with them in as final a way as possible. She will ensure that Athos is safe.

No matter what.

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“What are you brooding about?” d’Artagnan asks. Despite the offhand way he phrases the question, there’s real concern in his voice.

Athos wrenches his attention back. “Nothing.”

D’Artagnan doesn’t look convinced, but he also doesn’t pursue the subject.

He’s brooding about his wife, of course, what else? It’s troubling him, that she’s so involved with this. He went to so much effort to keep all of the others free of this knowledge, not wanting to implicate them in Aramis’s crime and the inevitable fallout. She found out anyway, and now he
wonders how he could ever have believed she wouldn’t.

And there is a sort of disturbing familiarity to the situation. He recognises it. The beautiful and ruthless Milady de Winter, a feared spy who works for the King’s First Minister, prepared to go to any dark and unscrupulous lengths in order to conceal an act of treason. He could have described her that way a year ago when he despised her as much as he loved her, spitting the words out in disgust. Now, they only make him feel sad and sort of hollow.

There is nothing she could do that would make him stop loving her – he said that, and he meant it. He’s not angry that there are similarities between what she does now and her work for the Cardinal, not horrified by the reminder of what she has been and done, and not disappointed by her stated willingness to stoop to worse methods if she thinks the situation requires it. He can see the difference – not just in the situation, but in her motivations, her character, the place they’re at now. Of course he doesn’t feel betrayed.

No, it’s nothing like that. What he feels is guilt, the familiar sickness burning his throat like cheap liquor.

She wanted out of this life, but somehow she’s fallen back into an echo of it, and that’s thanks to him. The anxiety and exhaustion carving lines in her face and dulling her eyes is entirely his fault, just as her original transformation into the Cardinal’s creature was. He wanted her to stay in Paris, so she stayed; he lives at the mercy of the impulses of Kings and the conspiracies of criminals, so she works to protect him as best she can.

What if what she really wanted was the cottage she spoke of before?

He remembers that brief moment so many months ago when he believed she’d left for England, when he’d told himself it was for the best. He’d been thrilled beyond words to be wrong, but that didn’t mean his thoughts before that realisation had been incorrect – he’d known even then that she couldn’t remain in Paris and stay out of the action, stay safe. Perhaps he should have wanted her safety more than he wanted her presence. Perhaps he should have wanted her happiness more than his own. He thinks he might be the most selfish man in the world. She’d said it herself when she spoke of returning to work – that she’d always be involved in this life, so long as he was. He’s tying her to a place she wanted to leave, to a life she hoped to put behind her. The past months have been so good, so wonderful, but when he thinks about it, he also recalls the difficulties and the dangers, the times she’s come close to taking a bullet or a knife helping him and his friends, the times she’s been forced to dirty her hands dealing with pimps and slavers and murderers and spies. It’s not as dark as the life she used to live, but it’s a long way from the fresh start she spoke of, and suddenly he finds himself wondering if she really is as happy with that as she seemed. He second-guesses every smile, every peal of laughter, every time he’s seen her heart in her eyes as she looked up at him – has he been seeing what he wanted to see, his own perfect joy reflected, ignoring the struggles and compromises she’s made to fit into his world? He trusts in her love for him, but for the first time he wonders if that love also comes with lies, a kinder sort of lie. He wonders if she only pretends she’s perfectly satisfied and fulfilled by this life, hiding any disappointment she feels at not being able to live the life of peace she wanted because she knows that would upset him.

Would she have been happy in England? Happier than she is here? Would she have been like the girl he ran through the fields with once, only pure joy on her face, not a shadow to be seen? Perhaps she could truly have started again, if she wasn’t weighted down by him, by Paris, by the past.

They’ve faced a lot, recently, but it’s only now he’s asking himself this, because it’s only now she
seems grim and exhausted by their latest disaster, instead of facing it with a smug smirk and a clever quip. He assumed she was enjoying being here, facing challenges head-on and defeating them, living a life of variety and excitement. He doesn’t like the thought that the contentedness he saw might simply have been his own self-delusion, or worse, another of her masks.

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“So what’re we doing?”

“We’re going to find a tavern near the Louvre and gossip with Red Guards, find out which guard or guards spread the rumour.” She owns a few gowns tacky enough to get a Red Guard’s attention, and all soldiers love to whine endlessly on about their day to a pretty, listening ear. “Once we find the trouble-makers targeting Musketeers…”

“We beat a confession out of them then throw them to the King,” Porthos says darkly. “Sounds good.”

“We’re not beating anything out of anyone,” Milady says. And Aramis told her off for being too violent. Apparently it doesn’t count when it’s Red Guards. “Let me deal with that side of things.”

“Then what am I doing?”

“Listening, mostly, and providing back-up. Lose the uniform. And lose the game as well, if you can – people talk more when they’re winning.”

Eight hours later, she’s regretting the plan slightly. Her low-cut dress is uncomfortable, the tavern (the fifth they’ve been in) is dingy and slightly too smoky, and bankrolling Porthos’s losing streak is expensive. This is the seventh Red Guard they’ve been pointed towards as the probable source of the rumour in the course of speaking to over thirty individuals, and her mood has worsened slightly with each unwitting source of information that she’s flirted and charmed into spilling his guts. Not only is it exhausting and unpleasant, but it’s getting repetitive.

Still, surely they’ll make some progress soon. Milady leans against the Red Guard next to her, smiling up at him flirtatiously. “I heard you’re the man who knows everything that’s going on,” she purrs.

Actually, what they heard was that he patrols the Louvre often, and was probably on duty that day, and that half a dozen men heard the rumour first from him.

“Yes, but not everything,” the man protests, though he’s visibly pleased. He tightens the arm he has around her, still pulling in his winnings from Porthos with the other arm. “But, y’know, in my line of work, I’m around royalty every day. I can’t talk about it, of course, but you hear things. Not much happens without me knowing.”

“Do you know anything about all these rumours about the Queen?” she asks in a hushed whisper, leaning in even further.

“Could be I’ve heard something,” he says, pretending coyness. He’s not as good at it as she is.

Porthos snorts. “Like that matters, friend. Everyone’s heard that rumour. Love, I’m telling you, all this one’s good for is repeating other people’s stories. If you’re in the mood for something a bit more interesting…” The insinuation in his voice makes his meaning clear as he looks at Milady, and she bridles and giggles like she’s honestly considering it.

“Other people’s stories? I’m the one who heard it first,” the Red Guard says, looking smug as this
draws Milady’s attention back to him. She tries to look impressed instead of just relieved that this
night is nearly over. “When I was patrolling the palace. Run across the most interesting things
there, you do.”

“Tell me everything,” Milady demands coquettishly, running her fingers up his chest and
wondering if he’s ever bathed before. “Every single detail. I could listen to you for hours.” But
God willing, she won’t have to.

He accepts this without question. “Well, not much to tell,” he says, with assumed casualness. “The
Queen’s governess got all hurt that a Musketeer tossed her out of bed. I overheard her wondering if
he didn’t like her enough because he liked the Queen too much, if you know what I mean.” He
rolls his eyes expressively. “Weeping like a waterfall, of course, all over that useless doctor.
Women will say anything when they’re upset.”

Not putting much stock in it himself didn’t stop him from spreading this scurrilous rumour about,
Milady notes sourly. “She accused the Queen of infidelity? Is she mad?” she breathes, looking up
at him wide-eyed and fascinated by his every word.

He puffs up even more at the attention and shoots Porthos a triumphant look. “Any lady who’d
carry on with a Musketeer is a bit mad, in my opinion. Of course, I didn’t tell anyone but a couple
of friends about it, quiet like, making sure they knew not to repeat it,” he says virtuously. “I’d
never slander Her Majesty.”

A couple of friends meaning half of the Red Guards, no doubt.

“Although, a few people have noticed that Her Majesty puts a lot of stock in the Musketeers,” he
continues blithely, dropping his voice to a confidential tone. “A bit too much, if you know what I
mean. Her fondness for them…”

“What if someone tells the King?” Porthos asks bluntly. “Then you’ll be for it.”

“No one’d be fool enough to pass such a rumour to him,” the Red Guard says dismissively. Then a
flicker of uncertainty passes across his face. He picks up his cards, but clearly finds it hard to
concentrate on them and lowers them again in moment. “Well, except maybe Chaput. Our Captain
is half in love with His Majesty, you know, and he’s never had the sense to know when to stop
talking, spews out everything he thinks. I would’ve made a far better Captain, if you ask me -”

“So if Chaput hears…”

“He’ll probably go straight to the King asking for permission to look into these lies and punish the
perpetrators.” The Red Guard seems to be losing his pleasure in both the game and Milady, in
thoughts of the possible punishment awaiting him. But then his face brightens as he says, “Of
course, all I did was overhear it. It’s the lady who’ll be in trouble.”

“Not if she denies ever having said it,” Milady says, losing patience with this and dropping every
pretence of interest in him. Suddenly, she’s sharp and cold, and he jerks back to look at her
properly for the first time. “And she will. She’s assured us of that. The man she was talking to will
also deny everything. That leaves you as the only creator of this malicious, treasonous lie, with a
man of learning and a noblewoman both claiming you made this up from whole cloth.”

He stares down at her, mouth opening and closing like a fish’s, stunned by the sudden change in
her demeanour. He looks across at Porthos as if for help, but the visibly tipsy man now looks
completely sober and his face is stone.
“But luckily, there are options,” Milady continues. “You could be executed for treason and slandering the Queen, of course. I wouldn’t personally recommend being hung, but it’s up to you. The other option is that you take off into the night, leaving a letter apologising for the silly rumour you started.” She places a purse of money on the table with a clunk. “There are opportunities abroad, if you’ve money and skills. Try England.”

“I won’t leave,” he splutters, still shocked. “My job… my friends… I mean, there’s no chance they’ll trace it back to me.”

“We did,” Porthos points out.

“And even if they do, they might not -”

“If they don’t kill you,” Milady says, silky and dangerous as a dagger. “I will. I’m very patriotic like that. Take the money. Leave. The rumour dies, or you do. Do we have an agreement?”

As it turns out, they do.
Athos enters the room quietly, and finds his wife at the window looking out. There’s something both distant and anxious about her expression – like she has the same bad feeling he has roiling in his gut, the same certainty that things are shifting and they may not be able to shift them back. Her arms are wrapped around herself like she’s cold, so he picks up a nearby blanket and drapes it around her shoulders. She half-turns and gives him a wan smile.

“You dealt with the rumours,” he reminds her, smoothing her curly hair back with one gentle hand so he can drop a kiss on her shoulder.

“No, I didn’t,” she says baldly. “At best, all I did was make them harder to prove, and you know it. They’ll still reach the King’s ears eventually.”

“With everyone involved denying it, and not a skerrick of proof, even the King wouldn’t take extreme action.” He hopes. The man’s unpredictable, though. Sometimes, anyone can persuade him of anything, and other times, he’s as stubborn as a mule – and then sometimes he’s both at once, completely unwilling to listen to one person, but as credulous and biddable as a child to another. If there’s any reason to miss the Cardinal, it’s that he was the only one who showed a consistent ability to keep the King sensible. Treville tries, but he’s far from being a master manipulator.

“Mmm.” She doesn’t give him a real reply, and returns to staring out the window at the busy grey street below.

He suddenly wishes, more fiercely than anything else, that he could take that stressed look off her face. After all, isn’t he the one who put it there? “That’s not what’s bothering you, though, is it?”

“It’s on the list,” she says, twisting to glance at him again. “Have you figured out who tried to kill you?”

“No,” he admits. He knows he should be more concerned about that, but now it looks like it’s unrelated to the rumours, he finds it a lot less worrying. It’s not some grand conspiracy, just some fool with a gun and a grudge, and he’s dealt with a great many fools in his time. So long as whoever it is focuses on him and leaves her and their son alone, he’ll be fine.

“Don’t go anywhere unarmed,” she orders, as if he ever does, moving away from him to stare him down and crossing her arms.

“At least, I’m not the one who spends my spare time in the worst taverns in the city,” he points out.

At least, he’s not the one who does that anymore. In her brief break from her search for the source of the rumours among the Red Guard (to feed their son, of course), she returned to the house tired, irritated, and overly powdered, wearing a dress more fitted to a tavern wench and a smell more suited to a tavern floor. The servants had barely looked surprised – at this point, they seem to have gotten used to the many oddities of their employer, and it takes more than wearing a cheap dress and stinking of sour wine to make them blink. To Athos, though, it had given immediate flashbacks to his own past, to the horrifyingly empty five years when he nearly lived in places that smelt exactly like that, back when he would have sacrificed anything, even his own life, if he could have looked up and seen her standing there.

“And how many hidden knives do you think I’m wearing?” she says dismissively. “Even you couldn’t find the half of them.”
He sees an opportunity, and gives her a slow smirk. “Would you care to wager on that, my lady?”

She recognises his intention in his face a second before he lunges for her and escapes him by moving behind the chair, leaving him fumbling uselessly at air as he tries to grab her skirt, the blanket he draped around her falling to the ground. “Don’t you dare,” she warns him, backing away, but there’s a matching gleam in her eyes and her expression is lightening by the moment. The mood changes, just like he wanted it to.

He grabs at her again, and she ducks and whirls away, already laughing, that real, throaty laugh that makes her seem barely more than a girl. And then the battle is on in earnest, him chasing her around the room, her darting away, using furniture as barriers and pillows as projectiles. It’s playful and foolish, both putting their heart and soul into the game but not putting in any real roughness or aggression. She laughs helplessly as she nearly slides into the wall when she tries to flee in stockinged feet on the smooth floor, and he grabs her by the waist to keep her up, then kisses her soundly before she gets free again and runs away. He trips over a footstool a minute later when trying to take a shortcut and finds himself grinning breathlessly on the floor as she sticks her tongue out at him from the other side of the room, triumphant. It’s wonderful.

He finally manages to leap the chaise longue and pin her against the wall, rifling through her skirts, questing fingers searching for the hidden knives, to the sound of her laughing and her half-hearted struggles against him. She manages to hook a foot around his ankle and that brings him to the ground again, but he brings her with him this time, surprising a shriek of laughter out of her at the shock of landing. She’s on top, her wrists held loosely in his grip as she tries to squirm away for an ineffective minute, arching her back, loose hair falling around them both, skin flushed and eyes bright as they wrestle. She is beyond beautiful, like this, and for a second he lays back just to admire her. She laughs and gives in as well, falling into him, body shaking against his. She laughs helplessly as she nearly slides into the wall when she tries to flee in stockinged feet on the smooth floor, and he grabs her by the waist to keep her up, then kisses her soundly before she gets free again and runs away. He trips over a footstool a minute later when trying to take a shortcut and finds himself grinning breathlessly on the floor as she sticks her tongue out at him from the other side of the room, triumphant. It’s wonderful.

He finds two knives, then three, throwing them onto the floor and then kissing where the sheaths were strapped, as she laughingly objects and tries to pull her clothes back into place and tries to push him off and tries to get free, not for a second seeming like she wants to succeed in any of these objectives. When he does pull back for a moment to survey her flushed, laughing face, she yanks him back in again and tries to roll them over once more, but he doesn’t allow it, smothering his breathless laughter in her hair as she lets her head drop back, laughing too, defeated.

It takes them both far too long to realise the door has opened.

“My lady?” The footman coughs politely, then shrinks back as they turn on him with identical glares, laughter slowly fading. “I – I’m sorry – you said – there is – I mean, when a Musketeer is at the door, you told us – he wanted to see Master Athos – urgent, he said –”

“Let him in at once,” Milady orders, trying to be dignified even though the man just saw them wrestling on the ground like children, and the footman steps back, revealing he already did. She starts trying to brush down her dress, trying to fix herself up as if to erase any evidence of their silly game, levering herself to a sitting position as Athos releases her.

Athos was expecting a panicking Aramis: instead, it’s d’Artagnan, face set with concern and something like anger. His expression doesn’t even flicker at finding them dishevelled and breathless on the floor, although Athos suspects that when the current crises is resolved he may get some light teasing about this situation. “Something’s amiss,” he says, before either of them can talk. “Constance came to the Garrison to talk to me. The Queen’s been confined to her rooms.”

It’s even more of a bucket of cold water than the footman’s entry. Athos gets to his feet slowly and
then reaches out a hand to help his wife up. Her smile has faded completely, laughter lines from her helpless giggling replaced by lines of stress again. He doesn’t like the return of them, but she’s lovely regardless – she’s still his Anne, even when her eyes are cold and her mouth is set. He loves her cold and calculating and ready for war, just as he loves her happy and laughing and playful, but he wishes they lived in a world where she could experience the former less, and the latter more.

Would she have smiled more in England?

“Is there any word why?” Athos says to d’Artagnan, voice tight, forcing his mind to the issue at hand.

“She doesn’t know. No one does. His Majesty just gave orders that she needs to stay in her apartments, and only a couple of maids are allowed in and out to bring her food and attend to other necessities. Everyone’s acting… oddly, Constance says. Like they know something she doesn’t. Whispering to each other.”

“The Dauphin?”

“He was removed from her rooms and placed in another part of the Louvre, along with his nurses,” d’Artagnan says. “The Queen’s not even allowed to see him. His governess is missing – no one will say where she is, but Constance thinks the Red Guards know. She’s gone back to see if they’ll let her in to keep Her Majesty company, but she’ll let us know if anything changes.”

“I see,” Athos says, a little hollowly. He exchanges a look with Milady.

“Really? Because I don’t,” d’Artagnan says, looking between them. “Porthos has gone to get Treville. We’re hoping he knows what’s going on. I thought we scotched the rumours. But even if they’re still circulating, why would the King believe them?”

“And Aramis?” Milady asks, ignoring the question, still keeping her gaze steady on Athos.

“Where’s he?”

“At the Garrison, waiting in case any news or orders reach us there,” d’Artagnan says.

Well, at least he hasn’t gone bursting into the Queen’s rooms, full of fear for his beloved, or been taken up by the Red Guards. That’s something. Athos would hesitate to call it a good sign, but at least it’s not a bad one. Frankly, if there were any reasonable excuse he could think of to get Aramis out of the country for the moment, he’d be using it right now.

D’Artagnan looks between the two of them again, frown deepening. “Why do I feel like I’m missing some vital piece of information?”

“Because you are,” Athos says, lips twisting in a thin smile, a poor parody of the real happiness that overtook him only minutes before. “But I think it’s time that was done.”

All this time hiding it to the best of his ability, banning Aramis from the Louvre, lying even to his wife, and now Athos feels ready to spill the whole truth at the slightest provocation – but he supposes that’s fair enough. If this is now so widely-known that it’s reached the King, and so well-believed it’s considered grounds to detain the Queen, keeping the others in ignorance about the truth is no longer an advantage. They need to know.

But he doesn’t have to be the one to tell them.

“Get the others,” Athos says. “Aramis created this mess… he can tell you.”
In other circumstances, this would be hilarious, Milady thinks – she’s lounging against a wall, listening to a conversation that resembles nothing so much as a comic pantomime. Treville seems more like a stern father than ever, Aramis like a guilty yet defiant little boy. Her husband, on the other hand, seems to be taking a kind of dark glee in spelling out how terrible the situation is, finally sharing his own stress with everyone else – for a moment she can picture him very clearly as a young child, tattling on his little brother for some infraction.

The news that their Queen is even more fond of her Musketeers than previously advertised has a different effect on all of them – Porthos is slightly dismayed, d’Artagnan exasperated, and Treville furious. She’s never seen him so riled up, especially not at his beloved Musketeers.

Aramis, meanwhile, still has that faint air of certainty that he’s in the right she’d noticed in all previous conversations with him on the subject – the romantic in him, presumably, sure that nothing could be a colossal and destructive mistake if it just felt so right. It’s love, after all, and surely nothing is wrong if it’s for love! Since she’s shared that view in the past, she does feel some sympathy for him, but it’s eclipsed by the sympathy she feels for Treville’s clear desire to slap him upside the head. This is really not the best time for Aramis to be getting all misty-eyed about Her Majesty’s reputation, not when he’s so efficiently burnt it to the ground.

“There’s more,” Athos says, still with that faint undertone of grim satisfaction, prodding Aramis into continuing.

Treville’s thunderous expression grows worse by the word. D’Artagnan covers his face with his hand briefly. Porthos hugs Aramis, which is very Porthos.

She hasn’t said a word yet – normally she wouldn’t be able to resist putting her own sarcastic remarks, but this has been far too wonderful to interrupt. The absurdity of Aramis being scolded for impregnating the Queen like a child being scolded for breaking a vase is irresistible. It’s gallows humour, and since the gallows in this case are literal, she shouldn’t find it so amusing, but it’s her habit to find entertainment in the worst of disasters. There is no situation so dire it cannot be improved by mockery. The amusement helps her push back her indefinable fears.

“I’ve got a wooden spoon somewhere if you’d like to rap his knuckles with it,” she offers Treville, in the spirit of this.

He glares at her. “And how long have you known of this? Didn’t you think it was part of your job to tell me if something like this was going to crash down on us?”

“You’ve been hesitant to expand my role to that of actual spymaster, if you recall. You employ me primarily to keep you informed of rumours.” She pauses, then says earnestly, “Minister, there are some rumours about the Queen going around -”

D’Artagnan lets out a snort, and Treville gives him a look that quiets him, then says to her, “Have you found out the source?”

“Yes. Aramis’s mistress, who you may also know as the Dauphin’s governess. I’m sure you can guess the basis of her appeal to him. I suspect she’s guessed it too, which may explain some of this.”

She feels like a fool. It must have been that damn conversation in the corridors outside the Dauphin’s rooms, the two of them basically announcing how badly Marguerite had been treated and how unimportant she was to Aramis compared to the Queen (and to nearly everyone else in his
life, come to think of it). It’s no surprise the woman discovered the virtues of honesty when the Red Guards came for her, instead of ruining her reputation and risking her life to protect the man who used her. Unless of course she is still lying, but the King or Chaput don’t believe her, which is even worse for their chances of getting through this unharmed.

Every pair of eyes in the room fries Aramis with a glare at once. He steps back under the combined force of their stares, and raises his hands defensively.

The argument continues, more heated than before. Treville looks like he would like to pull his hair out.

Time has somewhat dulled the enormity of it for her – that Aramis’s son will someday rule all of France, that the boy the King adores is not his own, that Aramis and the Queen committed treason and risked destabilising the whole of Europe for their own romantic urges. She’s known it all for months, and even if it seemed urgent and dangerous at first, at some point she stopped thinking like that. Probably faster than almost anyone else would, given that she’s dabbled in treason a few times herself.

Still, when she heard it being spoken of so openly that she felt like a chasm was opening before her feet. She tells herself that there’s no risk to her comfortable, happy life, but she knows that’s a lie. If Aramis is charged with treason, then at the very least, the Queen will be set aside, the Musketeers will be disbanded, Treville will be demoted, the King will be unstable, Paris will be unsafe, and France will be at war with Spain. Even if Athos somehow escaped a charge of treason for his concealment of the Dauphin’s parentage, he would never be able to stop himself from fighting to rescue Aramis, fighting to help the Queen, fighting to keep Paris together, fighting the Spanish. He would get himself killed fighting unwinnable battles, and she would either die helping him or flee without him to keep their son safe, knowing there was no way he would come with her. A choice between dying with her husband and living on without him: an impossible one.

She tries to imagine herself persuading him to leave, to seek happiness and safety elsewhere, and finds the idea almost laughable – he would probably think less of her even for suggesting it, for admitting she thinks their lives together are more important than dying for idiotic, idealistic concepts like duty and patriotism.

“My lady?”

It’s the footman again. Everyone was talking over each other, but they quiet immediately, casting glances around.

“I told you we weren’t to be disturbed,” she says icily to him.

Her footman is not having a good day. He swallows hard, Adam’s apple bobbing up and down his throat, and stares at her with wide eyes. “Yes, of course, my lady – but – but the Red Guards – they’re at the door – and they said – well, they – they want to – to come in -”

“What?”

A man she vaguely recognises as the Captain of the Red Guards steps around her footmen. The corridor behind him is choked with Red Guards, a dozen at least. The Captain steps forward and bows low to Treville. “Minister,” he says respectfully.

“Captain Chaput. What are you doing here?” Treville’s eyes are wary. “Am I needed at the Louvre?”
“No, my lord. We were looking for Monsieur Aramis at the Garrison, and the men directed us here.” Chaput turns to Athos. “Captain, the King would like to speak with your Musketeer.” He glances at Aramis, something wary about his expression. “At the Louvre, at his earliest convenience.”

“Speak with him,” Athos echoes. “And he sent a squad of Red Guards just to deliver that request? I doubt it. Is this an arrest, Chaput?”

“Only if Monsieur Aramis refuses to come with us,” Chaput says.

Aramis doesn’t hesitate. “What reason would I have to do that?” he wants to know, all cheerfulness. Only someone who knew him would recognise the worry in his eyes. “We’d better get going, though. It’s late already.”

“I’ll accompany you,” Athos says to Chaput, before Milady can stop him. “As his Captain, I should be present.”

Why would he risk himself like this? The King in a temper could lash out at anyone associated, and Athos was at the convent as well. Milady finds that she is fisting her hands in her skirts, automatically reaching for the hidden pocket that contains a long knife with a wickedly sharp point, one of the few her husband didn’t find. Athos, glancing back at her, notices this and shakes his head meaningfully. When she pauses, he steps towards her and takes her hands in his so she can’t reach for the knife, then leans forward and kisses her swiftly.

“Let’s get this over with, then,” he says, pulling free and turning back to the Red Guards. She lets him go, against her better judgement. “Lead the way, Captain.”

“I’ll come too,” Treville says. “I have some matters of state to see to at the Louvre.” The quick glance he gives d’Artagnan and Porthos is full of meaning, making it abundantly clear that what he’s actually going to do is discover everything he can about what’s going on and then get back to them.

She is left standing there. Porthos is by her side, d’Artagnan gripping one of his elbows to prevent him following.

And then they’re gone, with her husband with them. Any and all of her amusement about this is abruptly extinguished.

“What do we do?” Porthos says quietly, seeming shell-shocked. She supposes he must be. The two of them have been given a lot of information in a very short time.

“What can we do?” d’Artagnan asks, spreading his arms.

“Nothing except wait, right now,” Milady says coolly. She has her arms crossed, fingers digging into the opposing arms so tightly she suspects she’s bruising herself. She wants – well, she wants the same thing d’Artagnan and Porthos clearly want, to leap into action and save the day.

But this is not a situation where the ability to fight through an army is a useful attribute, or where her skills at assassination and thievery are particularly applicable. She did everything she could (short of killing Marguerite, which probably would not have helped matters anyway) to quell the rumour, but once a secret is known it cannot be recalled. All they can do now is see this through to the end. She is better at waiting than the rest of them could ever be – she waited five years for her revenge, after all. She knows how to play the long game.

Leaping into action now will achieve nothing. They could ambush the Red Guards and free the
two of them easily – but then what? That would turn them into wanted men. It would ruin their lives – and even though a part of her thinks that at least they would have lives, so perhaps it would be worth it, she knows it’s no answer.

“They could still talk their way out of this,” she adds, with more hope than conviction. “They’re not arrested yet.”

And perhaps – she relaxes slightly as she thinks it – perhaps Aramis is the only one at risk of being arrested. The thought of anyone accusing Athos of a torrid affair with the Queen of France goes past absurd into hilarious. Athos is Aramis’s captain, and he was at the convent (assuming they know about the convent), but apart from that he isn’t implicated in any way. Once he’s sworn up and down he knows nothing, they’ll probably let him go.

This whole thing is probably a storm in a teacup, and will be over just as quickly as the rest of His Majesty’s tantrums – the King will curse and fret about this terrible rumour, Aramis, Athos and Treville will soothe him with comforting words, and they’ll be back before she knows it.

She tells herself that, but for some reason it doesn’t make her feel any less sick.

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“Athos, Aramis,” the King says, his voice strangely tight. He looks hurt, indignant, and disapproving all at once, but without the rage Athos assumes any man would feel at finding out his wife was with someone else. “I’m glad you’re here. You can help straighten out this ridiculous misunderstanding.”

Most of Athos’s anxiety flees at that. The King is apparently not inclined to believe whatever he’s heard. Most of his anxiety, but not all of: the King is changeable as the wind. He is also, judging by the carelessly tipped-over bottle nearby and his overflowing glass, far from sober, which doesn’t bode well.

Athos managed to persuade Treville (in a hissed undertone) to part from them once they arrived at the Louvre. If this goes badly, the last thing they need is him caught up in the King’s anger. As First Minister, he’s the last bastion of sanity in the King’s cabinet, and if His Majesty makes any attempt at putting the Queen aside that sanity will be sorely needed. It will be war, after all.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Athos says. Better to keep the King’s attention on himself as much as possible – besides anything else, he knows how to steer the man better than Aramis does, having spent more time with him recently. “We’ll assist in any way we can. What seems to be the matter?”

The King spills his troubles like a child, all hurt exclamations and dramatic laments. He uses his glass to punctuate points, spilling wine, and a servant discreetly produces another bottle that reduces alarmingly quickly. By the time the King runs out of words, Athos is mildly surprised he isn’t slurring or unconscious.

The meat of it is this: Captain Chaput heard rumours from his men, terrible awful rumours, and apologetically informed His Majesty of them. His Majesty gave him leave to investigate and cut them off at the source. Looking into them led them back to the Dauphin’s governess, who burst into tears and claimed a host of wild things after some questioning under oath – her lover in love with the Queen, the Queen in love with him as well, the King cuckolded and played for a fool.

It seems Lady Marguerite is not particularly good at withstanding questioning – but Athos did notice the absence of the Dauphin from the story, the absence of Aramis and Milady confronting her and perhaps threatening her, so it seems she held back on some small part of it. Either that, or
she truly doesn’t know about the Dauphin, and feared mentioning Milady because – well, Athos’s wife can be truly terrifying when she wants to be.

Doctor Lemay has also been arrested, but maintains he couldn’t understand what Marguerite was talking about – she was weeping too hard – and that he told no one of their conversation anyway. The Red Guard who spread the rumour around has vanished mysteriously and can’t be found. But Lady Marguerite stands by her words, and her words condemn both Aramis and the Queen.

“Is any of this true?” the King finally finishes, somewhat incoherently.

Athos glances at Aramis and gives him the slightest possible nod. They both know the best lies hew as close to the truth as possible.

“Well, I did have something happening with the Lady Marguerite, for a while,” Aramis says, roguishly, talking to the King as if they’re good friends as well as monarch and subject – but still with that air of deference, perfectly judged. “Perhaps she got a little too invested in it. You know what women are like, they think every trifling fling should be a great romance.”

Athos can see the King automatically respond to the comradery he speaks with, leaning forward slightly as if they’re soldiers-in-arms sharing stories of old conquests in a tavern. Still, after a moment he frowns and says petulantly, “Yes, but I don’t care about that. What about the Queen?”

“I suppose Lady Marguerite must have been very hurt when Aramis ended things,” Athos says smoothly. “And sought a reason why he would turn his attention from her.”

“She was quite distraught,” Aramis agrees. “I didn’t realise she’d taken it this badly, though. Still, women are irrational when they consider themselves spurned, as I’m sure His Majesty knows. They’ll say or do almost anything, however ridiculous.”

It’s a good thing his wife isn’t around to hear this, Athos thinks, what with how heavily they’re leaning on the King’s low opinion of women. If he ever dared speak about her as if she were a silly, hysterical girl, he’d be lucky to avoid a knife wound.

“That’s true.” The King’s expression clears, and for a moment Athos thinks they’ve got through this with miraculous ease. Then he adds, looking at Aramis, “So you’re accusing your mistress of lying.”

Aramis hesitates and looks at Athos, who gives the slightest of shrugs. He doesn’t know how to answer that either. “I’m not saying she’s lying, exactly,” Aramis says carefully, after a moment. “Simply… mistaken. Swept away by her emotions. I’m sure she has the best of intentions.”

“Intentions, intentions, who cares about intentions?” The King throws a hand up impatiently, and now Athos can feel this going sour. “If it’s a lie, she’s committing treason and must face the consequences of that. She’s humiliated me in front of the whole city! The punishment for treason is death -”

“That seems unnecessarily extreme, sire,” Aramis says quickly.

Athos clears his throat, suddenly a little off balance. They can’t let an innocent woman be executed. “Perhaps you should just send her home to her family instead, to avoid offending them.”

“Well, she’s offended me. And so has that doctor. How dare they gossip about me, as if I am not their King! And how dare you,” and now the King turns his drunk, furious gaze on the two of them. “How dare you both question your King? If they’re lying, then they should make their peace with God now. The doctor, the governess, and that Red Guard as well if we ever catch up with
him, they’ll all pay for this. It’s no more than they deserve for treating their sovereign and ruler so poorly.”

Make your peace with God, Anne. For you must die.

Athos blinks, and for a moment he’s back there, in front of that tree, seeing the flicker of white skirts in the breeze and hearing the creak of the straining rope against the branch. His mouth is dry and there’s a strange, rising buzzing noise in his ears.

Every execution drags him back to that tree, but it’s worse when it’s a woman, worse still when they’re an innocent one. It doesn’t matter who they are, for a moment, to him, they are Anne. He can’t help it. Even with Ninon, when Anne was the orchestrator of the execution instead of the victim, he looked at her standing on a pile of timber waiting to burn and for a terrible endless second he had seen another scene entirely. It doesn’t matter that in a rational corner of his mind he knows that Anne is in no danger, or that he’s never so much as spoken to the Lady Marguerite and has no real reason to care about her. All that matters is that for a moment, he’s back in the midst of his worst nightmare – the hanging.

This is when Athos should speak, should defuse this. Perhaps he could manage it. But when he opens his mouth, nothing comes out, because the words he’s thinking are words from the past, words he should never have said. Sometimes, when these moments hit, they hit so hard they rob the breath from him entirely. Perhaps it’s closer to the surface as well, today, when Anne’s face switches so easily between softness and hardness, when Milady de Winter blurs into Anne de Breuil, when it’s difficult to remember the divide between now and then, when he wonders if he should regret his recent choices as well as those long past.

After a long pause, during which Athos can’t speak, Aramis bows. “I question nothing, Your Majesty. All I’m saying is that I doubt any of this was malicious. I simply wish to be sure -”

“And I wish to be sure if this really is a lie or not,” the King says, and suddenly his sulky petulance is replaced by true danger, for all that there’s no real difference to his tone. He downs the rest of his drink and then tosses it aside. His face is flushed with alcohol and anger. “No one treats me as they should. They’re all so ungrateful. Everyone is scheming against me, threatening me, betraying me… how can I be sure you aren’t among my enemies? How can I be sure my wife isn’t among my enemies?”

“Your Majesty -”

“The Queen has betrayed me before, recommending Rochefort to me, helping her brother. A traitorous daughter of Spain. She’s never cared for me the way she should,” the King whines. “She’s probably scheming against me as well.”

“Her Majesty would never do such a thing,” Aramis says, too fervent, forgetting to be cautious in his rush to cut off the King’s line of thinking. The threat to the Queen makes him lose his head in a way the threat to Marguerite never could, and the difference in the level of emotion is evident – even to the King.

“Oh, do you know her better than me, then?” His Majesty’s face twists, and the ground beneath their feet is no longer just unsteady, it’s giving way. He tries to stand and sways, all the wine catching up with him. For a moment he looks near tears. “Well, maybe you do. Maybe you do.” The King looks over at Chaput. “Captain?”

“Yes, sire?”
“I’m tired,” he says sulkily. “I don’t want to deal with this anymore. Keep looking into it, would you? And lock this Musketeer up —” he flaps a clumsy hand at Aramis. “Until he remembers who is King. Keep… keep talking to… oh, whoever you said you were going to. I forget. I need to rest.”

Athos isn’t surprised. The King looks on the verge of either throwing up or passing out, perhaps both. A servant has moved over to quietly support him.

Perhaps the sensible thing to do would be to let this go, to return tomorrow when the King is in a soberer and more reasonable frame of mind. It’s probably not the first night Aramis has spent in a cell.

But Athos owes his friend more than he could ever say, despite how annoyed he is with him at present. Not for saving his life a dozen times – when did his own life, after all, have any value to him? – but for his wife. It was Aramis who was there throughout the birth of his son when Athos wasn’t, who went hours without rest or drink or food doing whatever he could to keep Anne alive through her fever, who fought for her survival even when told to give up. Athos owes Aramis for Milady’s life, and his child’s, and every scrap of happiness he has. And even beside that debt, Aramis is his friend, his brother, and Athos came here to protect him as best he could. So he steps forward.

“Your Majesty, none of us could ever forget who is King,” he says, bowing his head. He was only ever country nobility, but some part of him remembers the patterns of a courtier even still. “You resemble your father more every day, and not just in looks.”

He can see Louis’s expression brighten at the compliment – he’s used to Athos being sarcastic, critical, and radiating slight exasperation, despite his outward show of deference. Athos never met the late King, in fact, but mentioning him is one of the easiest ways to get the King’s attention. It could backfire unpredictably, of course, but it’s worth a shot.

“Please forgive Aramis’s impudence. I hope all his loyal years of service outweigh his rudeness, at least in part,” Athos continues smoothly. Aramis quickly adopts an apologetic expression, exuding regret and devotion to his King. “I think he was trying to convey his concern that executing people for the crime of spreading this ridiculous rumour might be seen as confirmation of it, compounding the problem.”

The King looks momentarily thoughtful at that, face creasing even further – he mentioned the ‘humiliation’ of the rumours earlier, after all. The King loathes the thought of his people viewing him as a fool, a cuckold.

Soon, he’ll probably also start to consider what people will say about the Dauphin if it becomes common knowledge he doubts his wife’s faithfulness to such an extent. Right now, he clearly hasn’t made the connection, hasn’t realised that any uncertainty about the Queen’s fidelity raises uncertainty about her child’s paternity, which then puts the Dauphin’s right to inherit in doubt. When he does, he might immediately drop this whole line of questioning, horrified at the idea of making people question his son’s parentage, unable to face the idea of questioning it himself. If there is anyone the King loves, it’s his small son.

Aramis’s small son.

Aramis leaps in. “Exactly! And also, I admit, perhaps I’m still a little fond of Marguerite.” He looks properly abashed at this. “Even though she’s trying to get me hung for childish pique, I do have excellent memories of our time together, however brief. I would hate to see her hurt.”

A Red Guard approaches Chaput, muttering in his ear.
“I suppose I see what you mean,” the King says, a little dolefully. “No matter how cold, or argumentative, or difficult the Queen is towards me, I never like to see her hurt either.”

“A sentiment she returns, Your Majesty,” Athos says. “I have never seen a woman more distraught than she was when you were taken by slavers. It was as if she’d lost a part of herself.” An absolute lie. But at this point, what’s one more?

The King puffs up slightly, looking pleased. He’s still quite drunk, wavering on his feet, but he’s heading towards the happier variety of drunk now, buoyed up by their compliments and perhaps by the idea of forgetting this whole upsetting affair. Sometimes, the King likes to wallow in his sadness, his anger, his disappointment, mope about the various ways in which he considers himself victimised by the world, but those moods don’t last forever.

“Your Majesty?” Chaput says, just as the King is opening his mouth.

He scowls and swings his head towards Chaput, seeming to find it hard to focus through the haze of alcohol. “Oh, what is it now, Chaput?”

“I just wanted to inform you the nuns will be here tomorrow, sire,” Chaput says respectfully. “From Bourbon-les-Eaux, remember?”

Athos stiffens.

“Right… yes… you said… it seemed…” the King tries hard to focus. “That was the longest Her Majesty was ever unchaperoned. The only guards there were Aramis… and…” He turns to Athos, and any chance of ending this now disappear. The King’s face is creasing back into drunken suspicion. “And you, Captain.”

There is, from there, no saving the situation.

“Lock them both up,” the King says sulkily. “I have such a headache, I’m so sick of people talking to me and talking to me. As if what they have to say is more important than what their sovereign…” He trails off, swaying and looking green.

Athos can hear the faint sounds of the King throwing up as they’re led away by Chaput and the Red Guards – most undignified.

“Why are you doing this?” he says in an undertone to Chaput. “How does it help you to attack the Musketeers in this way?”

“Attack?” Chaput seems almost confused by the question, and certainly indignant. “I’m not attacking anyone, Captain. The King asked me to look into these rumours. To do so, I had to question the nurses, the maids, the men who guard the Dauphin, and the Queen’s ladies. A few of their responses when questioned under oath raised further concerns. All I want to do is make sure any questions about the Dauphin’s parentage are settled, as the King requested.”

So he at least has made the connection, joined the dots between the convent and the child and the affair with the governess, even if the King has yet to do so. But it’s not a witch hunt, not an attack, not an attempt to ruin the Musketeers. Athos looks at Chaput, feeling almost winded by the realisation – the man is completely genuine. And, unfortunately, closer to being in the right about this than Athos is comfortable with. He’s seeking out the truth and obeying his sovereign, nothing more.

“If the King repudiates the Queen or the Dauphin, it will start a war with Spain,” Athos says after a second’s pause. The Queen’s brother won’t stand for the insult. And even if he didn’t declare war,
the King would, without the Queen there to check him. “Be careful not to make any damaging assumptions.”

“I’m not making any assumptions, I’m not accusing anyone of anything, I’m just trying to find out the truth. The line of inheritance for the throne of France must be beyond reproach.”

They’ve had enemies who used the King’s favour as a weapon, playing puppet master and manipulating their erratic monarch in whatever direction they pleased. They’ve manipulated the King as well to fight back, carefully setting up the world for him to reach the conclusions they want him to reach, to give the orders they need him to give. Cajoling him. Directing him. Athos is so used to it being a battle over who can persuade the King, who can influence him, that it’s something of a shock to remember that no clever manipulator is half as much of a threat as the King making decisions based only on his own impulsive desires. You cannot run a country on tantrums and childish piques, on an infantile incomprehension of consequences, on a petty need to hit out at anyone who offends or hurts you, on a refusal to understand that you could ever be wrong or mistaken.

The King could reach any conclusion, and said conclusion will be based on a wild and unpredictable variety of factors – how pretty and apologetic the Queen looks when next he sees her. What courtiers speak to him and what they say. How well-rested he is, how hard his hangover hits, how much he’s had to drink, how quickly the servants draw his bath, if he likes his breakfast, whether the Dauphin smiles at him when he’s presented or is screaming in that piercing way so specific to babies. Their lives, the Queen’s life, and the future of France depends entirely on if the King is in a good mood, or if he’s drowning in paranoia and self-pity.

His Majesty is perfectly capable of having Aramis executed, setting his wife aside, disowning his son, and launching the whole country into war with Spain based on a fit of anger and frustration. Perhaps he’d regret it later, but the tears he would cry then would still be for himself and no one else, and they wouldn’t reverse anything.

And Chaput – loyal, eager Chaput – will follow the King into whatever madness his monarch wants, doing nothing to check his foolish choices, because Treville deliberately promoted a man who would never try to influence the King. Aramis committed treason, Athos covered it up, and Treville selected a man perfectly capable of discovering this and telling the King.

Richelieu himself couldn’t have routed them as thoroughly as they’ve seemingly routed themselves.

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They’ve been in the cell for hours, Athos slumped against the wall with his eyes closed, Aramis alternately praying and pacing.

“It’s just one night,” Aramis says, for the fifteenth time.

“Nuns,” Athos reminds him, in a voice of doom, not bothering to open his eyes. “Nuns under oath.”

There’s a slight noise and Athos jerks upright, staring into the darkness – but there’s no one there and he relaxes again. He’s responded this way to every noise since they were put here, even those of the building settling.

Aramis glances in the direction he did. “You act like you’re waiting for something.”

Athos shrugs, letting his eyes slide closed again. “Someone, actually.”
“Porthos and d’Artagnan won’t –” Aramis starts to say, and then understands what Athos means. “Ah. Milady. It’s only been a few hours, though. Do you really think she’ll be mounting a rescue mission already? And even if she was, how would she get in here by herself?”

Athos elects not to respond. Aramis has gone on several missions with Milady, stormed the Louvre with her, witnessed her kill Rochefort, watched her fight dozens of men, seen her break into places and break out of them – and yet he insists on underestimating her. Many people do.

He doesn’t. If Anne chooses to come for him, there are no walls that could block her way, and no soldiers who could stop her. He’s glad she hasn’t, though – an escape would only convince the King that every word of the rumour is true. Presumably, that’s why she’s holding off – that, or Porthos and d’Artagnan somehow persuaded her to wait a while longer.

“It’s actually very easy, if you look harmless and have a couple of coins to bribe the guards.” The figure materialises out of the dark, ugly smirk fixed on her pale face, and Athos experiences an unwelcome wash of memory go through him.

“Catherine,” he sighs the word out, almost resigned to it. He hadn’t forgotten her, exactly – he’d just put her out of his mind. He’s always found it very easy to put her from his mind, to disregard her. Even when he spoke to her daily, her voice seemed like background noise, her presence barely relevant to his life. It’s no wonder he can’t perform the necessary mental feats to imagine a world where she became his wife – his experience of marriage is fierce, almost wild devotion, obsessive love, desperate need, and all he feels for Catherine is mild annoyance and even milder guilt.

It takes Aramis a second longer. “Lady de Garouville. What are you doing here?”

“Well, I am hardly in a position to dodge now,” Athos says mildly, spreading his arms as if to indicate what a good target he is. Aramis makes a low noise of concern, but Athos ignores him – Catherine has poor aim when in a temper, as he discovered the last time she shot him, and the noise of the gun firing would draw the guards in here in a moment. An unknown person shooting at him while imprisoned might even convince the King this is all yet another conspiracy – stranger things have happened.

He wonders briefly how she found them – he wasn’t even dressed as a Musketeer when last they met, as he recalls. But then he remembers sending Aramis down to the cells to give a lecture about not shooting Musketeers, and feels slightly exasperated with himself. It would have been easy for her to find him after that. But why wait so long to strike?

Unless, he realises with a sudden chill of fear, she was waiting for him to have something to lose. And then Anne showed up.
At first Milady hardly showed herself and no one knew their connection, but gradually she became more widely known – first as Athos’s pregnant mistress, and then in time, as Athos’s wife and the mother of their newborn child. How long has Catherine been following him? Does she know about Milady? Has she been following her as well? Does Catherine know about their reconciliation, their child, their shared home, the life they’ve rebuilt? He can hardly be her only target, not when she hates his wife so very much, and he can only imagine that their renewed happiness would have exacerbated her hatred almost to madness.

“I’ve decided on something even more fitting, as it happens,” Catherine says, regaining some of her smugness as she sees realisation growing on his face. “I thought that first I’d take you from her the way she took Thomas from me… but no. I was too impatient. I can save that until last, so you can experience the rest from the vantage point of a cell like the one you put me in. You and Anne both deserve worse than death for all you’ve stolen from me. Not just my husband, but the home I would have had, the children I would have borne, the life I would have lived -”

“Stop monologuing,” Athos says, voice low. “If you go anywhere near her -”

“You’ll what?” Catherine jeers. “There’s not much you can do from here, is there? Don’t worry. I’ll see Anne gets exactly what she deserved all those years ago. But first, I’ll make both of you understand exactly what it feels like to lose everything.”

He growls, then, slamming against the bars as if he could tear them out, but she’s already gone, back into the darkness. He strikes it again and again, until the guards come in, until they threaten him. He wants to break out, should break out, doesn’t give a damn what effect it will have on King and Queen and country, on these accusations of treason, but Aramis pulls him back and the guards stay back from the bars and he can’t see any way out. He is not his wife. He cannot pick locks. He can’t break bars with the force of his anger, either, as much as he wishes he could.

He is as terrified as he is furious. He would never underestimate his wife, no, but she is unprepared, she has no warning and no suspicion, she will be thoroughly distracted by his arrest – and who knows how long Catherine has been plotting and planning. And – children. She mentioned the children she would have had, and he knows that must have been a deliberate choice. His son is at risk as well. Several fears morph and merge, becoming greater and more uncontrollable as they do so – his wife dying, being lost to him. His child targeted by one of his enemies. Him being utterly helpless to prevent harm coming to them.

Aramis rests a hand on his shoulder, eyes bright with concern, but Athos shakes it off, then slumps against the bars and closes his stinging eyes.

Catherine has always hated his wife. Perhaps she would have tried for vengeance on her even without Athos’s interference – but it’s still Athos’s fault that Catherine is in a position to hurt Anne. It was Athos who refused to arrest or kill Catherine, Athos who let Catherine know exactly where he was to be found, and Athos who persuaded his wife to remain in Paris with him even though he knew there were dangers here that could target her.

He came here to try and save Aramis. He was thinking only of keeping his friends safe, of keeping his life unchanged, everything in the correct order, the way it was supposed to be. He wasn’t thinking of her, of his family, not the way he should have been.

What if his thoughtlessness leads to his wife’s death, his child’s death? What if Catherine succeeds in hurting them while he is here, unable to lift a hand to protect them, unable even to warn them?
Arrested. Athos has been arrested.

Or “held”, as Treville insists on calling it – he claims it’s just the King being “tetchy”, and that he’s confident they can resolve the situation soon.

Somehow, she’s not convinced.

But still, on one subject he was right – there’s nothing they can do at present. To tell the truth, she’s almost relieved by that, since she’s in no shape to do anything right now. She’s exhausted. She’s been keeping abreast of what’s happening, gathering rumours from the Louvre, from the streets, from the taverns, and it’s been working – she knows where the Lady Marguerite and Doctor Lemay are, knows exactly what each of them said (imagines wringing Marguerite’s neck for it). She’s aware of where Athos and Aramis are being held, how easy it would be for her and the others to break them out, how little that would help the situation. She knows the names of the nuns who travelled from the convent under Red Guard protection, when they’re going to testify, and even what they’re likely to say. From what she’s heard, they can neither condemn nor exonerate Aramis – they’ll stress that they never saw anything untoward happen between the Queen and Aramis, but if questioned thoroughly, they’ll have to admit there were times the Queen was unchaperoned. The information is much more detailed than what Treville can hear as First Minister, and it took considerable effort to gather.

Treville had all but ordered her to leave the Garrison, to go and get some sleep. Of course, she doubts that was just due to her visible exhaustion – he seems worried about how she may react to Athos’s (hopefully temporary) imprisonment. His suggestion she go home had also contained an implicit order – don’t do anything. Don’t break Athos out. Don’t even go to see him. Don’t act without my instruction. Don’t go off on your own. Don’t do any damage.

She could have pointed out she’s been in the fray considerably more than he has, of late, and that she knows what she’s doing – her plans are rarely as ill-considered as Musketeer ones. But all the times she has behaved foolishly or impulsively, it’s because Athos was involved, and Treville knows that as surely as she does.

She could read Treville’s thoughts in his eyes – while he respects both of their skills, he thinks she and Athos are incapable of being rational when it comes to the other. He thinks that in this case, her judgment is compromised, that he can’t trust her to follow his orders, that she’d burn France down herself if she thought it necessary for her own aims. Given the past, he has good reason to think so, she supposes.

He’s also not wrong. It’s no more than what she’s said to Athos herself – that she’s willing to take extreme actions. That she’s still capable of being ruthless. But Athos hadn’t seemed to believe her, or perhaps just hadn’t wanted to. Sometimes, she wonders if he’s troubled by her ruthlessness, disturbed by her capacity for cruelty, and disappointed by her willingness to put herself, him and their son above concern for the world at large.

And sometimes, in darker moments, she wonders why it’s so bad that she’d do anything for them, sacrifice anything and anyone for their family. Sometimes she wishes Athos were the same as her, that he had that singular focus, that he would choose her above everything and never even hesitate.

Between all of her worries and fears, she sleeps very poorly, tipping from one disturbed dream to another.
She is playing with Athos again, laughing and running, but when she pulls away he’s nowhere to be seen. She reaches out desperately for the spot where he was, seeking him out, but there’s nothing but a noose, the rope coming to life like a snake and curling around her neck even as she tries to fight it off. The floor vanishes and there is a sickening drop and she can’t breathe. She lands on her back in grass that transforms into claws which scratch at her, and then when she cries out at the pain and hits back, they change again, into tongues of flames that lick at her.

It becomes half a dream, half a memory as she starts to move towards wakefulness, dozing fitfully in the valley between the real world and the imaginary. The heat of the fire and the heat of her rage mingling. Athos, drunk and confused, staring at her in disbelief. The feel of the locket beneath her fingers – she had been so sure, until that moment, that while he felt anger and guilt, love was long gone. She thought he had excised her from his heart years ago, the way she had never quite managed to do with him. And then he had sighed her name, relief and need and wonder in the exhalation, put his arm around her, curling clumsily into her embrace as if all he wanted was to be close to her. Damn the past and the future, damn everything that lay between them, nothing mattering except being pressed against each other once more, souls and bodies reunited. A strange, perfect moment, in a ruined house, amongst the scattered remnants of their ruined lives, surrounded by the shreds of their ruined hearts. A moment that could not last.

She wakes fully then, but for a moment the dream doesn’t fade. It’s so real she can almost taste it on her tongue, and when she inhales, the air smells like the past. She almost thinks he will be in her arms.

But of course it smells like him – it’s the bed they share, after all, but they are not sharing it now.

She breathes in again, anyway, closing her eyes, and – no wonder she dreamt of the past. No wonder she dreamt of smoke and flame. There is smoke in the air, the haze of it so light perhaps no one else would notice it, unless they’d lived a life like hers, having to be constantly on the alert, aware of every tiny change in the world. It’s not like the smoke that comes from the neat little fireplaces in each room, it’s wrong, it’s sour, it’s the smell of burning paint and cloth and glass as well as burning wood.

Every nerve in her body tenses and she’s rolling out of bed in an instant, racing towards the nursery, heedless of the impropriety of her diaphanous nightgown, heedless of the discomfort of bare feet on cold floors, heedless of everything but that one thought: fire.

There is faint glow coming from beneath the nursery door, and when she flings the door wide, she is blasted with the heat of it, swirling around her. She almost cannot believe the sight before her eyes, squinting through the thick haze of smoke hanging in the air. The nurse is a crumpled figure on the floor in the far corner, the back of her head dark, hair matted with dried blood. Half the floor is alight. The fire is climbing the walls. The bassinet, the bassinet her child sleeps in, has flames licking up its sides, clawing swiftly through the delicately embroidered cloth and up towards the tiny figure within.

Above the popping and crackling noises of a young fire growing quickly, she can hear thin, reedy cries, nothing like the full bellow René normally employs, as if he can’t quite breathe properly –

She doesn’t make any kind of conscious decision to do it. One moment, she is at the door, the next she is moving inexorably towards the bassinet through the thick smoke. Fire scorches the bottom of her bare feet and flirts with her nightgown, but the pain is unimportant. Her skin aches and tightens with the heat, as if she’s spent all day in a meadow with the sun on her face. When she breathes, it feels like she breathes ashes, choking on the taste of them, smoke coating her throat and
tongue, eyes stinging so painfully she wants to shut them tight, but that’s unimportant too. She takes her son in her arms and shushes him, tears choking her for some reason, yanking his long blanket off him desperately because the edge has caught alight even as she backs away towards the exit again as quickly as she can move. A part of the doorframe falls and she bats it away painfully with one arm, feels the burn and the cut of it, and nearly has to dive into the corridor as the rest comes down too, rolling upright again and fleeing, her child clutched close to her chest. Her skirt has thick smoke coming off it and she shifts René painfully into her injured arm to bat at the charred section of material with the other, trying to put it out but not slowing down for a second.

Then she’s down the stairs and out the door, out into the cold night air, falling to her knees with a sharp crack on the icy street, sobbing just as her son is sobbing, just at how close this was, what if she hadn’t woken, what if it had taken even a few more minutes, what if, what if -

The footman is there suddenly – he was probably asleep in his little room under the stairs and heard her thundering down them in a panic, she realises with the one part of her mind still working – and he crouches beside her. “My lady, my lady -” he says, bewildered and frightened, trying to avert his gaze from her relative state of undress but unable to stop gawping at the smoke trailing off her skirts. “There’s – what’s -”

“Go,” she snaps, and her voice is almost a croak – she breathed in more smoke than she thought, clearly – “Go. The nursery.” She doesn’t know if she means for him to stop the fire and rescue the nurse, or if she just wants him to leave her be so she can stare at her son, her son, her son who was so close to death, her son who is still coughing weakly in her arms.

She pats at his back lightly to try and help his breathing, too scared to be firm when he seems so small and weak, tears still falling on him, and he makes a hoarse choking noise and spits up some kind of disgusting grey mucous, again and again, then returns to crying at a much louder volume. His skin is pink, too pink to be just a reaction to the cold air, but it seems more like the kind of burn people get from the sun than from a house fire, he’s not burned… He sounds so hoarse and weak, and he cries as if his heart is breaking, and she cries that way too because her heart nearly did break, and where is her husband, why isn’t he here? She forces herself to straighten, to rub the tears away from her eyes, because it’s acceptable for Athos to see her weak but it’s not acceptable for anyone else to. She needs Athos, needs him, but he isn’t here, and so instead she stands straight and numbly watches as people rush around her desperately, the quiet night suddenly full of all the chaos fire causes in Paris – people crying out warnings, men gathering water and blankets, her servants staggering out into the cold night. Someone drapes a wet blanket around her and she doesn’t shrug it off.

She is vaguely conscious of her footman running to the Garrison, presumably to find her husband and tell him what’s happened, and she opens her mouth to say he’s not there but her throat is thick with bile and smoke and she doesn’t think she can say anything until she’s drunk several buckets of water. Instead, she stays where she is, unmoving, watching. Her arm is badly burnt and bleeding sluggishly, her feet red and blistered from the floor, her breathing harsh and wrong, her whole body stained with soot and smoke, her skin and eyes parched and almost glowing with leftover heat, and she’s watching the house they made into a home burn in front of her. But her spine is straight and her head high, because that’s how she has always survived.

There is one more little moment of vulnerability that she allows, however, one she can’t prevent – she presses a slightly too-hard kiss to her little son’s forehead as he cries. His fine hair tickles her nose and one of his flailing hands catches her on the cheek, and he is wonderfully, gloriously alive.
She’s in the Garrison, sitting in Athos’s office, a pitcher of cold water on the desk. She’s drank about three of them over the past few hours. She’s also been dipping a clean one of the Musketeer scarves in the pitcher repeatedly, then bringing it to René’s lips, because milk on its own doesn’t seem enough when he’s so dry and thirsty. If nothing else, at least it seemed to quiet his crying, distracting him from his misery and discomfort, from his heat-tightened skin, clogged throat, burning lungs and smoke-stinging eyes. At first he sucked greedily at the wet cloth, but now he seems to be satisfied, perhaps even close to sleep.

D’Artagnan is across the room from her, silent and watchful. They haven’t exchanged a word since she got here, but she can feel the repressed tension radiating off him. She suspects he sees this as a personal failing – Athos locked away for such a short time, and his wife and child attacked, his house set on fire, and d’Artagnan unable to do anything about it. Over time, his hero worship of his mentor and captain has lessened, but he still has an automatic, visceral reaction to the idea of failing Athos. Perhaps that’s why he’s hardly left her side since she got here, playing protector, playing helper. She might not ever admit it to him, but she’s grateful for the help. She hates receiving help, but right now she needs it.

She’s trying to stop shivering. She’s been trying for hours – has come close to spilling water from the pitcher half a dozen times. She couldn’t even clean and bandage her own arm. D’Artagnan had to do it, silently washing away the blood and smearing on ointment he retrieved from Aramis’s room before inexpertly winding bandages about her. The ointment barely dulls the pain, and she has no idea if it will help her arm heal or stop it from scarring, but at least the pungent smell of it covers up the scent of burnt flesh.

That’s not all he’s fetched for her. She’s swamped by an overlarge coat – one of Porthos’s, probably – and there’s a thick blanket around her and René on top of that, but somehow she still cannot seem to quell her shaking despite all her layers. Well, even if it’s not making her feel warm, at least it covers her gauzy nightdress (now charred, ripped, and grimy with smoke) and the weight of it around her brings some comfort.

Porthos enters and gives her a weary smile. He smells even more strongly of smoke than she does.

“‘The fire’s out,’” he tells her. “‘Didn’t even spread beyond your house, you found it so soon. The nursery’s gone and the hallway’s a bit scorched, but the rest of the place is good, the foundations are all solid. The nurse will live too – she’s got a hell of a headache, and is coughing half her lungs up, but nothing that will last. She didn’t see who hit her, though.’”

“It must be whoever was following Athos,” d’Artagnan says, looking exhausted, dark bags under his eyes and a deep set to his mouth she’s never seen before.

“Someone following him?” Milady asks numbly. “‘I thought they just took a shot at him in the street.’”

“Yes, but the way they did it…” d’Artagnan raises one shoulder in a half-shrug. “‘It must have taken planning, preparation, knowing his schedule exactly, even knowing what stall he would stop at. Whoever it was must have been following him for some time.’”

“And they knew how to get into my house,” Milady says softly, coldness starting to crawl through her veins, numbness replaced by something worse. She keeps having to remind herself not to cling too tightly to her son, loosening her arms every few minutes – she cannot let him go, but she’s also terrified that if she holds him too tightly, he will start coughing again, those horrible hoarse coughs. “‘That’s not easy.’”

And where they set the fire… to kill René first, of course, but if the hallway had caught properly,
everyone on the top floor would have been trapped. Milady could have exited out the window in her and Athos’s shared room – she originally chose the room partially for that reason – but she has a sudden sickening suspicion that if she goes and checks now she’ll find that the window is barred from the outside. Someone wanted them to die like that, like rats in a burning barn, panicking and suffocating and trapped, and that someone knew exactly how to do it. If she hadn’t woken…

No, they haven’t just been following Athos, have they? She thinks of the dozens of times in recent months she’s felt eyes on her back. The little noises in alleyways. The paranoia she dismissed as belonging in the past.

To nearly hit Athos from such a distance, they must be a good shot. To follow her without detection for so long, they must also be quite skilled at that, used to silently stalking prey through the darkness. Not a soldier, then – stealth is not a soldier’s specialty, as the Musketeers prove regularly. A spy, an assassin? No, setting a house alight is too clumsy, an act motivated by emotion, not by a paid killer’s cool logic. At least, it was when she did it.

_Homes burn_ – the taunting thought that used to ring in her mind regularly back when she and her husband were doing everything they could to destroy the past, in their own separate ways, and to destroy each other as well. Back when she burnt their old home herself, wanting it to match their ruined, blackened insides, wanting the sky to turn red with her fury and agony. The phrase had more meaning than just the literal, though – it meant, what seems safe isn’t safe. No happiness can last. At the end, nothing remains but ruins, and you will curse yourself for ever having naively hoped otherwise. She did curse herself for it once, when she and Athos burnt to cinders. Homes burn.

Is it all happening again? Not exactly the same, of course, but – close enough to hit her somewhere deeply painful. Athos in a cell like she was once, perhaps even destined for execution in the same way. If that happens, he’ll even acquire another dead brother as well, albeit a brother of the heart instead of one in blood. She’ll be left empty and haunted as he once was. Their house aflame again, every memory going up in smoke, but this time with their son nearly going up in smoke with it. Everything taken from her. Everything. The way it always has been.

She finds that she’s shaking again.

“Whoever they were, they’re willing to kill a child,” d’Artagnan says grimly, rousing her from her reverie. “Not just kill, even. Burn a child to death.” He looks at Porthos, and then at Milady, and she’s surprised by the depths of the rage in his eyes.

She spent years killing people – for the Cardinal, for her own advantage, even just to try and exorcise some of the rage from her heart. She’s killed innocents – quickly and occasionally with some regret, but she has. But in all that time, she never killed a child. It would never even have crossed her mind. Where was the benefit, after all?

Her heart is still pounding painfully, her breath too quick. His words scar her mind. Burn to death. Someone tried to burn her child to death. She thinks of that choking sense of smoke, her eyes stinging, the weak and wailing cries of René over the popping of wood, the way his skin was raw and red from the heat and how his pathetic little coughs rasped from his sore throat. This time, though, it doesn’t wrench her heart: it fills it with a terrible mix of fury and fear.

And that feeling spreads when Porthos speaks.

“If they’re still after Athos too,” he says slowly, almost distantly. “I mean… it’s easy enough to kill a man in jail, yeah? If they can get in, and we know they can get into places. Once they’re there, it’s like shooting fish in a barrel, pretty much.”
“It would be dishonourable and cowardly,” d’Artagnan says, but not in disagreement. His voice is hard. “Exactly what I’d expect from a child-murderer.”

“Whoever it is could kill Athos easy, maybe even Aramis as well. We need to warn them.”

“No, we need to go and get them,” Milady says sharply, already starting for the door, every step painful on her burnt feet, clutching René closely to her. Some part of her knows she shouldn’t be taking a baby to a jailbreak, but an army couldn’t pry her child from her arms right now.

Porthos nods grimly, falling in behind her, but d’Artagnan bars their way. “No,” he snaps. “Better on the run than dead.” She knows how to run. She could keep herself hidden from the Cardinal, and since there’s no one in the Louvre with half his competency any more, she can certainly keep them all hidden. They can go to the country, or even overseas, keep moving for a while. Treville will do everything he can to stop them being apprehended. It will work. She will keep her family safe.

“They won’t leave with us if we try and break them out, not when it will mean the Queen’s arrest or death,” d’Artagnan says. “Think.”

Porthos hesitates, then slumps. The look her turns on her is apologetic. “He’s right.”

Of course he’s right. Of course her husband would choose death over a life with her and their son, away from all this, away from his duty and his brothers and his men and his Queen and all the things he values more than her. She all but snarls at them like a wild animal. “So what do you suggest?”

“We prove their innocence,” d’Artagnan says impatiently, but then his face falls slightly as he remembers that there is no proof of that, because they are guilty, because they did in fact commit treason. Or at least Aramis did, and Athos implicated himself by remaining silent about the matter. “We… we’ll think of something. We can talk to Treville.”

“No,” she says. Treville has rules he follows, lines he won’t cross, priorities besides Athos, and right now she cares for none of those. “We’re done with your way. We do this my way now.”

“You way? Who are you planning to kill?” d’Artagnan scowls at her. “Lady Marguerite and Doctor Lemay? That will only convince everyone it was the truth.”

“I don’t only kill people,” she says in a low voice. “I’m also very good at convincing them to do what I want. Or had you forgotten?”

Porthos blinks at that and clears his throat, trying to break their stalemate, but they both ignore him.

“You can hold a gun to Marguerite’s head for as long as you want, I don’t think she’ll recant her testimony. And it wouldn’t exactly be believable if she did,” d’Artagnan says. “However convincing you think you are -”

“Not her, the King. I’ve saved the man’s life three times now. He’ll listen to me.”

There’s a long pause where they keep staring at each other, and then he says, “Really. Is that why he’ll listen to you?” There’s a challenge in his voice.

She reassesses, drawing in a long breath. “You saw, then. I wondered if you did. But you didn’t tell him.” She can’t help but wonder why, if he saw the kiss at the fort, he didn’t go straight to his friend with news of it. Because he didn’t want to be the one to hurt Athos? Because he knows what
she looks like when she’s wearing the mask of seductress, and didn’t see it in her face then? Because she’s somehow earned a measure of trust from him? God forbid.

In light of everything, though, it hardly matters – an unwanted kiss seems the most irrelevant thing in the world compared to the reedy wails of her suffocating child still ringing in her ears.

“Is one of you gonna tell me?” Porthos asks, understandably frustrated.

Milady switches her gaze to him. “No. It’s not relevant. Listen, I can get Athos and Aramis out, if you help me. So help.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Then I’ll do it without you,” she says honestly. “But it will be risky, and people might die, and I don’t – I don’t know what to do with René…” She swallows against sudden tears, feeling the warm weight of her small son in her arms. Everywhere she needs to go and everything she needs to do is dangerous, but she’s not sure she can stand the idea of him being out of earshot right now.

She hasn’t managed to let him go since the fire. The idea terrifies her. She needs to go back to the house, too, needs to get clothes and supplies, and that terrifies her as well. She was starting to feel safe, for the first time in a long time, and now that’s gone, the sense of security evaporating like mist in the cold light of day. But she’s used to being in danger – she is not used to her son being in danger. It is far, far worse.

“Hey,” Porthos’s gaze softens. “We’ll protect him with our life, you know that.”

She does. That’s why she needs them, as loathe as she is to admit that. She thinks she can do the parts of this she needs to do if her son is close by, protected by them. And with her advice, they can do the rest.

“I’ll help,” Porthos says. “I owe you a favour, remember?” But it’s clear from the softness in his expression that this is less to do with favours, and more to do with her clear distress – Porthos is fatally warm-hearted. Once upon a time, she would have considered that a weakness, one she could have used to crack him open like a nut – now, all she thinks is that she’s so very grateful for the understanding in his expression.

D’Artagnan hesitates, then sighs. “I don’t. But Athos… Aramis… we can’t leave them. Not to whatever monster is behind this, and not to execution. If you have a way to save them that doesn’t burn the country down around our ears, I’m in.”

“It won’t be clean,” she warns them.

Porthos gives a sort of a half-shrug, although she can tell she’s making him uneasy. There’s not many lines the Inseparables won’t cross for each other, but that doesn’t mean they enjoy crossing those lines.

“You can get them out? Free and clear? The Queen safe as well?” d’Artagnan checks. When she nods, he nods slowly as well. The grim set to his face makes him look older, less of a youth. “Then what are we waiting for?”

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The Louvre has more corridors than a rabbit warren, and they are as poorly-mapped: that’s the only reason why it’s so easy for Milady to make her way to the Queen’s rooms, shadowed by d’Artagnan. She gestures to him to wait outside, keeping watch and minding René, and then enters
– she’s likely to startle them by her sudden appearance, and if there are any additional guards present, she doesn’t want her son in the line of fire. She could of course send only d’Artagnan in, but she doesn’t trust him not to fumble over the explanation, or balk at the idea of involving his Queen and his beloved in something so undeniably immoral.

As it happens, when she opens the little door and steps out unexpectedly, it’s Constance who holds a knife up threateningly against her throat. It’s only for a blink, then Constance relaxes. “Oh, it’s you. What are you doing here?” Constance asks. She rakes her eyes up and down Milady, and then adds, “And dressed like that.”

Coincidentally, she bought this dress on the day she first met Her Majesty – or at least, the first meeting the Queen was aware of. It’s revealing, low-cut, and moulds perfectly to her shape, barely brought to acceptability by the addition of an overdress and the long gloves she wears to conceal the bandage on her arm. The first time she wore it, she planned to seduce her husband – but today, her own husband is not her target.

The Queen stands in the middle of the room, but turns at Constance’s greeting. Anne of Austria takes only an instant to recognise her, her response far quicker than Marguerite’s dawning comprehension. “I would also like to know that,” she says in a low voice, apparently deciding not to involve the guards outside. It would do her no good if she did – one is throwing up from an unexpected case of food poisoning, and the other won’t intervene (at least not if he wants to keep the ten livres he was given, and avoid his commanding officer finding out he’s been sleeping with the man’s wife).

Milady gives a half-shrug. “I’m here to help, Your Majesty.”

“Help how?”

There’s a little half-cry from behind her, the strange bleating noise babies sometimes make when they’re considering whether or not to let loose with a full war-cry, and she turns to see d’Artagnan coming out of the passageway with René held awkwardly in his arms. “He woke up,” d’Artagnan says, by way of explanation, looking uncomfortable.

Milady represses a sigh of exasperation and reaches out, René beginning to settle immediately in her more-confident hold. She should have brought Porthos as well – he knows how to calm the child. But he also knows where Lemay’s rooms are, and d’Artagnan does not, so this was the necessary configuration.

The Queen’s eyes widened and brightened for a moment at the noise of the babe, but then her face settles into disappointment as she recognises it’s not the Dauphin, just a child she’s never seen before. She clears her throat, hiding this. “A pretty child.”

“My son René,” Milady says, although she’s not sure why. Normally, she would hesitate to share even the smallest bit of information about herself. However, it occurs to her that the Queen’s good opinion, while not as valuable as the King’s, is still not precisely worthless. The woman should know who to thank for this assistance, if she desires to give thanks, especially if that gratitude comes with additional benefits.

“René? Named after…” Doubt appears on the Queen’s face for a moment, pretty lips opening in a silent ‘oh’, smooth brow furrowing slightly. Given Aramis’s reputation, and his dalliance with the Dauphin’s governess as well as the Queen herself, Milady supposes it’s a reasonable assumption to leap to. After all, Her Majesty was far too absorbed in her own affairs to pay attention to Milady and Athos’s conversation at the fort, and if there’s any Musketeer you’d expect to have bastard babies dotted all around France, it would be Aramis.
“Named after one of my husband’s best friends,” Milady explains, giving the woman a thin smile. “I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself. Milady Anne d’Athos, at your service, Your Majesty.”

The Queen blinks, assembling this new information. If she’s surprised by the news Athos has a wife and child – and Milady has no idea if it is new information, given Constance’s closeness to the Queen – she doesn’t allow that surprise to show in her expression.

Constance, meanwhile, has spent the entire conversation staring at d’Artagnan, one eyebrow raised in absolute incredulity at his appearance – apparently, she’s unimpressed by the curly fake moustache Milady affixed to his face, the gaudy English style to his clothes, and the impressively tacky hat. He complained bitterly about all of them, providing Milady with much-needed amusement, but he still wore them. He makes a surprisingly believable Englishman despite the tan of his skin, which she’s not sure anyone could achieve in England’s endless drizzle. Between that, and what she told him to say, getting the pieces was easy.

Reminded of her purpose, she shifts her quieting child to one arm, and reaches into her bag. No one tenses even slightly – when did she get such a degree of trust? It’s bizarre – and the Queen watches in silence as she brings out a tangled handful of big silver necklaces, bracelets, rings, and hair decorations.

“A gift,” Milady says, passing them to the Queen.

The other woman regards them with faint distaste. “I hope you don’t expect me to wear these.”

To her surprise, Milady smiles at that – the jewellery is even tackier than d’Artagnan’s hat. It’s all big silver flourishes, shined to excess. “No, Your Majesty. I expect you to use them to persuade your husband of your innocence.”

“You want me to summon the King? He won’t come.” She keeps her head high, although two pink spots of humiliation at this truth begin to appear on her cheeks.

“No. I’m going to him. After that, he’ll come here, perhaps with guards. That will be your chance.”

The Queen regards her for a long time. There is no immediate and total understanding when their gazes meet, mother to mother; no kinship from both knowing what it is to love a Musketeer, of the difficulties of being a woman in this world, of the ruthlessness borne of having a family to protect and no honourable way to protect it. But perhaps there is a flicker of something like recognition.

And one understanding is passed between them. The Queen knows that this strange plan – where a woman she barely knows orders her to undertake mysterious and unexplained activities, where d’Artagnan wears a disguise and Milady wears a dress more suited to the bedroom, where at the end the plan is to acquit a guilty man and deceive a King – is not a plan without casualties.

“Then tell me what I must do,” the Queen says in a low voice, accepting this without question – because in one way, she and Milady are exactly alike, and she’ll do whatever it takes to protect the people she loves.

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He and Aramis sit silently, lost in their own private miseries. They’d been dragged out briefly to watch the nuns’ “confession”, which hadn’t been as disastrous as Athos expected, but also hadn’t contained the exoneration Aramis hoped for. Now, they wait, but what are they waiting for? The news that they’re being executed? The news that the King has put the Queen aside? Or (Athos’s
heart thumps painfully at even the thought) the news that Catherine has struck?

Athos knows which news he fears the most.

“I should never have put her in danger,” Aramis says, apropos of nothing, his expression faraway – probably with Her Majesty, who’s still confined to her rooms. At least, that’s who Athos assumes he’s talking about, although he supposes it could also be Marguerite.

“No,” Athos says. “But you’re hardly the only one to make that mistake.” He knows his face twists as he says it.

“It’s not your fault,” Aramis insists, not for the first time. “Catherine would have gone after her whatever.”

“She could have been in England, far away from all this.”

“So could you,” Aramis says, so softly Athos almost doesn’t understand the words, and then he turns to stare at his friend in shock.

“What?”

“A Musketeer’s commission doesn’t have to be for life,” Aramis says, seeming to pick his words carefully. “And as nice as it is to imagine, none of us can do this forever. Eventually, there’s an ‘after’, and each of us needs to decide what that means for ourselves.”

Athos looks at Aramis and realises. “You’re not just talking about me, are you? You’re planning -”

“Up!”

They both jerk in surprise, jolted out of their quiet conversation. There’s two Red Guards there, one gesturing peremptorily at them. Athos exchanges a glance with Aramis and both slowly get to their feet. Standing side by side. Ready for whatever’s coming, whether death or freedom.

But then there’s Chaput, pushing past his own men quickly. “My apologies,” he says, and glares at the impatient guard. “My men are not always as polite as they could be.” With one oddly ritualistic movement, he unlocks the door. “By the order of the King, you are hereby released, and cleared of all charges. I would like to deliver a personal apology as well, for my treatment of you. You must understand -”

“We understand perfectly,” Athos says smoothly, already moving for the exit.

“Her Majesty?” Aramis checks.

Chaput clears his throat. “The King regrets his brief suspicion as unworthy of him, and has sought and received the Queen’s unconditional forgiveness for actions taken in the heat of the moment. I would, however, recommend you don’t speak widely of what’s happened. While some rumours may circulate, it’s best -”

“Not a word,” Aramis promises, and follows Athos, looking like he’s ten years younger, eyes sparkling.

Athos, meanwhile, can think of nothing but getting home. Of his family. Of what Catherine could be doing to them –

“Oi! Over here!”
They’re barely out the gates when they hear the call, and Athos swings around to see Porthos grinning hugely at them, white teeth flashing against dark skin. D’Artagnan is next to him, wearing a slightly smaller smile but looking just as pleased, but that doesn’t keep Athos’s attention, because there’s a child in Porthos’s arms.

He moves towards Porthos before he can stop himself, and then he’s bending over the tiny bundle as Porthos gently raises it for his inspection, just as Constance did once months ago, when the child there was even tinier than he is now. His son’s blue-green eyes blink up at him sleepily, and a yawn (little fists stretching outwards) turns into a smile as René recognises his father. He coos a jumbled word that may or may not mean papa in his own personal language of cries, burbles, mumbles and scattered syllables.

“René…” Athos breathes, suffused with relief that his son is fine, closing his eyes in thankfulness. But why is René here? Why not at home, in the care of the nurse? And why is he in Porthos’s arms? Where is his mother, Athos’s wife? What if –

“I suppose we know where I stand in your priorities, my love.” The drawl comes from behind him, and he turns, and he sees her, and suddenly his throat is choked. She was tucked in the corner, out of the wind, but now he sees her. It’s not just his son. She’s fine too. More than fine.

Her beauty can always level him, leave him on his knees, but today it’s even more debilitating, and even more wonderful. The familiar curve of her smirk is dizzying. She’s dazzling, all smooth pale skin, slender grace, dark curling hair falling down her back, dressed in her finest and most revealing silks, cheeks and lips flushed with triumph and cat-like green eyes bright. He almost wants to ban anyone else from laying eyes on her, because while she is deserving of worship he would prefer to be the only devotee. In fact, he would prefer it if it was only ever them, them and their son, isolated and safe from the rest of the world.

Is that what she meant, when she spoke of cottages, when she brought up the idea of leaving everything else behind?

He doesn’t care about their audience. He strides towards her without pause, and she utters a faint noise of surprise as he lifts her off her feet with the force of his embrace, twirling her around in a swirl of skirts and dark hair, holding her so closely that he can feel her heartbeat against his own. She laughs delightedly as he spins her around – the way he once did, consumed with joy, when she accepted his offer of marriage; the way he did after their wedding, when they entered the bedroom they would share for the first time and left any and all chaperons behind. He feels years drop away even as he does it. He finishes by kissing her, hard and thoroughly, near bending her back with the force of it, his arms the only thing keeping her from being brought to the ground. She grasps at his shirt to steady herself, kissing him with just as much abandon, but when he moves his grip slightly she winces unintentionally, and he pulls back, suddenly alarmed, holding her at arms’ length.

“Have you missed me after all, then?” she teases breathlessly, eyes alight in amusement, trying to slide over the moment. “Too many nights alone in your cell?”

He ignores her teasing, scanning her in concern, looking for the source of her discomfort. In his first sight of her, he didn’t realise that the pinkness to her cheeks is more than just pleasure, that beneath her joy at seeing him there’s a bone-deep weariness on her face, and that the smile she wears trembles just a little. He also hadn’t really registered the awkward way her arm curled around him, as if she couldn’t quite bend her elbow normally. He’d been too thrilled to see her to consciously process anything else until it was called to his attention. But he couldn’t fail to notice the way she flinched when he shifted his hand down from her shoulder, or the feel of bulkiness beneath her long glove that should not be there. Bandages?
“Anne?” he asks, voice low. He feels a clench in his heart. Is she feverish? An infected wound? But no, her eyes seem too clear for that, and her embrace too fierce.

“It’s nothing,” she promises, stilling, some of her joy in the moment fading. When he continues studying her, she says, so much assurance in her voice he can’t help but believe her. “Such concern! I’m touched, husband. But I’m quite fine, I promise, and so is René. We were more worried about you.”

“I thought -” he says, and breaks off, voice too thick. She’s bandaged, injured, clearly exhausted, but he feared so much worse. “I thought she might -”

She steps forward into his arms again and kisses him. He notices she moves a little gingerly, as if even stepping hurts, but then he’s distracted by the feel of her against him – gloriously alive, even if she’s not precisely well. He clutches her even closer somehow, so she’s pressed against him entirely, soaking in her warmth and solidity, the scent of her perfume, the smoothness of her skin. He presses his mouth worshipfully to her forehead, to her silky hair, to her cheeks, taking care not to press too hard or grip her too firmly even as he wants to clutch her to him with the desperation she always engenders. Everyone else has politely averted their gaze.

Finally, she withdraws, and this time it’s her with the question.

“Who?” she asks, voice low and deadly, tilting her head up.

“Catherine. She’s here. She’s the one who took the shot at me. She said she was going after you, after René, while I was… while I couldn’t…” He loses his voice again and buries his face in the cloud of her curly hair. She’s fine. Of course Catherine is no threat to her. She’s fine, and so is their son.

“Catherine,” Milady echoes, mouth twisting thoughtfully. “Of course. That explains the nature of the attacks, but also the skill-set.”

“What did she do to you?” he says in a low voice, then corrects himself, “What did she try to do?”

“I’ll tell you later,” she says, with a careless gesture. “Now isn’t the time for long conversations. Or the place, for that matter.”

“It’s not?” Porthos says, eyebrows lifting. Athos suspects he wants to add a sarcastic comment about it apparently being the perfect time and place for overly-long embraces, but he restrains himself. In his arms, the baby starts crying.

“It’s not,” Anne says firmly. She manages to extricate herself partway from Athos’s grip, bringing a hand up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear before wincing and letting it drop. “In fact, I think it’s time I fed René. There’s a little room in the back of a nearby dressmaker I can use.”

Athos shakes his head before she finishes talking. He doesn’t want to let her leave his side for as much as a moment. “No, you don’t have to. We can go home immediately.” He glances at the others, slightly apologetic – they probably want to celebrate. So does he, but not in the same way, not all of them together in a tavern, not right now. Right now all he wants is to be with his family.

“No,” Milady says, a little too quickly and harshly. She manufactures a smile when he looks at her, already reaching out to take the crying baby into her arms, and moving away from him as she does so. He doesn’t think that’s a coincidence. “Here is better. It will only take a short while. I’ll meet you all back at the Garrison.”

Athos doesn’t understand, but after exchanging a look with his wife, d’Artagnan slings an arm
around his neck and all but drags him away from Milady. “The others will be relieved to see you again,” he says, his own cheerfulness seeming just a little fake. “Treville’s there as well – he’s been minding matters in your absence.”

Athos glances back at his wife with a worried frown, but lets the others drag him away. Milady refuses to feed René at the Garrison, since the other Musketeers are prone to entering without knocking and nearly every room has windows and no shades, so that makes sense – but why doesn’t she want them to go home? Does she not want to be alone with him?

There’s a sense of dread suddenly pooling in his belly. What happened while he was imprisoned?

The sense of dread in no way lessens when they all settle in his office, laughing and drinking. Porthos and d’Artagnan keep having silent conversations where they mouth words and make frantic gestures over his head, apparently unaware they’re not being quite subtle enough. Aramis hasn’t picked up on it, yet, too relieved that the Queen and the Dauphin are safe, that all his sins have been forgiven (or at least swept under the rug, never to be seen again). Treville leaves quite soon and so misses most of it – he needs to check on the King, he says, and keep an eye on the situation. They’re released, but that doesn’t mean all the danger is gone. But Athos notices immediately.

“I’m going to fetch some more wine,” d’Artagnan says eventually, too brightly.

“I’ll help,” Porthos says, getting up, and then they’re gone.

Even Aramis catches this one, his happiness fading to puzzlement. “What’re they up to?”

“Let’s find out,” Athos says grimly, and they follow.

The conversation is quiet, but not quiet enough.

“…give her time to tell him herself.” That’s d’Artagnan’s voice, surprisingly sharp.

“Since when are you such a fan of lying? Or of Milady de Winter, for that matter?”

“I’m not a fan of either,” d’Artagnan snaps. “But she said she’d tell him. And it’s not as if she’ll be able to conceal it – everyone will know soon enough.”

“I know, but hiding it, even for a little while -”

“It’s not our place. It was her idea, her plan, and she’s the one who persuaded the King -”

Porthos cuts him off in turn. “But we helped with the rest, we let her do it. What d’you think Athos is gonna make of how she ‘persuaded’ the King?” The subdued distaste in his voice makes it clear he’s not entirely on board either. “Or what Aramis will say about -”

Despite disagreeing, d’Artagnan’s tone shows some of that same discomfort. “I know, I know. But she’ll be here in a minute. The most important thing is that they’re free, however it happened -”

“You really think they’ll see it like that?”

Athos’s ears ring. He stands for a moment, swaying, mind jumping to conclusions, extrapolating, winding out half-sentences into full ones, digging up old suspicions and letting them into the light of day. Old suspicions that suddenly seem less like paranoid delusions and more like prescience. No. It can’t be. But the way Porthos said the word ‘persuaded’, insinuation in every syllable...
He turns and heads down the corridor, brushing past his surprised friends, who spring apart like illicit lovers caught meeting. Aramis stops by them, and Athos can hear him asking what’s going on, asking what they were talking about, concern in his voice, but Athos doesn’t pause. He’s streets away in less than a minute.

Finally, he stops, leaning against the nearest wall, feeling as if he’s taken a blow, eyes stinging slightly. He’s no fool, although right now he wishes he were, and he can make the connections easily. The King’s abrupt change of heart, his and Aramis’s quick release, his friends unwilling to talk about what they did to secure it; his wife avoiding his company, wearing her most seductive dress, sneaking into the Louvre, persuading the King that he was overreacting and to let them go…

Is that how she won them their freedom? Seducing the King into a more forgiving mood, distracting him from the Queen’s possible affairs by encouraging him to start one of his own? Athos can picture her with her eyes demurely lowered, but nothing demure about her cat-like smile, her fingers trailing up the King’s chest teasingly and her beauty on full display in that revealing dress. He can imagine her talking in her best sweet, coaxing tones about how it seems absurd to try people on the basis of some silly rumour, assuring him that no woman who had His Majesty could ever want any other, charming and flattering and pleasing him until his rage and betrayal were only a distant memory. Was that how she did it?

He would never have agreed to that.

Athos wants to react with fury, utter and complete fury – how dare she. She told him she’d stay away from the King. She promised he had no reason to worry, that she was faithful, that she loved him. She said there was nothing the King had that was worth losing their family –

But that’s where he hits a wall again, because the King did have something she might have considered worth risking everything for. He had Athos. She spoke of seducing Remi to save her own life. Did she seduce the King as part of some misguided attempt to save his? He is furious, hurt, grateful, heartbroken, confused, jealous and disgusted all at once. He wants to rail at her, roar insults into her face, leave and never come back…

No. Not that.

He’s too confused, too sore from what he’s just learnt to even begin to consider it rationally. He’s certainly too confused to be near her – a part of him desperately wants to hold her, another part just as desperately wants to shake her until her teeth rattle. He’s terrified of what he might do if he sees her, the actions he might take that could not be taken back, the things he might say when his tongue is loosened by this all-encompassing hurt and betrayal.

He stiffens, growing even colder as he runs through the overheard conversation in his mind again. D’Artagnan said… d’Artagnan said she wouldn’t be able to hide it, that everyone would know. What does that mean?

Did she trade more than her body for his life? Did she agree to be the King’s mistress? Is that why she threw herself into his kiss earlier like she was starving for him, only to pull back from the idea of spending time alone together? Maybe she knows their time is short, that she will be leaving soon, that every kiss brings them closer to their last. Maybe she fears telling him that, fears his reaction.

Right now, he isn’t entirely sure she’s wrong to fear his reaction. He’s had a taste of happiness, love, family, a taste of what it’s like to have everything he could ever want. To have that taken away – to watch someone else have everything he wants – if Aramis feels this pain every time he sees the Queen with the King, or the King with the Dauphin, Athos can’t imagine how he hasn’t
torn his own heart out to finally end it. That’s what he’ll do, if his wife is lost to him, if he’s
destroyed again, if all light disappears from the world, if these past months were the only joy he
will ever experience –

Every thought sends a throb of pain through his head, through his heart. He feels like he’s dying.
And so, like a wounded animal, Athos abandons sense and heads for the familiar – for a tavern, for
a drink, for the comforting embrace of oblivion.
It’s not a tavern Athos has ever been to before, or even in a part of Paris he usually goes. He doesn’t want to see anyone he knows. He doesn’t want any of his friends to find him.

He just wants another drink, and another, and another…

He’s quite drunk by the time someone settles into the chair opposite him, slumped over his drink and barely able to move. When he finally manages to tip his heavy head back enough to assess the intruder without his hat blocking his vision, he’s not as surprised as he should be that it’s her. It’s been hours. Of course she would find him.

He is, however, surprised by her choice of companions. Which is to say, her lack of companions, apart from the babe in her arms.

“You choose to come here alone, when you know there’s a madwoman after you?” As an opening question, it lacks politeness, but it certainly doesn’t lack feeling.

It is, after all, one thing to separate from the rest of them for barely half an hour in the full light of day, with the intention of re-joining everyone else at the Musketeer garrison, where the best soldiers in Paris can protect her until he returns – quite another for her to spend hours trawling the worst parts of Paris. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he assumed his friends wouldn’t let her leave their side now they knew about the threat, otherwise he never could have left himself, no matter how desperately he needed a drink. In fact, he still believes that the others would never let her go off alone, especially with their son, which means she must have slipped away from them somehow.

“Should I ignore the hypocrisy of that, Athos?” She raises an eyebrow.

Well, yes. Preferably. But Athos doesn’t fear Catherine coming after him. She threatened to take his wife and child from him first, for one thing; and for another, how is he ever supposed to fear for his own life the way he fears for Anne’s and René’s? He doubts that reasoning will meet with her approval, though. He needs to find a different tack.

“And since when do you take the baby to taverns?” he says, over-articulating the words to avoid slurring them. He’s quite proud of how steadily his voice comes out, how well he controls his expression, given that he’s at the stage where he can barely find the energy to lift his drink to his lips anymore. His heart still beats faster at the sight of her, though, only matched by his quickening breath.

He wishes she’d waited and let him meet her at home. Then he would have had time for hurt, anger, jealousy and fear to die down, time to sleep off the effects of his potations, time to remember not to let his own pain make him cruel. He doesn’t want to talk to her when he’s drunk, when the hurt is still raw, when he can’t quite trust his own tongue, when he’s been slowly stewing in self-righteous rage and suspicion for the past few hours – when he’s poisoned his mind and sharpened his fury with each spiralling thought. Right now, he feels liable to lash out, to be unreasonable and unfair, to ignore the reasons why she did what she did, to blame her for everything regardless of fault, and to allow himself to forget that he loves her and she loves him – and that that’s more important than anything else in the world, including whatever happened with
the King.

“Since his father has apparently decided to relocate permanently to one.” Her own coolness matches his. “Besides, our home is somewhat charred at present. I was going to fill you in on the details at the Garrison – all the details – but by the time I got there, you were nowhere to be found.”

“I suppose my eavesdropping at least saved you the trouble of doing your own dirty work,” he says, feeling soberer from her presence, and not liking the shift. “But then, you’ve never minded before, have you?”

She heaves a sigh, as if his comment is merely irritating, but he sees the flash in her eyes. “So I see you’re dealing well with recent events. I knew you’d be unhappy, but I must admit, I didn’t expect you to react this poorly.”

Athos’s laughter almost comes out unhinged. “Of course you didn’t. Of course you wouldn’t. It all matters so little to you, doesn’t it?”

“You know that’s not true,” she says, dropping her mask of indifference, and shifting René in her arms as she leans forward, intent on him. “Of all the people in the world, you’re the one who most knows it.” She stares at him until he drops his gaze. “If you’re expecting me to apologise for doing whatever it took to keep you alive -”

“What kind of fool would I be to expect an apology from you?” he shakes his head, blackly furious at both himself and her. More at himself, to tell the truth, for his bitterness, for lashing out, but in the moment that awareness only makes the anger fiercer, however unjustified it might be. “We would have found another way. You didn’t have to give yourself to the King.”

There’s a long pause as she stares at him, hand going to her throat, and then she says, voice cool again, “It seems that your friends are as poor at communication as ever, and we’re talking at cross purposes. But for the record, even if I had done such a thing, it wouldn’t justify this response. That would be a sacrifice on my part, not a betrayal, and I would -”

He interrupts before she can continue. “You… you didn’t? You weren’t with the King. From what they said, I thought -”

“I would have,” she says brutally, interrupting as well. “If it was necessary, I would have, make no mistake. And his interest was… useful, in obtaining his attention. I won’t deny that. But it’s better I remain a mystery to him, instead of a mistress. Of all the things the King might give to a warm and willing woman, I doubt his respect is among them. And I needed him to listen to me, to heed my words, to believe in the evidence I guided him to.”

He’s so relieved he almost sways in his seat. That relief means he can admit the truth – that if she had done that, he still would have forgiven her, even if she never asked for forgiveness or considered she needed it. It would have taken time, it would have hurt, and perhaps he would never have been able to summon the gratitude he should have felt for his rescue, but eventually the wound would have healed like all the others have, leaving only a scar. He’d know that anything she did, she did for him, to help him, to save him, and even if he couldn’t approve of it that wouldn’t stop him from loving her for it. Their anger would fade, they would come to understand each other’s views on the matter even if they did not share them, and they would settle back into their lives together. They would be fine.

Unless, of course, she had promised herself as mistress – but he doesn’t need to think of that now.
Doesn’t need to consider what he might have done to keep his wife, his son, his family, the lines he might have crossed, the damage he might have caused. He can hide his shame and his lack of honour.

Then the meaning of the rest of her words registers. “Anne. What evidence? What exactly did you do?”

“What I’ve done a dozen times before,” she says softly. He thinks he can see something like guilt on her face, along with the exhaustion visibly dragging at her, and it worries him. “What you did, once, based on a plan I gave you. I admit, the victims this time are somewhat less deserving -”

Even drunk, he’s not entirely slow. A different kind of persuasion, based purely on deceit instead of seduction. “Marguerite. Lemay. You convinced him they were lying?”

“Not just that. I convinced him they were spies in a vast plot to force him into war with Spain. I told them they worked for the English.” She flashes a bitter parody of a smile, containing no happiness. “In Lemay’s rooms, the guards found incriminating letters – forged by one of Porthos’s friends in the Court using the medical notes Lemay lent to Aramis, and then hidden there by Porthos in all the usual hiding places. And Marguerite’s jewellery case now contains quite a collection of silver, jewellery I claimed was a payment from the English spies in the city. Her Majesty will tell him those pieces were always there when she leads him to them – though of course, she was ignorant of the significance.”

“The silversmith. You got them from the silversmith.” It was not so long ago. He remembers. How like her, to save a scrap of information for months, waiting for the time it will do maximum damage. Clever, cold, hard… her face is like stone.

“Yes. Well, not personally, that was d’Artagnan’s part, but – yes. The Red Guards will raid it shortly – they may even be doing it now. They’ll find more proof there, more letters.”

Athos shakes his head, slightly dizzied by this – although perhaps that’s the copious amounts of wine he consumed. “It’s absurd. He could never think that they -”

“Marguerite’s mother was English, and Lemay studied there for a time. The silversmith proves that England has been spying on the King for some time. The English ambassador just left for a visit home, and these accusations will make it seem like a flight instead. The Red Guard I paid off fled to England as well, at my suggestion. The King is always looking for conspiracies. It won’t take much.”

He knows she’s right. “You’ve sentenced two innocent people to the block.” He says it baldly, more to judge her reaction than anything.

She pulls back, eyes flashing fire, but the pain in her face is easy to see now as well. “Such judgment, from a man nearly convicted of treason. Two people for a country? The King won’t set the Queen aside now or execute her. He won’t disown the Dauphin. There’ll be no war with Spain. He’ll have new paranoias to distract him, new shadowy spectres to chase. The whole of France will be safer…”

Yes, it will be. The King won’t declare war with Spain if he thinks that’s what the English want him to do, any more than he’ll declare war with England if he thinks Spain will attack while they’re weakened. She’s neatly prevented a potential catastrophe that’s been making the whole country hold its breath for months.

“And is that why you did it?” This, he asks purely to torture himself. He knows why she did it.
The lines on her face deepen, the dim lighting of the tavern making every line seem carved into her skin. “You know it’s not. You’ve always been my motive, Athos, for good or for bad.”

For good or for bad – it says everything, doesn’t it? She was the Cardinal’s creature, but that woman was born at the hanging Athos ordered. She tried to ruin Treville and the Musketeers, because with his hand around her neck and his gun at her back (a foolish ploy), he made her think that was the only way to survive his rage. She worked for slavers, because she needed to hide from Richelieu’s anger, anger she ignited by helping Athos when she had no reason to. She killed for Rochefort, but it was for money to raise the child Athos gave her.

Now, she does it all. Everything she wanted to leave behind. She fights and kills, she spies and schemes, she conceals treason and sends good people to their deaths. She lives here in Paris, where men threaten her with nightmarish things, where women set her house ablaze, where there will always be another danger. She has the life she wished to escape, and he knows it, and he can no longer deny it.

And she does it all for him.

Every part of this is his fault, and if he’d lost her to revenge or arrest or the King, it would only be what he deserved.

“You should have gone to England,” he says desolately, the words spilling out without him intending to say them.

It’s only when she draws back from him as if struck that he realises what meaning she placed upon his words. “Perhaps I should have,” she says, and it almost comes out as a sound of pain. He thinks he sees tears in her eyes.

She’s out the door before he can rise.

X_X_X_X_X

Milady’s gone only two streets when she hears the noise behind her, and breathes deeply through her nose to both martial her patience and suppress her hurt.

“If you’re about to say -” she begins as she turns, expecting to see Athos.

Instead, it’s Catherine, and the gun she holds is levelled at chest height, but she’s not aiming just at Milady. If she shoots, the bullet will go right through René’s tiny, delicate head.

Milady’s blood turns to ice, her arms locking around her child – as if they’re any protection against a bullet.

“Hand him over,” Catherine says with quiet venom. “Or I’ll shoot now, and rid the world of your spawn as well as you.”

Normally, perhaps she would consider options – fighting for control of the gun. Diving to the ground. Fleeing. But the threat to her child circumvents all ability to plan, to weigh up risk. There is no greater risk than her son being hurt, and she’s holding him out before she can think twice, although every part of her cries out at the separation.

Catherine takes him, holding him both precariously and uncomfortably. “If you attack me, I might drop him,” she says. “Walk, Anne.”

She does. “You set my house on fire. Why?”
“The house I should have been mistress of is nothing but a burnt shell now. It was only fair that I do the same to yours.” Catherine always did find it easy to twist logic and sense until they were unrecognisable. “But somehow you survived, like the roach you are.”

“Ah. A burnt house for a burnt house. And you shot at Athos because you’d shot him before.” How clumsy and uninspired. “So I suppose we’re heading for a noose now?”

Catherine snarls, and jams the gun into the small of Milady’s back. “It’s what you deserve. What you always deserved.”

She could argue, could explain, but she has more important things to worry about. René is starting to cry, cold and confused. “And what about my – what about the child? What does he deserve?” She keeps her voice cool, almost impersonal, because the more desperately she shows her love for René the less likely Catherine is to spare him.

“Perhaps I’ll keep him,” Catherine says. “Raise him to know what monsters his parents were. Would you like that, Anne? Or would you rather I killed him now, when he’s too young to have realised what you are? Although I suppose if he’s anything like his father – or the man you claim is his father, anyway – then perhaps he’d remain blinded by you for his whole life.”

“He’s a child,” Milady snaps, losing some of her composure. Catherine’s led her up the walkways now, and there it is ahead – a noose. Catherine combines a sense of drama with no imagination or subtlety. “Whatever offences you imagine, he’s committed none of them.”

She turns her head so she can see the other woman’s expression. There is no softening there.

When Athos had said it was Catherine, she thought of course. It explained a great deal. The Catherine of her old memories wouldn’t have the necessary skills for these attacks, but the Catherine who lived off whatever she could shoot and skin would have to. To make a living out of it, a hunter needs to be good at silently stalking their quarry, have excellent aim, and know how to use fire. Adapting those skills to human prey would probably be a far smaller step than learning them to begin with. It explained how she managed to successfully follow them without being seen.

But as well as thinking that, she’d also thought, it’s only Catherine. Compared to some of her enemies, Catherine seemed scarcely a threat, and with Athos back and Catherine’s advantage of surprise gone, she had felt like the problem was dealt with. Together, they would be more than a match for her, after all. Each of them are formidable, have faced and survived things others can barely comprehend, have fought down armies – what is Catherine, compared to them? If the threat had been someone else, Milady would probably never have gone off on her own like this, exposing herself and her son to the world when she has a whole regiment of eager protectors at her beck and call. Milady has faith in her abilities, but she doesn’t take foolish risks, not if there’s no need. But after all, it was only Catherine, and Catherine was easy to disregard as a danger.

But. She had forgotten. While Catherine may not match the calm menace of the Cardinal, or the volatile cruelty of Rochefort, or even the harsh callousness of Sarazin – that does not make her less of a threat. She’s always been close to the edge of madness, and now something’s pushed her over it. A sane rabbit will flee from a snake. A mad one will attack it, and sometimes, with surprise and viciousness on its side, it will win.

Everyone is made up of the best and worst they can be, of their kindness and their cruelty, their joy and misery, their rage and love. Milady can rock, feed and soothe her little child, and feel her chest ache and expand with all the love she holds within, but she can also condemn an innocent man and woman to death – she’s both of those people. And the shrill, ineffectual Catherine she had so easily dismissed when they shared a house… that’s the same Catherine who would have burnt that tiny
baby to death without remorse. There is no divide.

She forgot that. It seems that mistake may be her last. She only hopes it doesn’t cause her son’s death as well, her son who continues to wail as Catherine cradles him inexpertly in one arm – the other still levelling a gun at Milady.

“Forward,” Catherine says. “I wonder what Athos will do when he finds your corpse? He’ll realise that he betrayed his brother, his honour, his name, and the woman he should have married, all for nothing. Maybe I won’t even need to kill him myself.”

Milady stops forward, into the noose. She thinks about Athos, about her son. She thinks of them all curled up together – what was it? A week ago? Athos had been reading a book. Something made him snort, and he muttered a sarcastic remark, and then pressed a quick kiss to her forehead. René shifted sleepily in her arms and reached up for her face, burbling in his own meaningless, jumbled language at her. Just a little moment, but something about it had struck her, made her want to freeze the world in that instant. Her husband’s arms around her. Her arms around her son. All of them in a little bubble of safety, quiet, comfort, and love. Her heart had hurt with how much she loved them. The most beautiful ache in the world.

And then there is a rope around her neck, and her choker torn off savagely, and she waits for the sickening drop –

There’s a gasp from behind her, and René’s wails increase in volume, so she can only just hear the noise of sharp metal slicing through the air. Then the rope is pulled away, and there is a muscled arm holding her against a firm chest, and the sound of his breath half-sobbing in her ear.

“Anne,” he says, almost in despair.

“I’m fine,” she says, frantic. “René, what about -” He passes their child into her arms and she clings to both of them, pressing herself as close to Athos as she can with their son between them, laying her head on his chest. His heartbeat is as wild as her own. The relief of her sudden safety makes her lightheaded.

A sound makes her turn her head, and she looks down at Catherine, snivelling pathetically on the floor. Athos must have snatched René from her and shoved her to the ground in their struggle. There’s a gun nearby, but Athos kicks it away before Catherine can even think of moving, stepping out of their embrace to do so. He looks down at Catherine, face unreadable.

Milady doesn’t pay attention to what the woman says. She’s done listening to people like Catherine. But even so, she catches the occasional accusation, the whining self-pity, the absurd self-righteousness –

“Kill her and let’s be on her way,” she suggests sharply, secure in the knowledge that Athos will do no such thing. He didn’t let her kill Catherine when she shot him, after all. Really, the only reason she says it is to annoy Catherine, by showing off that she can talk to Athos like this, reminding the woman how little she matters.

As a result, she’s quite surprised when Athos immediately raises his sword.

Her hand flashes out almost without her consent, pulling at his arm before he can thrust it forward.

“What?” he says. He looks tired, but much soberer than before – perhaps this brief engagement shocked the alcohol out of him. Catherine sobs even louder. “You said -”

“But I didn’t think you’d do it,” she says. “I’m the one who’s ruthless, remember? The one who
lies, and cheats, and kills -”

“You aren’t the only killer here, Anne,” he says, exhaustion heavy on every word. “And you’re also not the only one who would do whatever it takes to protect our family. Yes, I had pity for her once. That’s since run out. If she had succeeded, thanks to my selfishness, because I left you alone to indulge in self-pity and wine instead of -” His face crumples as he says it, until he looks utterly wrecked by the thought of what could have happened.

“You don’t want to be that kind of person,” she says flatly, interrupting his attempt to torture himself and returning them to the point at hand. “You don’t want me to be that kind of person either. Your face when you realised what I’d done -”

“With Marguerite and Lemay? I don’t blame you for that,” he says. “I don’t. I just wish… I wish we didn’t live in a world where you had to make such choices.”

“Of course you blame me. I sentenced two people to death -”

“So we’ll break them out,” he says simply. “We’ll pretend to be the English saving their assets. They’ll have to flee France, but… truthfully, this was never a situation where everyone would escape unscathed. None of this is your fault.”

“You felt otherwise when you thought I’d bedded the King.” Milady keeps her eyes on him. She can see Catherine trying to crawl quietly towards them out of her peripheral vision, though.

“No, it… it wasn’t because I thought you’d been with him,” he tells her, a little brokenly. “Or – not only that. That hurt, but I knew that it was to protect me. No, it was what I thought I would have to do. If you’d persuaded him by seducing him, if you’d agreed to be his mistress -” His voice breaks on the word, but he swallows dryly and manages to continue in a hoarser voice. “Then I wanted to take you both and leave. Even if it spoilt whatever lie you’d gotten the King to swallow. Even if it made him decide the Queen must be scheming against him, and you a part of that. Even if it started a war.”

“Athos…”

“That’s what I was drinking to avoid – the knowledge of how little honour I have, when I have happiness within my grasp and cannot stand to lose it.” He pauses, then amends his words. “When I have you with me, and cannot stand to lose you.”

She feels relief go through her in a wave. He’s not angry with her, or ashamed of her actions. He understands. He forgives her. And – he feels the same. Perhaps it should not bring her pleasure, the idea that they’re both willing to set the world ablaze for the other, but it does. Oh, she doubts he would actually go through with it, no matter what he says – but that he believes it is enough.

They still have more to talk about. She can see that in his eyes. There’s something he wants to say, wants to ask. But first –

As Catherine’s hand flies up to grab at Athos’s gun, Milady’s is quicker. Balancing her child on her hip, she strikes like a snake, and leaves fingerprint bruises as she twists Catherine’s arm into a painful position.

“Never come near me or mine again,” Milady tells her, in an almost friendly voice. “Or what you would have done to me will be nothing compared to the torments I inflict on you.” She releases the woman’s arm and steps back and away. She feels suddenly unstoppable, fierce, furious and sure in who she is.
“Should I -” Athos begins, looking at Catherine.

“Do what you like,” she says, and starts to stride away. “If we’re to rescue those people, we’d best get to work.”

Athos pauses behind her for a long time, but then, with a soft curse, follows her.

Catherine continues to cry helplessly on the floor. Milady doubts she’ll risk their wrath again.

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Events move quickly from there. In the dark of night, five hooded figures break into the Chatelet. It’s not the first time any of them have entered there by untraditional means.

The last time Milady was here was a year ago, when she and d’Artagnan were supposedly under arrest for conspiring to kill Athos. Athos, Porthos and Aramis broke her out, most unwillingly. Now they return, all working together, no lies or schemes between any of them.

It’s strange how the world shifts, how the wheel turns, how the seasons change. D’Artagnan, the boy who she lied to and the boy who lied to her, now keeps her secrets when she asks. Porthos and Aramis, the men who she would have organised the deaths of without a second thought, now fight side-by-side with her as allies and even friends. The Queen she tried to have killed trusts her and owes her life to her. She betrayed Treville and sent him to the Bastille, and now he’s her employer, and currently guarding her child.

Her husband who hung her once, who swore he would see her hang again for her crimes, finally saw it – and saved her from it instead.

And she – well, she has changed the most of all, she suspects. She doesn’t feel hunted anymore. She doesn’t feel angry all the way down to her bones. She’s found better things to base her life around than revenge.

She has shared her supply of ether, and the guards disappear with sighs and the noise of bodies slumping to the floor – it will add to the impression that this was spies, instead of soldiers. The Musketeers are not what she’d consider stealthy, but they have improved over recent months, and there is no alarm raised. Really, the hardest part about getting them out is quieting Marguerite’s frightened sobbing, and persuading Lemay to stop asking confused questions.

It’s dawn by the time they’re at the edge of Paris.

“Where will we go?” Marguerite asks. She looks wrung-out, more like a ghost than ever, skin ash-pale and eyes reddened by tears.

“England,” Athos says. “You both speak the language, after all, and we can get you to Le Havre and across the Channel quickly.”

Aramis clears his throat. “Might I have a moment to talk to you, Marguerite? In private?”

She nods and they move away. Milady can hear the occasional word drifting through the wind – Aramis is apologising abjectly, she suspects. Judging by the look of it, Marguerite is telling him the apology is unnecessary, while contriving to look as small, scared, hurt and heartbroken as possible to increase his guilt. Her world will never be the same, and they all know it – she'll never see her father again, she has no respectable noble marriage to look forward to, and her life of privilege and comfort is over. Was it Aramis who ruined her life, or Milady, or Marguerite herself? A team effort, Milady supposes.
Lemay, meanwhile, will probably be fine. He evinces a mild regret at not seeing Constance again, since he considers her a good friend, but he’s looking forward to the challenge of being a country doctor in some part of England he’s never been to before. Marguerite can be his sister, he supposes vaguely when Porthos suggests it. And his assistant as well, in time, helping with women and babies, since it seems she already knows a few things about caring for infants.

Who knows what will happen? Perhaps they’ll live out their lives in awkward misery, Lemay bored by a tiny town and Marguerite despairing of her lowered status. Perhaps the two of them will fall for each other, change their cover story to that of husband and wife, and fill a cottage somewhere with children. Perhaps Lemay will come to enjoy caring for grateful villagers instead of a volatile King, and be grateful for spare time and opportunities to conduct his research. Perhaps one of Lemay’s patients will ask for Marguerite’s hand, and give her the love she wanted from Aramis. Perhaps Marguerite will learn healing from Lemay and become a midwife or unofficial doctor in her own right, and someday thank God that she was given the chance to do something with her life, instead of becoming trapped in a loveless marriage for rank and money.

And perhaps none of that will happen. Perhaps they’ll be found and executed after all. There is no way for Milady to know. She’s done all she can for them. She feels a slight sense of guilt at placing them in this situation – more for Lemay than for Marguerite – but compared with many of the things she’s done, this is nothing. She can survive it easily.

Aramis, meanwhile, looks nearly bent over by the weight of his guilt when he returns. He apologises to Lemay as well, and the man forgives him immediately, as if nearly getting a friend executed is something that could happen to anyone. Their farewell is brief but heartfelt, and includes Aramis thanking Lemay profusely for some unspecified favour he’s done him recently. Milady has her own suspicions about what that might be, inspired by searching Aramis’s room for samples of the doctor’s handwriting.

They all watch the two fugitives get into their coach and leave. Milady leans back against her husband as they do, savouring the feel of his warmth up her back and his arms wrapped around her, and looks at Aramis. He seemed to age ten years when he heard how she’d gotten their freedom, but his immediate response of fury has long since died down. He seems to rest all the blame on himself now instead.

“Marguerite would have sent you, Athos, and Her Majesty all to your deaths,” she says clearly. Athos’s arms tighten around her and he hides a quick kiss in her hair.

“She couldn’t lie under oath,” Aramis protests.

“Why not? You did. Is she more devout than you?” Milady shakes her head. “No, she made a choice, trust me. A part of her wanted to see you suffer. She’s not as innocent as you think.” She’d seen the emotions in the woman’s eyes, and recognised them – love, hate, betrayal, guilt. Marguerite may play the ingénue, but she has a darkness to her as well. After all, who doesn’t?

But that, at least, is not her problem.

Aramis shakes his head again, refusing to believe her.

Porthos is still staring after the carriage, a little sadly. “We’ll have to stop getting sick and injured so much now,” he remarks to no one in particular. “Was useful, knowing an actual doctor. No offence Aramis.”

“None taken.” Aramis manages a half-smile, but it looks pained.
Milady straightens with a sigh, twisting in her husband’s arms. “I should return home,” she tells him.

“Are you sure -” he begins.

“I’m sure,” she says firmly. Yes, some of the place is burnt. But as Porthos said, the foundations are solid. She and Athos have rebuilt from far worse. She refuses to let Catherine turn their home into somewhere she fears.

It’s time to take her son home. She can get the servants to set up in a new nursery in one of the spare rooms. And she should check on the nurse, as well – find out how the woman’s doing, see if she’s still willing to work for Milady despite the danger. Given the scarcity of well-paying jobs in Paris, and the fact she’s been present for a gunfight before and gave no signs of wanting to quit, Milady thinks her odds of keeping the nurse are good. Perhaps she can give her a knife or gun and teach her some techniques in case this ever happens again – and not just her, the maid, the footman, even the cook. She doesn’t care if she has to increase their wages to persuade them. She also wants to rearrange the house, set up booby-traps on the roof and balcony, get better locks on the doors and windows, grease the window ledges, and put in secure hidden rooms and tripwires and any number of other things. A few concealed weapons are not enough. The next time someone comes for her family, they won’t get far.

First, though, she wants to get some sleep. She’s been awake a long time.

“Are you coming?” she asks Athos.

He wants to say yes, she can see it in his eyes, but instead he sighs and says. “I should go to the Garrison. I don’t want anyone to question why I’m late.”

She thinks that, ironically, if he was innocent of anything, he’d probably be quite willing to go home with her. But since he spent last night breaking into the Chatelet, he doesn’t want to risk giving any sign of that. She understands.

She stretches up to kiss him. As always, it sends warmth throbbing through her. She is very aware of the firmness of his chest, of the heat of his skin, of the beard that scratches pleasurably at her face, of the feel of his hair against her fingers, of the large, strong hands that rest lightly on her hips. When it comes to Athos, even a glance sometimes feels like a tease, a promise of what will come later, and so a kiss makes it almost unimaginable that she’s not dragging him back with her.

“Later,” he says finally, when they separate, his voice a little husky.

She doesn’t know if he means a continuation of this, or a continuation of their earlier conversation, or perhaps both. She knows which she’d prefer – she aches to be close to him, heat stirring in her belly and her skin tingling with want, itching to pull him against her again. Nevertheless, she agrees, “Later.”

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D’Artagnan suppresses another yawn as they head into Athos’s office. The familiar sounds of clashing metal, gunshots, and the noise of hooves drift in from the outside, Musketeers heading out to the various duties Athos just assigned or settling into their usual morning training.

“God,” d’Artagnan says. “What a week.”

“Still, at least we’re all together again,” Porthos says cheerfully.
“Ah.” Aramis looks embarrassed. “Not for long, I’m afraid.”

“What?” Porthos’s eyes widen as he registers the unusual gravity in Aramis’s tone.

“I’m going to resign my commission.” He drops the bomb as gently as possible, but it is still undeniably a bomb. Even Athos, who was somewhat prepared for it after their conversation earlier, cannot stop himself from wincing at it.

D’Artagnan straightens away from the wall. To him, anyone choosing not to be a Musketeer when they could be one is inconceivable. “What? Why?”

“I would have thought that’s fairly obvious,” Aramis says, still gentle. “Louis has let go of this idea for now, but if I keep hovering around Her Majesty and the Dauphin he’ll pick up on it again sooner or later.” He glances over at Athos, faintly apologetic. “You could reiterate the order banning me from the Louvre, I suppose, but that’s just as suspicious.”

He’s right. The King’s not even the only threat. If the Dauphin is to rule someday, they can’t afford his parentage to be in question. Accusations of illegitimacy always happen, however spurious or absurd they are, and having Aramis hanging around the Queen after those rumours makes for an easy target.

Still, it’s difficult to accept. “But… where will you go?”

“Not far. The Sorbonne, actually.”

D’Artagnan blinks. “The Sorbonne? You’re planning to get a degree?”

“I know, doesn’t it sound absurd? But it’s what I want. I’ve been planning it for over a month now.”

“You know the Cardinal’s buried there – he used to be headmaster, for heaven’s sake,” Athos says incredulously. “I know you’ve always had an interest in theology, but is that really the kind of place you want to -”

“I’m not planning to study just theology there. Medicine. Doctor Lemay spoke to his old teachers before all this mess and talked me up, and they’re more than willing to take me on. They don’t even mind that I’m a bit older and a bit less educated than their usual students.” Aramis gives a small smile. “Lately, it seems like every time I turn around, someone’s ill or injured. Being good at sewing isn’t really cutting it anymore.”

That explains all the books, anyway, all the study, all the meetings with Lemay, Aramis’s effusive gratitude earlier for unspoken favours. It’s still hard to picture – Aramis is by no means stupid, but he’s never had the attention span someone needs for poring over books. But then, when it comes to medicine, he has always seemed more focused, somehow, able to concentrate on one wound or illness for hours or even days.

“So you’ll stay in Paris. Stay nearby,” Porthos says, focusing on what he considers the important part.

“Yes, just not as a Musketeer. But as a practicing man of medicine, I do promise to offer you a steep discount if any of your men need wounds sewn or fevers cooled.” He hesitates, then adds quietly. “I’ve been a soldier for a very long time, you know. Done a lot of damage. Taken a lot of lives. And then I nearly got Her Majesty imprisoned, and you lot executed, and Lord only knows what would have happened to the Dauphin…”
“Aramis, that wasn’t your -”

“But it was. I think it’s time I started working on making amends. Becoming a doctor might not have crossed my mind if you all hadn’t been so determined to die recently, but I think it’s better than my first thought, which was joining a monastery,” Aramis says. “This is a compromise, of sorts. A more practical way to atone for my mistakes. What do you think?”

“That you’ll be a better doctor than you would a monk,” Athos says frankly. Monks need even more of an attention span than doctors, living a life based around prayer and repetitive manual tasks – even with Aramis’s piety, Athos can’t picture him excelling at it. But then, it’s hard to picture any of his friends as anything but Musketeers, just as it’s hard to picture himself as anything else.

Porthos chimes in, “And that if you think that I won’t drag you out of the Sorbonne for a drink every second night, you’re kidding yourself.”

Aramis grins, looking relieved. “My friend, I never thought otherwise for one single second. So we’ll still... we’ll still be friends, even if I’m not a Musketeer?”

“Friends? Nah. We’re brothers. Always.” Porthos slings an arm around Aramis’s neck, and the other around d’Artagnan’s. D’Artagnan laughs, ducks slightly, and drags Athos into it as well. “No matter where we go or what we do.”

Athos smiles.

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The house smells of smoke and the floors are still a bit charred and damp, but the footman opens the door for him and the maid curteys to him as he goes by, so it seems to be business as usual after all. He suppresses a shudder of horror as he passes the nursery door, but truthfully, it’s only in his imagination – in the bright light of day, the hallway doesn’t look too bad, just a pattern of scorch-marks and splinters decorating the previously pristine walls and floors, nothing like the utter destruction he envisioned. Given spare time and supplies, even he could fix the place up, despite his relative lack of skills.

But none of that can occupy his mind for long, not when Milady is waiting for him.

She’s on him almost the moment he’s through the door to their room, mouth landing forcefully on his. It seems she’s allowed René out of her sight for the moment, to spend the time with him alone. This wasn’t how he intended the night to go, though – or at least not yet, and he’s unsure what she’ll want after their talk, how she’ll feel, if he’ll unwittingly offend her somehow. He reaches out to steady her against him, to push her gently away, but then she nips his bottom lip, and heat flashes through him uncontrollably.

All thought disappears, lost to pleasure. Control and sense depart similarly. He groans into her mouth, hands grappling and pulling at her clothing, unravelling her braids, sliding down her body. His mouth travels as well, into the curve of her neck, the hinge of her jaw, the hollow below her ear. Her gasp is wild and desperate.

They stumble through the room, usually so familiar, like blind men through an obstacle course – barely able to notice the furniture they trip over, wrapped around each other so closely, directionless and desperate, unwilling to spare any attention for anything besides each other. He groans again at the feel of fingernails digging into the muscles of his back, sinking his teeth lightly into the side of her neck – over her scar, her scar which is bare, her choker never replaced after the showdown with Catherine. She lets her head fall back, gasping wild-eyed at the ceiling, and baring
her throat further to him, grasping hands pulling him closer, closer –

The back of her legs hits the bedframe, and they topple over onto the bed together, limbs entangled and clothes a mess, not caring to find purchase or balance when they could instead find each other. He leans back for a moment, weight on his hands, just to look at her, to look at her, desire made flesh, an angel who fell all the way down into his bed, her state of dishabille leaving little to the imagination, her hooded eyes liquid darkness in the candlelight, her reddened lips stretched into a smile…

He remembers suddenly that this wasn’t part of his plan, mind surfacing briefly as she’s distracted by his shirt ties. He planned for discussion. He grabs her hands and stills them, preparing to tear himself away from the overpowering sensation of pleasure touching her ignites, and already regretting the necessity.

“Wait,” he says breathlessly, rolling off her and away. Every inch of him cries out at the separation – he’s pulled to her by a force stronger than gravity, almost crushed to pieces by the ferocity of his need.

But there are other things he needs just as much. He needs her to be happy. He needs her to feel safe.

“Wait?” she says, high-pitched and disbelieving, as she struggles to sit upright in the crumpled mess of skirts, sheets, blankets and pillows, one bare leg bent in front of her, corset half undone. Once she’s propped up on one hand, she can glare at him properly. She makes an irresistible picture in the candlelight, eyes bright, lips swollen, clothes in disarray, all dark dishevelled hair and pale creamy skin against flowing silks. Somehow he resists it anyway. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“We need to talk.”

She looks at him, still incredulous. Then, with a frustrated sigh, she tucks one loose curl behind her ear, and gives in. “Fine, then. Talk.”

“Are you unhappy here?” It bursts out. “In Paris.”

She looks at him like he’s quite mad. “Of course not. What makes you ask?”

“This week… you’ve seemed…”

“Well, it’s been quite a long week.” She sees that this has no effect on his frown, his worried expression, so she continues. “I could feel it, I think. On some level, I knew I was being followed. It made me jumpy, that’s all. And the possibility of you being arrested for treason…”

“You’ve dealt with accusations of treason before,” he points out. “It barely seemed to bother you.”

“Because then I had nothing to lose. Now I have you, our child, our home, our life together… yes, it scared me. Is that what you want to hear?”

“It’s hardly the first threat to our life together,” he says, images flashing through his mind in quick succession. Her wearing her best smirk in a slavers’ camp, her thrashing in the midst of a fever, her furious face as he swam slowly back to consciousness at the fort, her with a blade held against her throat by the Marquis. Her with a noose around her neck.

She waves her hand dismissively. “That’s different. Generally, the threat something we can fight, head-on, together. We can protect ourselves, we can protect each other. But if Paris fell into chaos, I would probably have to take René from here, or at least send him away.”
To England? He wants to ask, but doesn’t. “Paris would fall to chaos if the King died, as well, but you’ve never seemed so concerned about that.”

She shrugs. “Even if the King died, eventually the situation would calm. I could come back to you. But this… if His Majesty decided Aramis was guilty, it wouldn’t just be an execution, it would be war.” A brief, bitter smile goes across her face. “Even if we somehow saved everyone you cared about, if we sent them all off into hiding like Marguerite and Lemay, you wouldn’t be willing to do the same.”

“What?”

“I’m not a fool, Athos,” she says. “There will always be people here you want to protect. Aramis, Porthos, d’Artagnan, Treville, Constance, the Queen, the Dauphin, that idiot of a King. But even if they were all safe, if there was a war, you’d still go and fight in it, wouldn’t you? For France. For duty. You wouldn’t leave with me.”

He looks at her, shocked.

“France has no chance against Spain,” she says. “But you enjoy fighting losing battles, don’t you?”

He doesn’t know quite why she’s angry with him, but she clearly is. Anger driven by hurt, perhaps, at the idea he’d choose duty and his brothers over her and their child. He’s sacrificed a lot in the name of duty – but she’s nearly always been the sacrifice, hasn’t she? He failed to be by her side during the birth, even after promising he would be. He wasn’t there to protect her or René when they were attacked in their home. She’s put herself at risk plenty of times to aid him in missions he considered his duty, although he knows she holds such concepts cheap. He claimed duty was his motive for the hanging, as well, and although he recognises that now as being nothing more than a lie he told himself, the memory must still sting for her. Perhaps it’s no wonder she spits the word duty as if it’s a curse.

“When I mentioned England before…” he begins. It’s not a change of subject, even if it seems like one.

She snorts. “When you told me I should have gone? When you said you didn’t want me here? I assumed that was just an expression of anger.”

“No, it wasn’t.” He swallows hard as he watches her straighten, surprised by this. “But that’s not exactly what I meant.”

“And yet, it’s exactly what you said, Athos.” She shakes her head, candlelight catching red lights in her hair and skin. It’s distracting, but the pain on her face is more so. “You know I don’t regret staying here. You know I love you. So when you say I should have left, I’m not sure what meaning I should place on that, except that you’d prefer me gone.”

“I just want you to be happy and safe.”

“Without you?” She gives a half-smile. “You have a very strange idea of what makes me happy.”

And this is the hard part. “I did not mean without me.”

A pause. “What?”

“England,” he says hurriedly, already expecting her to cut him off. “To you, it’s an idea, isn’t it, not a place? The idea of leaving this behind, finding a quiet life. We could still do that, whether in England or France. You… you think that my duty, my country, my men, and my brothers mean
more to me than you or René. But they don’t. They were a way to survive without you, but I’m not
without you anymore.” He swallows again. His mouth feels dry. “I love them. I do. But I love you
more. And if this life is making you unhappy…”

She looks almost shocked by this. Then she inhales deeply and slowly, in and out her nose, and
says, “So you’re leaving it up to me? Stay or go?” He nods, frowning slightly. “You don’t want to
leave,” she observes.

“I…” he trails off, struggling to be honest. “No. Not right now, anyway.” Now that the threat has
passed, he can relax again. He likes being captain. He likes their lives here.

But truthfully? His happiness has always depended on hers.

There are two options here – one offers a sense of peace, the other a sense of purpose. Both are, in
their own way, very tempting to him.

The country is beautiful, even in England (although he’s not fond of the weather there, or the
food). They would love it, he knows. They would never experience the downsides of peasant life –
the countryside is much cheaper than a bustling city like Paris, and they could live out ten
lifetimes there on the money Anne got from Rochefort and on his own savings, especially if they
supplemented it by growing some of their own food and Athos taking up hunting and fishing again.
They could even afford to still have a maid or nurse to help out, if Anne wanted to keep them, and
farmhands to assist with arduous tasks like ploughing. He can picture himself years from now, in a
field somewhere, swinging his laughing little son up onto his shoulders, his beautiful wife
watching from the doorway of a cottage, arms crossed and a smile on her face. Can imagine long,
lazy evenings by the fire where they read to each other, talk, put René to bed, then fall into bed
themselves. The two of them doing simple, rewarding chores, planting, ploughing, cooking,
cleaning, playing with their son. All of them growing healthy and content on country air, warm
sunlight and freshly grown food. René becoming a happy, strong little country boy, climbing trees
and fishing and running about, perhaps accompanied (in time) by little siblings who fill up the
cottage with children’s laughter. They would settle into life together, gradually forgetting the
adrenaline rush of constant danger and the feel of weapons in their hands. A quiet, simple, lovely
existence, and a part of him yearns for it.

But Paris… well, Paris is his home. His friends are here. His work matters fiercely to him. He can
c picture this future as well – his son constantly underfoot at the Garrison and in the stables, learning
to pick locks from his mother and ride horses from his father. Being bandaged by Aramis when he
falls, being tossed in the air by Porthos, acting as an older cousin to d’Artagnan’s and Constance’s
future children, listening solemnly to Treville’s lectures about honour. He also pictures he and
Anne at taverns with all their friends, walking together down the busy, lively Paris streets, talking
about their work protecting France (in their different ways), fighting off enemies together,
frantically kissing in alleyways. An exciting life, a life to be proud of, one filled with worry and
danger but also with every day full of meaning and adventure. A life in the thick of it, working
besides all the people they care for, in defence of the new home they’ve made together. Knowing
they’re defending not just their son, or any other children they might have, but everyone else’s
children as well – doing their best to assure the future of all of France, and themselves with it.

Yes, both options are good ones, are lives that would make him happy – so, all things being equal,
the better option is whatever makes her happy as well.

He struggles to articulate this. “If I was with you and our son,” he says finally, slowly. “Then I
could be happy in a prison, or in slums, or even in Spain. I could certainly be happy on a farm
somewhere. So please, if you want to leave, tell me.”
“I don’t,” she says, bluntly, then echoes his words. “Not right now, anyway.”

He sees his thoughts reflected in her eyes, dark in the half-light. He sees the satisfaction of doing what she’s good at, what she’s trained to do; recognises her joy in the heat of battle and the clash of swords; remembers the instinctive way she becomes part of the flow of people in the Parisian streets; realises how much she’s come to enjoy having people she cares for besides just him. It’s a moment of perfect understanding – this life contains moments of fear, stress, anger and confusion, but for both of them, the good far outweighs the bad. They’ll stay here, and enjoy it – for now, at least.

“But someday… perhaps?” He likes that thought, to his own surprise. He loves being in the thick of it, protecting people, helping them, fighting every day – but now that he’s thinking about it, he also loves the idea of putting his sword down, at least for a while. Having more spare hours in the day to spend with his child and his wife. Finally being able to relax, instead of always holding himself tense for the next threat.

It’s been a busy year, after all – a wonderful one, but still a busy one.

“Yes,” she says after a moment, decisively. “And when that someday comes for one of us, it comes for both of us. Is that the deal? If I want a cottage in the country, I tell you, and if you do, you tell me, and then we go. No hesitation. Deal?”

He closes his eyes. The relief is indescribable. She’s happy here, but they will always have the option to be happy elsewhere as well. “Deal.”

There are ways they can prepare for that ‘someday’. He can change d’Artagnan’s role partly to that of assistant and general factotum, gradually training him to be Captain – with his plans to have a family (however illegitimate the children in question might be), d’Artagnan could probably use the additional pay, and it will give Athos more time with his own family in the interim. He can save his wages, read books on farming, improve his carpentry skills, keep an ear out for information about good land for sale outside Paris. Milady can set up Treville’s growing network of informants and train others to take on her role. So that someday, on a moment’s notice, they can shift quickly and easily into a comfortable, simple life, far from politics and machinations, far from spies and soldiers, nothing to concentrate on except each other.

Perhaps ‘someday’ is not for years or even decades. Perhaps it will be how they live out their old age, their children already grown and out in the world. But it sends a wave of peace and hope through him to think of that ‘someday’, regardless of when it comes.

She reaches out towards him, and he leans into her, already anticipating her touch. But all she does is hook one finger around the chain he wears constantly, pulling the locket out of his shirt. She holds it loosely in her hand, and looks him square in the face. “Swear it,” she says quietly, and Athos’s stomach drops. “Swear that whatever we do, we do it together.”

He almost sways from it. He’s broken so many promises he’s made to her, whether intentionally or not, whether the promise was a good one or a cruelty born of rage and hurt. Oh, he’s kept some, of course, most of them small promises easily given, but when it comes to ones as important as this he feels like he’s consistently failed to keep to his word – again, whether for good or bad. Nothing will ever come between us. You must die. I will see you hanged for your crimes. If you kill her, I’ll kill you. In good times and in bad. I’ll never leave you. I promise.

But there’s nothing he can see in her face but total belief that he will keep his word. That certainty burns in her eyes, almost a religious fervour. It’s the kind of faith he thought they both lost a long time ago – not just in God, but in the world, and in each other. But there it is, plain to see, and all
This is… something amazing. It’s not just love, which he has come to think of as a constant between them. It’s trust. It’s the absolute trust that made her think that he would understand, even while he read a list of crimes as his brother’s body cooled on the floor. It’s the trust they both betrayed and broke back then. But now she looks at him, and he looks at her, eyes shining, and he realises that they truly have come back stronger. Their trust is now as unconditional as their love. He couldn’t have imagined it, back when he begged her to stay, back when he told her that with time and trying perhaps they could come to trust each other again – back then, all he pictured was an uneasy, uncomfortable sort of trust, the two of them pretending for the benefit of their child and their own fragile happiness. This is something else entirely. There is nothing fragile about it, not anymore. He knows she would never do anything deliberately to hurt him, to deceive him, to betray him. She knows the same of him.

“I swear it.” He means it more than he’s ever meant anything in his life.

All tension leaves her too, and then she’s smiling, that open and honest smile that made him fall in love with her the first time he saw it – and every time after, in truth. Her smile draws his gaze to her mouth, full and red from his kisses, and then lower, to her bared throat, to the open top of her silk dress, to her curves.

She leans forward further and he loses his breath. Love overwhelms him, and desire returns, as fierce as if he never pulled away to begin with – maybe even fiercer.

“Well,” she says, pretending to be thoughtful, her voice returning to something more playful. “So we’re decided – you won’t resign your commission or give up your duties.” The heat in her gaze warms him all the way through. He can almost believe that he’ll never be cold again, with the feel of her eyes on him. “But you do have other duties too, husband. I suggest you attend to them now.”

Perhaps he’ll be lost for the rest of his life, but lost in her. He cannot think of anything better than that.

“As my lady commands,” he says, and draws her back down into the sheets.

Homes burn. But sometimes, they can be rebuilt.

Chapter End Notes

The end :) I hope you guys enjoyed the story. I really enjoyed writing it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!